NOVEMBER 6th, 2026

CHACR DIGEST #61

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EUROPE

NATO has held talks about its 2029 Defence Planning Process targets to bolster capability requirements against potential Russian aggression. With the United States reportedly considering sharp reductions in its regional troop presence, European allies are facing pressure to fill critical capability gaps, assume greater financial burdens and adapt to a 'NATO 3.0' responsibility model. There are five major debates to be discussed: setting level-of-ambition troop requirements, shifting targets toward functional objectives, balancing traditional military hardware with autonomous drone technologies, addressing southern flank security alongside eastern and Arctic priorities, and integrating operational lessons from Ukraine. Speaking at the Warsaw Security Forum, US Ambassador to NATO Matthew Whitaker called on the Alliance to modernise infrastructure and shift military forces from Western to Eastern Europe. Whitaker stated that Washington is reviewing its European troop posture, noting Europe currently ranks fourth among US strategic priorities. He urged European allies to "step forward" to reduce dependence and prevent American overextension, while criticising members missing NATO's two per cent of gross domestic product defence spending target. In response, EU Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius highlighted initiatives to strengthen European autonomy through drone defences, satellite communications and surveillance capabilities.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk warned that Russia could escalate hybrid attacks against Poland and the Baltic states before Christmas to test NATO's response. Threats include larger-scale sabotage, cyberattacks and provocations targeting critical infrastructure, borders and supply lines carrying essential goods to Ukraine. Andrew Monaghan has previously argued that continuing Russian mobilisation extends beyond troop recruitment to a whole-of-state process, viewing Ukraine as part of an enduring 'Thirty Years War' against Euro-Atlantic powers. In this context, *Politico* reports EU ambassadors and officials are quietly preparing for a nightmare scenario of a major hybrid attack resulting in multiple casualties. But, while European leaders have discussed deploying emergency response teams and establishing new security protocols, it is reported that confidential exchanges have exposed sharp divisions among member states. Several diplomats and experts warn that expanding the security role risks duplicating NATO's established functions, potentially creating dangerous confusion during a crisis. Persistent concerns over unsecure communications and intelligence leaks to Moscow have also led some capitals to restrict sensitive information strictly to NATO channels. To resolve these institutional overlaps, security analysts have recommended a clear division of labour: NATO handling military deterrence and intelligence-sharing, while the EU concentrates on civilian crisis response and financial support.

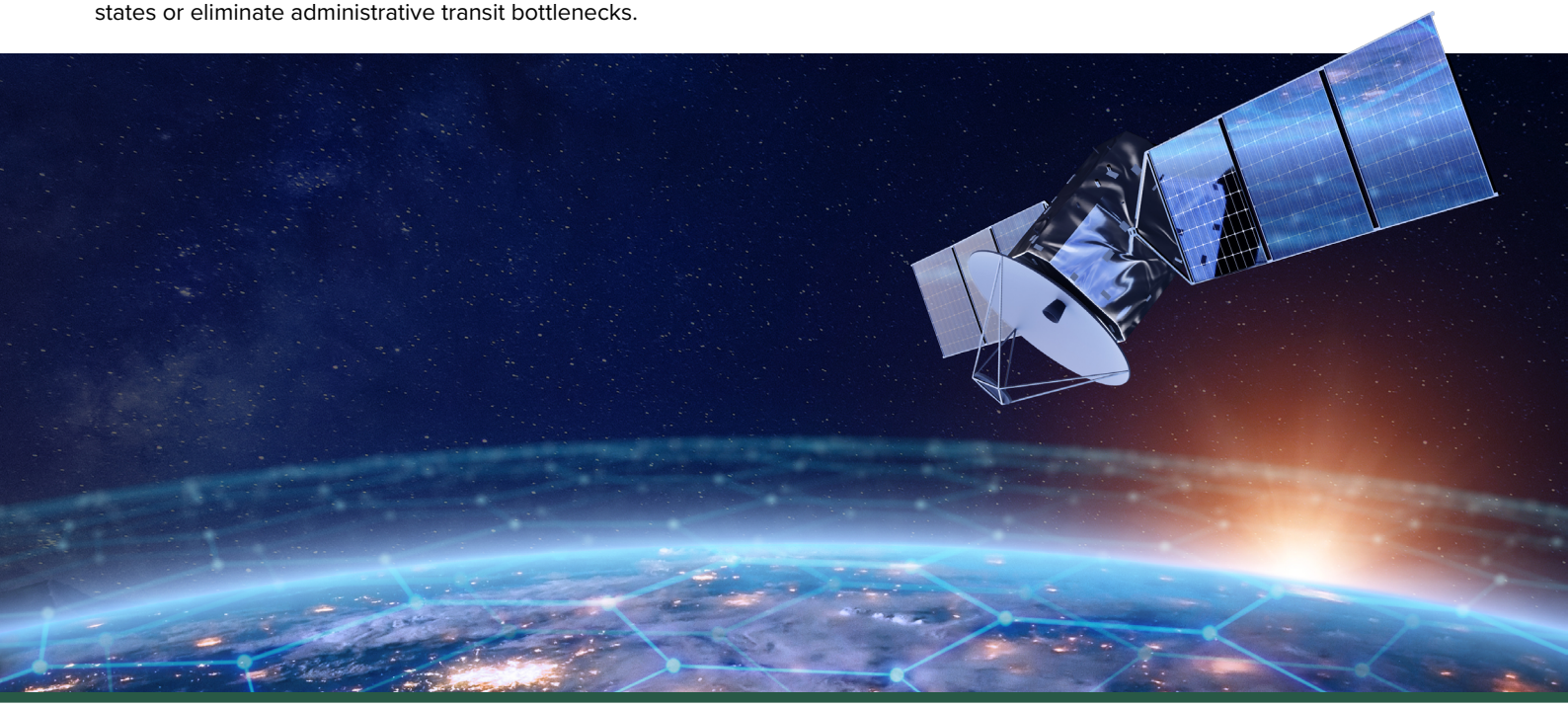
The focus in Ukraine, as CNN reported, is American-made Patriot interceptor missiles, supplies of which have been completely exhausted, leaving key infrastructure exposed to Russian ballistic missile strikes on energy facilities in Kyiv and Kharkiv. This critical shortage coincided with an escalating dispute between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Donald Trump. The Trump administration has pressured Kyiv to cease deep strikes on Russian oil refineries, threatening to suspend intelligence sharing and European purchases of American weaponry for Ukraine. In response, Zelensky expressed betrayal over Washington's agreement to import Russian fuel, refusing to halt attacks without receiving additional air defence systems. Compounding these strategic challenges, Ukrainian military forces experienced artificial throttling of their military-grade Starshield satellite communications, which severely impaired drone operations and logistics during heavy Russian aerial bombardment.

Joshua VerGow, writing for the Atlantic Council, examines how the Starshield disruption also exposed the severe operational risks inherent in military dependence on commercial technology. While commercial innovation offers cutting-edge capabilities, such as satellite communications, cloud computing and artificial intelligence, at speeds and scales governments cannot independently reproduce, it introduces critical vulnerabilities when armed forces build command structures around systems they do not own, operate or control. Ukraine's experience demonstrates that commercial infrastructure can become unavailable not just from enemy attacks, but from technical disruptions, provider policy decisions or contractual limitations. This offers an urgent warning for Western militaries, including the US Department of Defense, which is rapidly integrating commercial services through initiatives like the Space Force's Commercial Space Strategy and Joint Warfighting Cloud Capability. To effectively manage these strategic trade-offs without forfeiting commercial innovation, the writer argues defence policymakers must incorporate commercial dependencies directly into force design, acquisition and operational planning. He calls on the Pentagon to systematically map essential commercial services, evaluate foreign supply chain risks, secure robust contractual assurances and establish viable fallback procedures. It is also argued that armed forces must routinely simulate non-adversarial commercial outages in military training exercises to ensure mission readiness when private systems fail.

Engelsberg Ideas has published analysis by Peter Caddick-Adams which references the impact of the Starshield satellite communications network disruption. The writer contends this is accelerating efforts across Europe and Canada to vastly expand sovereign military manufacturing and establish independent satellite infrastructure to reduce long-term dependence on American suppliers. The focus of his article, however, is to explain how Ukraine's front-line experience is fundamentally transforming modern warfare concepts. Extreme drone density, optical sensors and precision strike systems have effectively eliminated traditional static front lines and dense troop concentrations, stretching active combat zones more than 20 kilometres deep. Kyiv expends between 9,000 and 10,000 UAVs daily, with unmanned systems and drone-directed artillery inflicting roughly 85 per cent of all battlefield casualties. Consequently, drone piloting and network engineering are becoming skills as fundamental to every soldier as operating a rifle. Despite widespread assumptions, artificial intelligence currently plays a minimal role, primarily aiding navigation for long-range strikes. Rapid tactical innovation occurs within weeks rather than years, far outstripping conventional Western procurement timelines. Additionally, pervasive drone surveillance routinely prevents medics from reaching casualties, forcing individual soldiers to perform advanced field medical procedures themselves.

With the recent publication by the House of Commons Defence Select Committee of a new High North report, and last month's participation by British, Norwegian and American troops in Operation Atlantic City, conducted on the remote Jan Mayen island, the Nordic and Baltic regions remain a focus of activity and interest. While Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre held a joint call with President Putin to press for de-escalation and peace in Ukraine, Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo criticised President Trump for siding with Moscow, stating there is "no logic" to abandoning NATO allies. Meanwhile, Lithuanian troops fired live rounds from German tanks for the first time during one of their largest annual military exercises. And the *Moscow Times* reports Lithuania deployed troops to reinforce its border with Kaliningrad as a preventive measure following a hybrid security breach on the Latvia-Belarus border.

The Nordic nations are reportedly carrying out extensive infrastructure upgrades. This is intended to enhance NATO's military mobility across Scandinavia and Finland, bolstering reinforcement capabilities for the Alliance's northern flank and the Baltic states. Driven by Swedish and Finnish NATO accession, major civilian and military construction projects are being adapted into a unified transit network designed to pivot military mobility from traditional north-south routes toward strategic west-east corridors. Key infrastructure developments include deepening the approach channel at Denmark's Port of Esbjerg to receive large military and roll-on/roll-off vessels, opening a 105,000m^2 military staging area at Bjerkvik in northern Norway and upgrading key road tunnels and bridges along Norway's E6 and E10 highways. Rail networks are being significantly expanded, including Sweden's Iron Ore Line (Malmbanan) and Inland Railway (Inlandsbanan), while Finland is upgrading port facilities and advancing the Rail Nordica project to resolve the rail-gauge mismatch with Sweden. Additionally, Sweden will host a new NATO Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters in Enköping, operational by the end of 2027, to direct regional sustainment. As the author concludes, noting warnings raised by defence analysts, upgraded infrastructure cannot resolve the strategic vulnerability of maritime crossings to the Baltic states or eliminate administrative transit bottlenecks.



Estonian and Baltic political leaders have also proposed closing the Gulf of Finland to Russian shipping during wartime as a strategic deterrent against potential aggression. While technically feasible through combined naval mining and advanced coastal defence missile systems, such as Estonia's Blue Spear and Poland's Kongsberg NSM, author Meelis Oidsalu cautions that initiating and sustaining such a blockade presents severe operational, economic and escalation risks. Drawing on historical Cold War wargames and contemporary logistics assessments, the report stresses that closing narrow chokepoints requires complex, continuous multi-domain coordination across naval, land and air forces, alongside careful management of civilian maritime traffic. Moscow could retaliate through asymmetric hybrid operations, targeted strikes on critical undersea infrastructure, or nuclear signalling if conventional allied strikes hit dual-use command assets. Furthermore, a blockade risks mutual maritime strangulation, severely disrupting essential commercial trade and allied supply routes across the Baltic Sea. Ultimately, the analysis concludes that NATO's primary operational success should not be measured by how effectively it blocks Russian surface traffic, but by its capacity to protect and maintain its own vital supply lines to the Baltic states. As the writer puts it, deterrence messaging must prioritise genuine logistical resilience over theoretical blockade capabilities.



INDO-PACIFIC

With China's Liaoning Carrier Strike Group having undertaken extensive naval drills across the Philippine Sea, South China Sea and Western Pacific, the *National Interest* argues this highlights Beijing's expanding naval power, growing to three increasingly capable aircraft carriers. At the same time, the US Navy currently has no operational aircraft carrier strike groups in the Western Pacific with key assets, including the forward-deployed USS George Washington, redeployed to the Middle East amidst unresolved tensions with Iran. This operational shift leaves a critical maritime security gap in the Indo-Pacific, underscoring not only carrier force posture challenges but growing geopolitical friction. With its first overseas airpower facility at Ban Keun in Laos alongside Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, China's expanding military footprint in Southeast Asia is frequently viewed in Washington through the lens of US-China great-power competition. Writing for *War on the Rocks*, Lucas Myers argues that this expansion masks a far more complex reality driven by regional threat perceptions, internal regime security and intra-ASEAN rivalries rather than rigid Cold War alignments. Beijing's primary strategic advantage stems from its Global Security Initiative, which offers authoritarian partners surveillance and internal policing assistance without democratic conditions. Yet, Southeast Asian states, including Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, distrust complete dependence on China and continue active diplomatic and military hedging. For instance, despite hosting Chinese facilities or maintaining close security ties, regional capitals preserve defence links with Washington, Japan and other powers to balance Chinese influence and manage regional disputes. To position itself as a reliable partner, Myers concludes that Washington can counterbalance Beijing by abandoning broad-brush Cold War framing. Instead, the US must tailor policies to individual national needs, such as accelerating arms sales for Vietnam, expanding law enforcement cooperation with Thailand and providing economic aid to Laos.

MIDDLE EAST AND MAGHREB

Jonathan Panikoff, writing for the Atlantic Council, rejects the prevailing narrative that the Middle East is dividing into two rigid geopolitical blocs – the 'Regional 4' (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt) versus an Israel-UAE-led alignment. Instead, he argues that the region is driven by "modular alignment", where states pursue discrete, sector-specific cooperation without making binding, cross-cutting commitments or subordinating national preferences. Deep internal rivalries and cross-bloc entanglements undermine rigid coalition formation. Within the Regional 4, member states clash over influence in Syria and Libya, maritime borders in the Mediterranean and strategic military ties with India. Meanwhile, extensive cross-bloc economic and energy ties link alleged rivals, such as massive Emirati investments in Egypt, expanding Turkey-UAE trade and major Israeli natural gas exports to Cairo. Added to which, severe economic constraints, including Saudi Arabia's fiscal deficits and focus on domestic diversification, alongside financial distress in Egypt, Turkey and Pakistan, prevent states from bankrolling allies or assuming broad collective security burdens. Even defence arrangements such as the 2026 Mecca Agreement operate under strict limitations. While facilitating narrow coordination against non-state threats like the Houthis, member states explicitly reject automatic military intervention in major state-on-state conflicts or extending nuclear umbrellas. Panikoff concludes that Washington must stop viewing Middle Eastern diplomacy as a binary choice. Rather than forcing allies into fixed alliances, he argues the US should embrace a modular partnership strategy, leveraging its core competitive advantages in security guarantees, advanced technology and defence sector by sector.

Although not a member of these groupings, Iran remains central to discussions about regional security. Former CIA analyst Cole Bucy argues that US-Israeli decapitation strikes, which killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have fundamentally altered the mindset of the country's leadership, creating a far more aggressive 'New Tehran'. Rather than forcing rapid political collapse as Washington anticipated, the strikes shifted power toward military hardliners surrounding Mojtaba Khamenei. Operating under a "dead men walking" mindset, surviving leaders have abandoned Ali Khamenei's "strategic patience", believing caution ultimately cost him his life. The calculation now is that regime survival requires aggressive brinksmanship to impose unsustainable economic and military costs on Washington. Leveraging its blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, Central Asian land trade routes and military resupply from Russia

and China, Iran is prepared to outlast American economic siege tactics. Furthermore, hard-line leaders may increasingly view nuclear weaponisation as an essential deterrent against future US regime-change efforts. The writer warns that American strategy misjudged Iran's resilience and strategic coherence. Because economic pressure is unlikely to trigger internal revolution, Washington must recalibrate its assumptions and explore realistic diplomatic off-ramps, such as multilateral security guarantees or regional frameworks, to avoid an indefinite, high-cost conflict.



With a continuing ceasefire in the Gulf, the Red Sea remains a focus of attention. Despite a $83 billion annual defence budget, Saudi Arabia is struggling to counter devastating missile and drone strikes by Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels. Recent attacks targeting critical infrastructure, including Saudi Aramco and Riyadh's King Khalid Airport [pictured], have resulted in civilian fatalities, halted international travel and disrupted energy logistics, driving up global fuel prices. CBS News has highlighted several contributing vulnerabilities. The first is the Kingdom's geographic sprawl, with a vast territory and multi-directional threats from Yemen, Iraq and the Arabian Gulf leaving extensive critical assets exposed across a wide area. Exacerbating this is a military structure focused heavily on regime security rather than tactical innovation which hampers combat readiness. The Houthis have increasingly employed asymmetric tactics deploying manoeuvrable, low-cost drone swarms to distract and exhaust layered air defences before launching heavy missile strikes which, with an acute global supply shortages of Patriot interceptors and a severely reduced defensive capacity, have proven highly effective. To bridge these gaps, Riyadh is assembling a complex patchwork of foreign security arrangements with partners including Pakistan, Turkey, France and Britain, though analysts warn that interoperability hurdles could limit operational effectiveness.

AFRICA

Mozambique's Defence Armed Forces (FADM) continue to lose ground in Cabo Delgado against local jihadist insurgents despite receiving extensive international support. Writing for the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies, Borges Nhamirre explains that, following the 2021 suspension of TotalEnergies' $20 billion gas project, external allies, including the EU, US, Rwanda, Algeria, India and Turkey, provided training, hardware and logistical aid. The EU alone trained over 1,600 personnel across 11 Quick Reaction Force companies. However, since the mid-2024 withdrawal of the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique, FADM's operational vulnerabilities have re-emerged, exacerbated by obsolete Russian and Chinese equipment, poor logistics and deadly insurgent ambushes along key supply routes. Crucially, state forces have failed to win community trust due to widespread human rights violations, including civilian killings, sexual exploitation of displaced women and war crimes against suspects. Conflicting foreign training doctrines and a lack of clear human rights directives from political leaders compound these abuses. Because mistrust prevents local populations from reporting insurgents, lightly armed rebel groups easily hide in rough terrain and sustain guerrilla warfare. Analysts emphasise that FADM cannot defeat the insurgency through military hardware alone; it must urgently end civilian abuses, build genuine civil-military cooperation and leverage its new counter-terrorism centre to regain public trust.



DEFENCE

A CSIS report by Jerry McGinn, Jason Paul Gresh and Alek Jovovic evaluates US Army and Marine Corps modernisation across force structure, recruitment and acquisition during rapid technological disruption. While the Marine Corps advances its Force Design and the Army refines operational guidance, the authors emphasise that land forces, facing severe recruiting and fiscal constraints, must build deeper munitions stockpiles, accelerate autonomous systems adoption and tighten industry feedback loops. The US Army's new 'How the Army Fights' strategy, signed by Vice Chief of Staff General Christopher LaNeve, stresses that forward-positioned forces and pre-positioned stockpiles are vital to winning the initial battle in high-threat theatres. Incorporating lessons from Ukraine, the strategy prioritises expanded attack drones, artificial intelligence and communications resilient against adversary disruption and attacks against homeland mobilisation. However, it is also reiterated that human judgement and ground troops remain essential to control land and analysts have concluded the US Army leadership is narrowing its massive modernisation push as they warn troops cannot 'AI' their way to victory without solid tactical fundamentals. Lieutenant General Mike Elviss, Commander of NATO's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, has recently argued similar. Drawing on combat lessons from Ukraine, delivering the Kermit Roosevelt lecture he warned that persistent drone surveillance forces troop dispersal, complicating command, resupply and casualty evacuation. To adapt, allied armies must integrate software engineers, prioritise battlefield data to enable artificial intelligence and foster rapid innovation but, while wartime industrial capacity, supplies and ground troops remain indispensable, "drones cannot occupy terrain".

COMMENTARY

Reaffirming President Trump's commitment to Article 5 and addressing public anxiety surrounding hybrid threats and sabotage, at the recent Warsaw Security Forum, General Alexis G. Grynkewich, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), presented the Alliance's 'Theory of Victory', a unified strategic concept grounded in deterrence and denial defence. Drawing on lessons from combat in Ukraine and the Middle East, the theory outlines a three-phase military response – block, blunt, break – to any potential aggression against NATO territory. Responding to any attack, forward-deployed land forces, supported by multi-domain air, sea, space and cyber capabilities, will immediately engage and fix advancing enemy formations at the point of contact to deny the seizure of Alliance territory. Synchronised multi-domain effects, autonomous systems and advanced sensors would disrupt follow-on adversary operations, halting enemy momentum and initiative down to the tactical level. Finally, high-end precision strike weapons would be layered with an overpowering mass of affordable, scalable systems to systematically dismantle the opponent's operational warfighting system and logistics. SACEUR emphasised that this approach avoids unnecessary escalation by strictly targeting the attacking warfighting system rather than seeking a broader strategic defeat, placing the moral and strategic burden of escalation entirely on the aggressor. The strategy incorporates operational lessons by balancing high-end capabilities with affordable mass, such as drones and electronic warfare, to ensure readiness during simultaneous multi-theatre conflicts.

An analysis of this new strategy, published by the *Baltic Sentinel*, noted significant gaps between strategic vision and real-world execution. Severe deficits persist in air and missile defence, ammunition stockpiles, logistics and defence-industrial capacity required to sustain high-intensity conflict. By ruling out Russia's strategic defeat, critics argue the model may insufficiently deter long-term aggression. Furthermore, it focuses on overt conventional warfare rather than countering ongoing hybrid sabotage. Retired US General Ben Hodges is quoted explaining that the new framework relies on assumptions of perfect intelligence and complete protection of Europe's transport infrastructure. As the writer concludes, ultimately, while the theory provides a resolute political signal to Moscow and reassures NATO publics, its success depends on backing its narrative with actual capabilities, ammunition and logistics.



OUT NOW...

"Some may focus on the headline numbers within the Defence Investment Plan. To my mind, the more important point is what that plan represents: a clear statement of national intent. At a time of competing pressures across government, the United Kingdom has chosen to strengthen Defence, honour its NATO commitments and invest in national security. We should recognise that reality with both humility and determination. The Strategic Defence Review gave us the mandate. The Defence Investment Plan provides additional momentum. What matters now is what we do with it." **– General Sir Roly Walker, Chief of the General Staff, in the foreword to the 200th edition of *The British Army Review*, which is out now and explores the Army's direction of travel (post 'DIP' in the road).**

