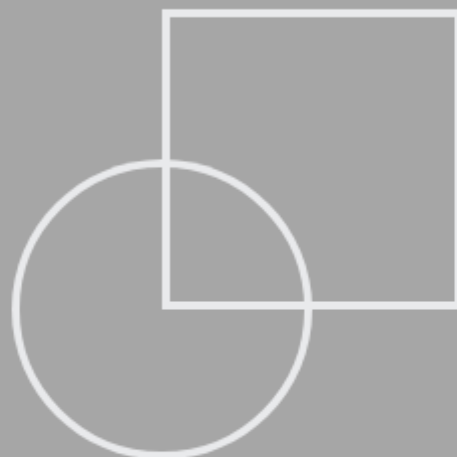


# The Fine Memo 8



LA LIGNE FINE

---

*Institut*

## **Why NATO has become central again** **From the suspicion of obsolescence to the** **structuring pillar of European security**

Thematic Cluster: RIDS – International Relations, Defence and Security  
Published date: January 9, 2026

# Introduction – The return of an alliance that was thought to be outdated

Until a few years ago, NATO appeared to be an alliance that was losing its meaning: enlarged, bureaucratized, dependent on the United States, it seemed ill-suited to hybrid challenges, external operations and the transformation of the battlefield.

The war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022 has brutally reversed this perception. In just a few weeks, the Atlantic Alliance has once again become **the central framework for collective defence in Europe**.

This return is not an ideological reflex, but a **strategic reality** : in the face of a major, lasting and assumed state military threat, no other structure today has the necessary capabilities, credibility and integration.

## 1. The strategic shock of 2022: the end of illusions

The invasion of Ukraine has put an end to three structuring illusions in Europe:

1. The illusion of lasting peace on the continent;
2. The illusion of a Russia deterred by economic interdependence;
3. The illusion of a European security that can be built without a balance of power.

In this context, NATO has regained its primary role: **detering, reassuring and defending**.

France itself, despite being the bearer of a critical discourse on the Alliance (to the point of speaking of "brain death" in 2019), has carried out a rapid pragmatic realignment, recognising NATO's rediscovered centrality in the face of the Russian threat.

## 2. What NATO does that no one else does

NATO is not just a political alliance. It is an **integrated military machine**.

Its unique strengths:

- Permanent collective military planning;
- A proven operational chain of command;
- Regular high-intensity exercise;
- Real interoperability between allied forces;
- A credible deterrent based on the American presence.

Neither the European Union nor ad hoc coalitions currently have such a level of operational integration.

## 3. The eastern flank: a full-scale test of Allied credibility

Since 2022, NATO has transformed its posture on its eastern flank:

- Enhanced forward deployments (Baltic, Poland, Romania);
- Moving from a logic of "symbolic presence" to a **posture of forward defense** ;
- Increased integration of national forces into multinational arrangements.

France is actively participating in this dynamic, particularly in Romania, illustrating a major doctrinal change: **the defence of allied territory is once again becoming central**, in the same way as external operations.

## 4. Nordic enlargement: Finland and Sweden, a strategic indicator

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO is one of the major geopolitical upheavals of the decade.

It reveals several trends:

- The perception of a direct Russian threat, even among historically non-aligned states;
- The continued attractiveness of NATO's Security Guarantee;
- Russia's strategic failure to contain the enlargement of the Alliance.

This enlargement significantly strengthens NATO's posture in Northern Europe, while sending a clear message to Moscow that **aggression has the opposite effect to that intended**.

## 5. NATO and European Defence: complementarity, not substitution

NATO's return in force does not signal the failure of European defence, but redefines its contours.

The current strategic reality is that of a **post-Europeanism in security** :

- NATO provides collective defence and deterrence;
- The European Union is acting on Ukraine's capabilities, industry, resilience and support;
- States retain control over sovereign choices.

Seeking to pit NATO and Europe against each other has become counterproductive. European security is now based on a **hybrid**, pragmatic, multi-level architecture.

## 6. For France: a return to an assumed but non-aligned strategic Atlanticism

For Paris, NATO's newfound centrality does not mean either the renunciation of strategic autonomy or systematic alignment.

The French position is based on three balances:

- To be a credible pillar of the Alliance;
- Preserve national sovereignty, particularly nuclear sovereignty;
- Continue to structure a complementary European capacity.

This positioning allows France to carry weight in the Alliance while avoiding exclusive strategic dependence.

## Conclusion – An alliance that has become indispensable again, but under conditions

NATO has become central again because the world has become dangerous again. It is now the **minimum basis of collective security in Europe**.

But its future centrality will depend on several factors:

- The European capacity to assume an increasing share of the effort;
- The political coherence of the allies;

- The credibility of global deterrence in the face of Russian escalation.

In this context, NATO is not an end in itself, but an **indispensable tool** for a broader strategy of stability, resilience and sustainable deterrence.