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How Europe can act when NATO cannot

From NATO 3.0 to a European Plan B

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Executive summary

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has made stronger European conventional defence urgent. Elbridge Colby, the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, offers a useful starting point with his NATO 3.0 vision: European Allies assume primary responsibility for conventional deterrence, while the United States remains the ultimate strategic backstop. That division of labour can include contingencies in which Europeans act without US participation. Europe must therefore be able to generate sufficient forces and direct them coherently when the United States does not participate and therefore the North Atlantic Council (NAC) cannot authorise an operation. European Allies can assemble much of the necessary conventional force and NATO-standard command structure. What is currently missing is a clear, pre-agreed and practiced European political-strategic chain that connects political authority to military action.

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A Plan B

Europe needs a NATO-compatible alternative arrangement through which willing European Allies could act when the United States does not participate and the NAC cannot authorise an operation, while preserving NATO as the central framework for European collective defence. Such a Plan B would strengthen deterrence by addressing the political-strategic gap and reducing uncertainty over whether available forces can be authorised and employed when needed. To make it credible, structural and operational arrangements for the Transfer of Authority (TOA) of forces, military advice, command access, handovers to and from NATO, sustainment, escalation control and termination must be defined and exercised before a crisis. Without them, capable formations may remain unusable when speed matters most, and an adversary could exploit uncertainty over NAC consensus, access to NATO services or the availability of US enablers.

A NATO-first sequence

The design follows a strict NATO-first sequence. Plan A1 is a full transatlantic NATO operation. Plan A2 is a European-led NATO operation under NAC authority and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), with Europeans providing campaign leadership and most conventional forces. Plan B applies only when the NAC cannot authorise the operation and participating European Allies choose to act under separate treaty authority. It is bounded to European territory, its lines of communication and contingencies directly connected to its defence, and is therefore not a competing global mandate. All three plans use the same NATO-standard regional campaign design. This permits a shift from Plan A2 to Plan B if necessary and allows a later NAC decision to supersede the European mandate and return the operation to SACEUR without creating two operational masters.

A separate European authority

The separate authority would come from (what this paper calls) a new European Defence Compact – or Compact for short - comprising a Master Treaty and regional Protocols for the North, Centre and South of the continent. The treaty would create a mutual-defence obligation, decision rules and a European Compact Council (ECC) composed of ratifying European NATO Allies, including non-EU members. The ECC is to the Compact what the NAC is to NATO. An ECC decision would authorize a particular non-NATO 'Europe only' military operation, and identify the participating nations, political objective, geographic scope and the Joint Force Command (JFC) responsible for the operation. Nations could participate militarily or provide other support, while minimum viable coalitions and pre-agreed supporting arrangements would be established in advance. The ECC would coordinate all three regions under one political end state and allocate scarce enablers across them.

A reversible command chain

The military chain would run from the ECC, informed by written military advice, through a Compact-appointed European Strategic Commander to the designated JFC commander under a distinct European appointment. A NAC-approved command-access arrangement should define which JFC resources could be made available, while nationally controlled contingency arrangements would preserve continuity if access were withdrawn. Pre-agreed supporting arrangements would cover the practical support required for operations, with EU and national instruments contributing outside the command chain. The ordinary NAC would remain in session; North American assets would require national consent; nuclear matters would remain under national or NATO authority; and a supremacy clause would trigger reintegration once the NAC authorised essentially the same operation.

The following seven recommendations translate these three tests into a practical sequence of steps from political agreement to operational implementation

Recommendations

1. **Negotiate and conclude one European Defence Compact.**
2. **Approve NATO-European command access before a crisis.**
3. **Build and exercise one political-to-operational chain.**
4. **Fund and test the supporting arrangements.**
5. **Demonstrate the model at one regional Joint Force Command.**
6. **Assign leads and apply completion tests.**
7. **Launch the process before the next NATO summit.**

1. Introduction

European Allies must also prepare for a contingency in which US political choices prevent American participation in a NATO operation, thus blocking consensus in the North Atlantic Council (NAC).

Russia's war against Ukraine has made Europe's conventional defence an immediate strategic requirement. At the same time, Washington is recalibrating its role in Europe. The 2026 National Defense Strategy calls for European Allies to assume primary responsibility for the continent's conventional defence with critical but more limited US support. Secretary Pete Hegseth has also launched a six-month review of the US force posture in Europe, while some US contributions to NATO's crisis forces have already been reduced. Undersecretary Elbridge Colby has described the intended division of labour as European conventional defence backed by continued US extended nuclear deterrence as 'NATO 3.0'. The debate has thus moved beyond burden-sharing towards burden-shifting.

President Trump's repeated demands that the United States acquire Greenland, including a period in which he refused to exclude the use of force against the territory of a NATO Ally, represent a further strategic turning point for European defence planning. These demands form part of a broader pattern of questioning the reliability of US collective-defence commitments. Trump has previously suggested that Russia should be allowed to act as it wished against Allies he considered insufficiently committed to defence spending, subsequently stated as President that the United States would not necessarily defend Allies that failed to meet his expectations, and in 2026 openly raised the possibility of US withdrawal from NATO.

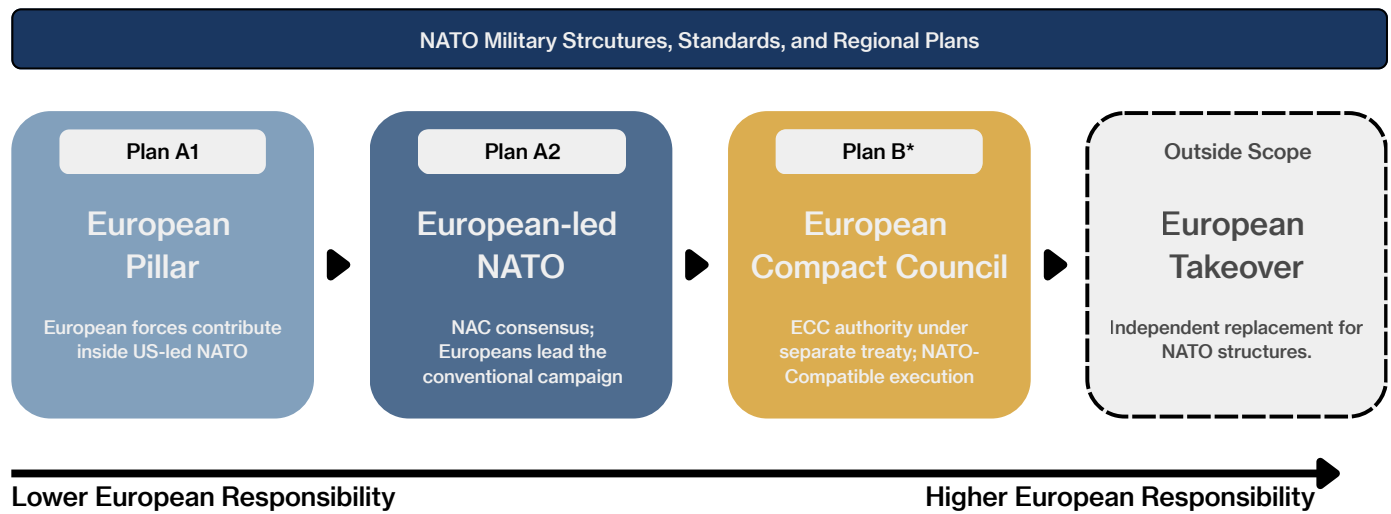
These developments expose a limitation in the concept of NATO 3.0. NATO 3.0 assumes that the United States remains a cooperative Ally and strategic backstop even as Europeans assume primary responsibility for conventional defence. The Greenland episode, together with repeated challenges to the reliability of US collective-defence commitments, creates a more demanding planning problem. European Allies must also prepare for a contingency in which US political choices prevent American participation in a NATO operation, thus blocking consensus in the North Atlantic Council (NAC).¹

This paper develops a three-plan process to prepare for that contingency. Plan A1 is a full transatlantic NATO operation. Plan A2 is a European-led NATO operation under NAC authority. Plan B is a NATO-compatible alternative arrangement through which willing European Allies could authorise, command and sustain a European defence operation when US participation and NAC authorisation cannot be assumed. Plan B addresses the political and institutional gap left by NATO 3.0: how European Allies would act when they possess the forces required for defence but cannot rely on the normal NATO political chain to employ them. Plan B is built upon the idea of a European Defence Compact, or Compact for short, and a European Compact Council (ECC). The Compact essentially functions as a European NATO. It is a separate European treaty with NATO-compatible military structures and regional defence plans. The ECC would be the principal political decision-making body of the Compact, the equivalent of the NAC. (see Figure 1).

¹ In NATO's consensus-based decision-making process, a NATO operation requires the consent of all Allies represented in the North Atlantic Council. Individual Allies are not necessarily required to contribute forces to every NATO operation, but any Ally can prevent the NAC from authorising an operation by withholding its consent. A group of willing Allies could still act outside NATO, but it could not do so under NATO authority or as a NATO operation.

Where the European Plan B Sits

A NATO-first continuum of European conventional-defense responsibility



*Plan B changes the source of political authority, not the geography, standards or route back to NATO

Figure 1. A NATO-first sequence for European defence

Figure 1 suggests a chain in which NATO remains the preferred framework, and Plan B is the alternative if Plans A1 and A2 are not feasible. The proposed chain begins with political purpose. The ECC, comprising the participating nations, would adopt an ECC decision setting the political objective. A Compact-appointed European Strategic Commander, supported by a small permanent staff, would translate that decision into military-strategic direction. The actual military campaign would be led by one of the three NATO Joint Force Commands (JFCs) envisaged for North, Centre and South, each led by an European commander. The commander of the relevant JFC would assume the separate European Command and use the command arrangement established and exercised in peacetime to conduct the regional campaign.

Plan B includes a pre-planned route back to NATO authority once NAC consensus is restored. The ordinary NAC would remain in session and North American participation would remain welcome. A later NAC decision covering the same operation would supersede the ECC decision and transfer operational authority to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) at an agreed time.

The deterrent value of this architecture lies in reducing uncertainty. Moscow should be unable to assume that NAC disagreement, an unprepared TOA procedure or the withdrawal of selected command services will stop a European response. A paper arrangement could still show division or create competing chains. Credibility therefore requires exercises that cover Plan A2 and both normal and degraded-access Plan B, followed by a transfer back to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

2. Three plans

2.1. A strict sequence

The name 'Plan B' rightfully suggests a strict order of preference. In Plan A1, NAC consensus sends direction through SACEUR to the relevant JFC, backed by substantial US leadership and enablers. Plan A2 uses the same NATO chain, however with European Allies providing the operational leadership and the bulk of conventional forces. Both are NATO operations. Plan B is the alternative plan in which participating European Allies derive authority from the European Defence Compact because the NAC has not authorised the operation.

A US decision to step back from direct military leadership in NATO leaves Plan A2 available whenever Washington supports the operation and the NAC supplies political authority. Plan B becomes relevant when the NAC cannot reach consensus, whether because of delay, obstruction or a deeper transatlantic dispute. The absence of NATO political agreement is the necessary condition. The participating heads of state and government could then decide to activate Plan B under the Compact.

The Compact should cover European territory, the continent's lines of communication and contingencies directly connected to its defence.² This bounded territorial function aligns commitments with NATO's regional plans, keeps objectives and resource demands credible, and focuses the Compact on European collective defence rather than turning it into a second alliance for global operations. Out-of-area operations and distant missions would remain matters for the ordinary NAC or separate coalitions.

2.2. A common campaign design under different authority

The command levels remain constant across the three Plans. Governments set the political objectives. A strategic commander requests and allocates military forces across regions and domains. A JFC designs and conducts the joint campaign.

Under Plan A1 and Plan A2, European commanders in the NATO Command Structure remain under SACEUR's authority. Under Plan B, the same officers could serve through a legally distinct European appointment under a European commander. The Compact, TOA and a peacetime command-access arrangement would supply the required authority. Dual-capable JFCs provide the operational baseline. Compact activation would occur only if the NAC could not agree.³

² The Master Treaty and each regional Protocol would define the covered area in annexes, using national territory, agreed maritime and air approaches and the boundaries of relevant NATO regional plans. Overseas territories, disputed areas and routes outside those limits would require treatment in the applicable Protocol and ECC decision.

³ Loss, Prochwicz Jazowska and Puglierin, *Making Defence European Again*, 5-8.

Plan B becomes relevant when the NAC cannot reach consensus, whether because of delay, obstruction or a deeper transatlantic dispute.

Figure 2 shows the three operating plans converging on the same NATO-standard regional campaign design. This shared military framework makes European responsibility practical under Plan A2 and makes a later transfer from Plan B to NATO command possible without imposing two operational masters on the same force.

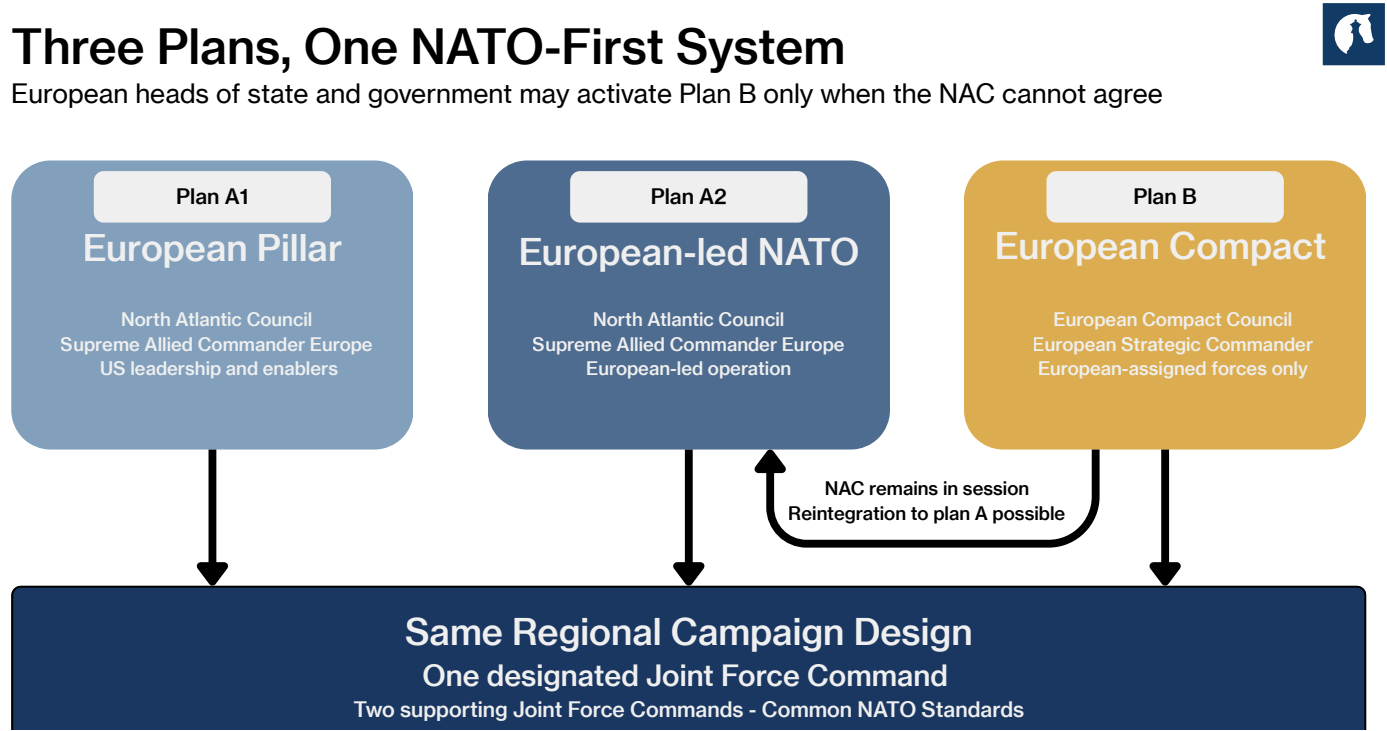


Figure 2. A common regional campaign design under three sources of authority

3. The political-strategic architecture: the Compact and Council

3.1. European Defence Compact

The Compact addresses a defined gap between NATO's Washington Treaty and the European Union's Treaty of Lisbon.

This paper proposes a construct, called the European Defence Compact - or Compact for short -, that gives body to the established, but undefined, notion of an 'European pillar of NATO'.⁴ The Compact addresses a defined gap between NATO's Washington Treaty and the European Union's Treaty of Lisbon. Article 5 of the Washington Treaty requires each Ally to assist an attacked Ally by taking 'such action as it deems necessary', which may include armed force; it does not prescribe an automatic military response. The Treaty also establishes one North Atlantic Council. Without consensus, a subset of Allies cannot act as NATO. The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) introduced a similar collective defence clause for the EU through Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). This clause obliges EU members to aid an EU member suffering armed aggression. However, it offers no standing command chain while its coverage stops at EU membership. The Compact fills the seam through a pre-agreed legal trigger; a wider European membership; Transfer of Authority (TOA) and other command arrangements; as well as a NATO hand-off mechanism for a military operation or campaign the NAC cannot authorise.

European governments have repeatedly used smaller formats for problems ill-suited to NATO- or EU-wide arrangements. The European Intervention Initiative supports action through several possible institutions. The Joint Expeditionary Force combines optional participation with NATO doctrine and standards. Nordic defence cooperation adds regional planning and trust.⁵ These formats demonstrate a demand for flexible action. None, however, combines that flexibility with an autonomous treaty-based mutual-defence obligation and a permanent integrated political-military command structure comparable to NATO.

⁴ The term 'European Defence Compact' is not entirely new. However, the Compact suggested in this paper deals with authorizing, organizing and overseeing actual military operations. As such, it goes a step further than any of the current official initiatives and many of the informally coined constructs for more European Strategic Autonomy and less military dependence on the United States. For instance, the article The case for a European Defence Compact defines a European Define Compact as "a coalition of likeminded countries to swiftly deliver and finance joint defence capabilities".

⁵ Letter of Intent Concerning the Development of the European Intervention Initiative, 25 June 2018; United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) - Policy Direction, 12 July 2021; NORDEFCO Vision 2025, 13 November 2018.

The Compact would ensure proper political-military interaction in a Europe-only setting while leaving existing formats in place.

The modified Brussels Treaty of 1954 offers a partial precedent. It preserved a European mutual-defence obligation and a separate European council while relying on NATO military authorities and avoiding duplicate staffs. The Compact adapts this logic by combining a separate European treaty basis with NATO-compatible military structures, while extending it to a broader membership, current regional defence plans, and a clear path for transferring operations back to NATO command.⁶

The Compact would also differ from the Petersberg tasks and the Berlin Plus arrangements. The Petersberg tasks define crisis management missions that the EU may undertake; they do not create a mutual defence decision or a standing command chain for a territorial-defence campaign. Berlin Plus allows an EU-led operation to use NATO planning and collective assets when the Alliance agrees to release them. Plan B would instead give willing European nations, including non-NATO EU-members as well as non-EU members, separate Treaty authority, pre-agreed command access and a contingency chain able to continue if the NAC cannot authorise the operation. Its advantage is executability under political blockage.⁷

One Compact, Three Regional Protocols

One Political Alliance, One Council, One Strategy, Three executable Regional Plans

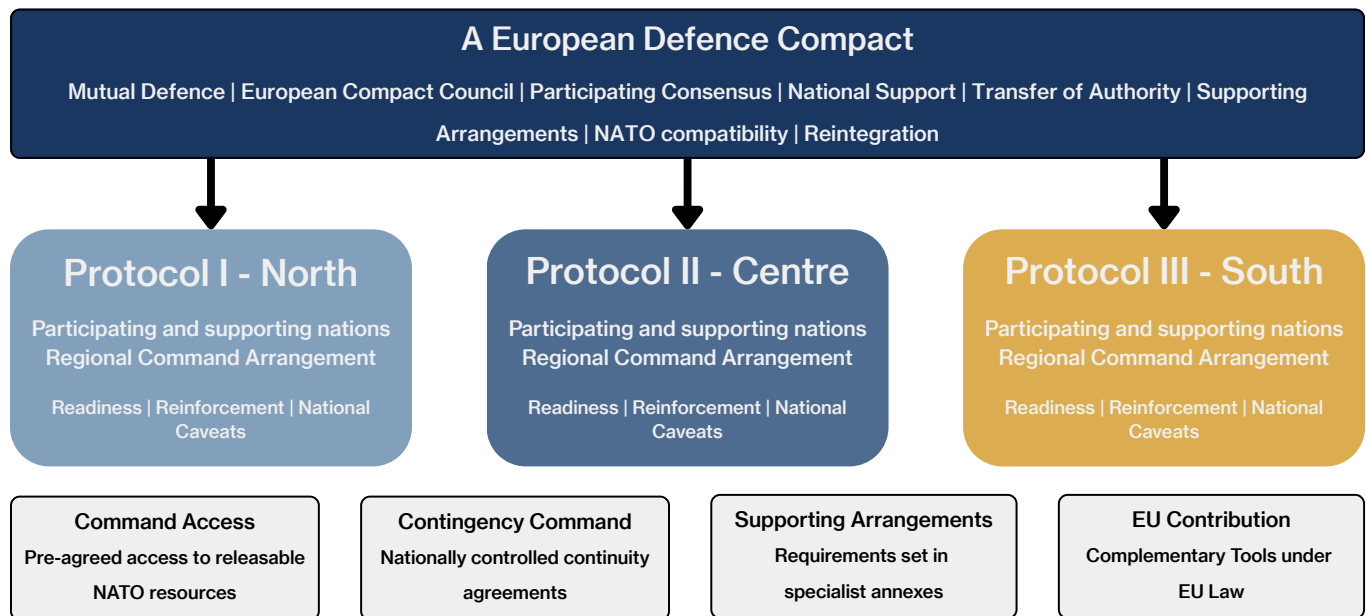


Figure 3. Structure of the European Defence Compact

⁶ NATO, 'The Paris Agreements,' 23 October 1954, Modified Brussels Treaty; NATO, 'Final Communiqué,' 22 October 1954,

⁷ Treaty on European Union, Article 43(1), on the Petersberg tasks; Council of the European Union, European Union Concept for EU-led Military Operations and Missions, 19 December 2014, 20, on Berlin Plus release, monitoring, return and recall of NATO assets and capabilities.

3.2. European Compact Council

The European Compact Council (ECC) is the Compact's equivalent to NATO's NAC. Article 9 of the Washington Treaty establishes one NAC in which every Ally is represented. The ECC would be a similar body with its own governance and legal basis. Article 9 of the Washington Treaty, together with NATO's consensus rule, means that a smaller group of Allies cannot take a NATO decision over another Ally's objection. Article 8 still allows Allies to enter into separate commitments, if these do not conflict with the nations' obligations under the Washington Treaty. Compact activation must therefore derive from the separate treaty while remaining expressly subordinate to a later NAC decision covering the same operation.⁸

The decision-making members of the ECC would be European NATO Allies that had joined the Compact, including non-EU Allies such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland and Türkiye. The United States and Canada would have guaranteed consultation, would receive the common briefings and could offer nationally controlled assets. Voting, however, would be restricted to Compact nations.

The ECC would operate like the NAC. Permanent representatives would meet in Compact configuration, supported by a rotating chair and a small coordination cell of seconded officials. The ECC could also meet at the level of defence ministers, foreign ministers, or heads of state and government to consider the broader political end state, major escalation or a change in the Compact's mandate. Co-location with the NAC seems logical, but would require a full-NAC decision covering facilities, security and releasable information.

An ECC decision would identify participating and supporting nations, set the political objective and geographic scope, and designate the supported JFC. At the start of a crisis, each nation would declare whether it would participate militarily or provide another form of support. NATO's regional plans and force requirements would remain the operational baseline. Forces pre-assigned to the relevant protocol would follow the TOA arrangements agreed in advance once the activation conditions were met. A nation could withhold forces not pre-assigned under that protocol; the Compact's wider assistance obligation would still apply. Each protocol should define a minimum viable coalition through three tests: a request from the attacked nation, participation by the relevant framework nations and sufficient pre-assigned forces for the initial plan.

3.3. A crisis procedure that can be rehearsed

The ECC and its protocols should be established and exercised in peacetime. Regular exercises would test the decision sequence, participation rules and the limits of delegated authority before a crisis. These processes would remain separate from the ordinary NAC proceedings.

At the onset of a crisis, the NAC should meet first and NATO's normal assessment and planning should proceed. Only if the NAC could not agree within a pre-agreed decision window would the participating Compact nations convene as the ECC, using the same releasable

⁸ The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington, 4 April 1949, Articles 8 and 9.

The United States and Canada would have guaranteed consultation, would receive the common briefings and could offer nationally controlled assets. Voting, however, would be restricted to Compact nations.

assessment. The two political processes would remain sequential, separately chaired and separately recorded.

If NAC consensus emerged, Plan A1 or Plan A2 would apply according to whether the conventional campaign was US- or European-led. If consensus did not emerge, the ECC could subsequently make its own decision under the Compact treaty.

During Plan B, the ordinary NAC would remain in session and review developments, allowing North American Allies to support or join later. If the NAC subsequently authorises the operation, a reintegration protocol would set a transfer time at which the European Strategic Commander hands operational control to SACEUR and the separate Compact command arrangement ends.

The ECC should receive direct military advice before it fixes an objective. The European Strategic Commander (see §4.1) should submit a written military estimate and be consulted on operations and strategic assessments during relevant sessions. National Chiefs of Defence or military representatives would confirm what their governments can provide and identify caveats. Their role would remain advisory, with political authority retaining the decision.

3.4. Safeguards and NATO reintegration

To avoid regional fragmentation, the ECC must be the common political forum for JFC North, Centre and South, while the European Strategic Commander designates one supported and two supporting JFCs. Each protocol should pre-plan cross-regional transfers and priorities for scarce enablers under one political end state.

The Compact would need a political consultative body equivalent to NATO's Nuclear Planning Group to address the nuclear implications of a conventional campaign while leaving all nuclear forces and decisions under national or NATO authority.⁹

Command priority between NATO and the Compact must be unambiguous. A supremacy clause should provide that a later NAC decision covering essentially the same collective defence operation takes precedence and triggers the Reintegration Protocol unless NATO and Compact nations jointly decide otherwise.

Plan B introduces specific risks for NATO and the United States. A European operation could widen a conflict, expose NATO personnel or infrastructure, or lead an adversary to treat Compact action as Alliance action. That could trigger Article 4 consultations and create pressure for an Article 5 determination or US involvement even without an initial NAC mandate. The Compact cannot eliminate this risk. It can reduce it through a bounded ECC mandate, prior consultation with the United States and Canada, separate legal records and public communications, national consent for North American assets, clear rules for access to NATO facilities, continuous NAC briefings, escalation-control procedures and a pre-agreed reintegration trigger. Compact members would still have to accept the residual risk that defending European territory may engage wider Alliance interests.

⁹ NATO, "Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)," updated 20 May 2026.

During Plan B, the ordinary NAC would remain in session and review developments, allowing North American Allies to support or join later.

4. Military implementation: from direction to command

4.1. Strategic command and the Joint Force Command system

Political authority becomes executable only when a political decision passes through a defined military chain and assigned forces arrive with usable authority. Compact nations should therefore appoint a European Strategic Commander and a small permanent European Strategic Staff. This Command would translate ECC direction into priorities across regions, with the designated JFC turning those priorities into a campaign.

The European Strategic Command would be staffed mainly through national secondments and could be co-located at SHAPE under a prior NAC-approved command-access arrangement. The arrangement should specify which SHAPE planners, releasable plans, communications and facilities could support the Compact; none would transfer automatically. The permanent European staff and nationally controlled contingency elements must be able to operate if that access is denied or recalled. The Compact should identify in advance which eligible European officer would assume command in each region. A core of planners and liaison officers could maintain the arrangements in peacetime and expand through pre-designated augmentees in a crisis.

Historical precedent: LIVE OAK

LIVE OAK, created in 1959 by France, the United Kingdom and the United States, was a separate contingency-planning staff for maintaining access to West Berlin. It moved to SHAPE in 1961 so that its tripartite plans could be coordinated with NATO's Berlin contingency planning, while political oversight remained separate: the Washington Ambassadorial Group supervised LIVE OAK and the NAC supervised NATO plans. General Lauris Norstad led LIVE OAK while also serving as Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and planners prepared to transfer command responsibility to NATO if a Berlin crisis widened. The precedent shows that co-location, dual appointments, separate political control and a pre-planned transfer can coexist.¹⁰

Box 1. LIVE OAK shows how separate political authority, NATO-compatible planning and dual-hatted command arrangements can coexist, while preserving a pre-planned route for transferring command responsibility to NATO.

¹⁰ NATO, 'NATO Marks 50 Years Since the 1961 Berlin Crisis,' 13 August 2011; NATO History, 'United States and NATO,' section on General Lauris Norstad.

Under Plan B, the designated JFC commander would hold a separate Compact operational appointment and report to the European Strategic Commander. The designated JFC would become the supported operational commander. The campaign could use the same regional design and many of the same European personnel.

For each ECC-authorized operation, the European Strategic Commander would designate one JFC as the supported command for the affected region; the other two would coordinate reinforcements and scarce enablers as supporting commands. The United Kingdom's assumption of JFC Norfolk, Italy's of JFC Naples, and the German-Polish rotation at Brunssum provide the leadership base. Geographic responsibilities and component relationships should follow those regional plans. Where a crisis spans regions, the ECC would set one political objective and assign each JFC a defined regional role.

4.2. Command continuity from the JFC to the corps

The JFC commander's separate European operational appointment would derive authority from the Compact treaty, the ECC decision and the participating nations' force transfers. The European Strategic Commander would hold a distinct strategic appointment over that operational commander. Operational continuity also depends on institutional access. A JFC belongs to NATO's Command Structure under SACEUR and uses common-funded facilities, communications and plans to implement NATO decisions. This command authority is separate from access to NATO resources. A full-NAC arrangement would authorize use of specified NATO resources.

The full NAC should approve a NATO-European Command Access Arrangement for co-location, liaison and releasable planning. It should designate the personnel and equipment that remain under European national authority. It should also set release conditions for NATO facilities, communications, plans and intelligence, with monitoring and recall procedures. US and Canadian assets would transfer only under national consent. Berlin Plus offers a functional precedent for release, monitoring and return.¹¹

Compact nations, working with host nations, should simultaneously establish European contingency command elements, secure communications and alternate headquarters under separate status and support arrangements. If access to selected NATO services is withheld or withdrawn, the contingency element would preserve operational continuity and bridge the supported JFC to an alternate European headquarters. These elements provide resilience and would activate only when selected NATO services are unavailable.

¹¹ Council of the European Union, European Union Concept for EU-led Military Operations and Missions, 19 December 2014, 20, describing Berlin Plus release, monitoring and return or recall of NATO assets and capabilities; EUR-Lex, "Cooperation with NATO," May 21, 2007.2

The full NAC should approve a NATO-European Command Access Arrangement for co-location, liaison and releasable planning.

The MCLCC as the JFC's land component

The preceding sections explain how political authority would reach the designated Joint Force Command and how command could continue if access to selected NATO services were withdrawn. In a large land campaign, this chain would extend through a Multi-Corps Land Component Command (MCLCC). An MCLCC is a multinational, three-star headquarters assigned as the supported JFC's land component. It would direct several corps within the wider joint campaign and coordinate the support required for sustained land operations. This preserves the single operational chain developed in this paper. A full design lies beyond the paper's scope. This outline therefore concentrates on the practical use of an established NATO role and existing headquarters. Command remains at the three-star component level.

Below the MCLCC, corps would be built around complete divisions formed from existing brigades. These brigades must possess the combat power and organic support required from the opening of a crisis. Bilateral and multinational arrangements should enable the divisions to train together and deploy as cohesive formations. Sister-corps partnerships would allow divisions to reinforce one another and give each corps access to scarce enablers.¹²

To make this capability available across Europe, France, Germany and Poland should each prepare a multinational, three-star headquarters for certification in the MCLCC role. Each headquarters should be able to command up to three war-fighting corps. Certification would require multinational staffing and secure communications. The result would be a prepared land-component option for each supported JFC within the existing NATO Command Structure.¹³

The route to implementation is already established in NATO practice. The Alliance began experimenting with the MCLCC concept in 2021. US Army Europe and Africa subsequently exercised the role under JFC Brunssum during Avenger Triad 24. MCLCC Northwest was inaugurated alongside Finnish Army Command at Mikkeli in October 2025 under a three-star commander. These precedents show how an existing headquarters can assume the role through augmentation and NATO certification.¹⁴

Regional allocation would follow NATO's existing plans. MCLCC Northwest would cover the High North. The other two headquarters would support the north-eastern and south-eastern flanks and could establish forward command posts in Poland and Romania. During a campaign, the assigned MCLCC would translate the supported JFC's plan into coordinated corps operations. The pool of three headquarters would reduce dependence on US Army Europe and allow command allocation to follow operational demand.

The model provides a practicable extension of the command chain proposed in this paper. Its command relationships and implementation arrangements will need to be worked out in due course. The Netherlands could support this effort by offering 1 German-Netherlands Corps (1 GNC) for exercises.

Box 2. The MCLCC extends the JFC's operational chain into the land domain by coordinating multiple corps within a regional campaign, providing a practical mechanism for translating JFC direction into coordinated land operations.

¹² Ruiz Palmer and Simon, *Taking Charge*, 6, 20–24.

¹³ Ruiz Palmer and Simon, *Taking Charge*, 23–24. The source proposes three multinational four-star army-level headquarters led by France, Germany and Poland; this paper carries forward their multi-corps function through three-star MCLCCs and treats MCLCC Northwest at Mikkeli as the northern model.

¹⁴ Allied Command Transformation, 'Multi Corps Land Component Command Concept Experimentation', 2021; NATO, 'JFCBS and US Army Europe Conclude Avenger Triad 24', 19 September 2024; Finnish Army, 'The Official Inauguration of NATO's Multi-Corps Land Component Command Northwest Is Held in Mikkeli', 3 October 2025; Finnish Army, 'Joint Planning Meeting Increases Defence Readiness in the North', 17 April 2026.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The political, institutional and operational design set out in this paper provides a practical pathway from argument to implementation. Governments must now decide whether they are willing to pre-authorise ECC decisions, TOA, command access and supporting arrangements needed to make European action possible in practice. The Compact's value depends on three tests. It must operate when the NAC cannot authorise an operation, retain command during degraded access to selected NATO systems and return cleanly to SACEUR when NATO authority becomes available. The following seven recommendations turn those tests into a sequence of deliverables.

1. **Negotiate and conclude one European Defence Compact.** European NATO Allies should open formal negotiations and develop a treaty package for consideration by national capitals. The package should consist of a Master Treaty plus Protocols for the North, Centre and South of the continent. It should define Council governance and participation rules, minimum regional coalitions and supporting obligations. It should guarantee North American consultation, and set NATO supremacy and reintegration safeguards.
2. **Approve NATO-European command access before a crisis.** The full NAC should approve a NATO-European Command Access Arrangement. It should state which JFC resources can be released and set the conditions for monitoring, recall and return. Assets that remain under separate national consent should be identified in advance. Compact nations, working with host nations, should simultaneously establish European contingency command elements, secure communications and alternate headquarters.
3. **Build and exercise one political-to-operational chain.** Compact nations should first stand up the ECC with a separate chair, legal record and decision template. They should then appoint the European Strategic Commander and permanent staff and define the activation thresholds. The supported JFC commander would receive a legally distinct European appointment.
4. **Fund and test the supporting arrangements.** Compact governments should identify the supporting arrangements required for movement, sustainment and secure communications. Each commitment should have a responsible authority and funding route, while detailed technical requirements should be developed by specialists. EU and national support packages should link to these obligations while remaining outside the Compact command chain.
5. **Demonstrate the model at one regional Joint Force Command.** Compact nations should select one of the three regional Joint Force Commands and a supporting European corps headquarters for the first command-post exercise. The pilot should test the ECC decision, dual appointments, command access, supporting arrangements, degraded access and reintegration into NATO. JFC Brunssum and 1 German-Netherlands Corps offer one suitable pairing, but the model should be transferable to the other two regions.

6. **Assign leads and apply completion tests.** Each workstream needs an identified lead and an observable completion test. A lead group and Treaty secretariat should own the Compact; the NAC, Allied Command Operations and host nations should own command access; ECC governments and the supported JFC commander should own the command chain; defence and finance ministries should own supporting arrangements; and the selected JFC and corps headquarters should own the pilot. Completion requires Treaty text ready for national legal review, executable decision and authority templates, uninterrupted command under degraded access, funded support commitments and one end-to-end exercise that returns authority cleanly to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Full capability requires demonstrated performance in all three regions.
7. **Launch the process before the next NATO summit.** France, Germany and the United Kingdom should convene an initial group of willing European Allies within three months. The group should invite other European NATO Allies from the outset, begin structured consultations with the United States and Canada in parallel, and table a mandate to negotiate the Compact before the next NATO summit. It should report the agreed timetable, unresolved legal issues and proposed exercise site to national leaders. The Netherlands should voice its support for this initiative and substantiate it by offering 1 GNC for exercises.



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