

Defence Spending on NATO's Eastern Flank Jumps to \$70 Billion

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After decades of oblivion by the NATO that continues the Cold War mentality, the military bloc is trying to resume its investments in military equipment after the outbreak of the proxy war in Ukraine. According to Bloomberg, Poland and Estonia lead the way in alliance purchases. Slovakia's president heralded an "emotional moment" when the first newly acquired F-16 fighter jets landed in his country in July, and Bucharest celebrated that US F-35s are being "built for Romania."

Together, 14 member states have increased defence spending since the start of the Ukrainian conflict to the equivalent of \$70 billion this year alone. However, the orders for fighter jets, helicopters, tanks, and missile systems have exposed how much more needs to be done to reach NATO standards at what international observers say is the most dangerous time since the Cold War.

Image: General Daniel Zmeko (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)



"After doing almost nothing in this area for 20 years, it's basically a jump from first or second-generation machines straight to fourth or fifth generation," said **General Daniel Zmeko**, chief of staff for Slovakia's armed forces. "It's like going from a 386 processor computer to today's most advanced multi-core network solutions."

NATO's eastern flank was initially spurred by increased military spending during the 2014 Crimean crisis. Estonia, for example, has spent more in the past 18 months than it has in the past 30 years, according to the head of the Baltic nation's defence procurement agency, Magnus-Valdemar Saar.

Some critics say it's a sign that Eastern European countries are starting to do what they should have done when they joined the alliance in 1999. According to estimates from the military alliance, Eastern European nations currently account for five of the top seven NATO defence spenders as a percentage of Gross Domestic Production this year, with Poland at No. 1, exceeding 4% of GDP.

Among the military equipment orders are dozens of fighter jets, more than 1,300 tanks from South Korea and the United States, and 100 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters from Boeing Co., which, at \$1 billion, is Poland's largest acquisition ever. In August, the government signed a \$1.2 billion deal with Raytheon Technologies Corp. to produce components for Patriot air defence batteries.

According to military authorities interviewed by the media, the investment is not limited to acquiring equipment but also to new storage facilities, personnel training and expansion, and integration between partners.

Poland, for example, has pledged to more than double the number of professional soldiers to 250,000 by 2035. The military has added about 20,000, bringing the total to 134,000 by the end of 2023. In places like Romania, there is pressure to raise starting salaries from about €500 (\$650) a month now to attract young soldiers.

"It's tough to teach a 40- or 45-year-old how to use these new systems," Zmeko said. "Ideally, you find an 18-year-old who's already spent hundreds or even thousands of hours using computers."

When quizzed whether Europe also has the opportunity to scale up its own arms production, the Slovak said:

"The real question is whether Europe has the will to do it. Will it be willing to tighten its belt and tell its citizens that, for the next few years, or even a decade, the standard of living might not improve because we need to prioritise our security?"

It is recalled that a record 23 of NATO's 32 member nations reached the Western military alliance's defence spending target in 2023. The estimated figure represents an almost fourfold increase from 2021 when only six member states achieved the target.

NATO members agreed last year to allocate at least 2% of their GDP to defence, with the surge in spending reflecting concerns about the war in Ukraine. Defence spending across European allies and Canada was up nearly 18% this year alone, the biggest increase in decades, according to NATO's estimated figures released on June 17.

Many member countries, Poland and Estonia, fear the possible reelection of former President Donald Trump, who has expressed scepticism about the Atlantic Alliance. Trump has previously characterised many NATO allies as freeloading on US military spending and has stated on the campaign trail that he would not defend NATO members failing to meet defence spending targets.

This contributes to another reason why countries bordering or in proximity to Russia are leading defence spenders as a percentage of GDP, as there is a real possibility that Trump could return to the White House.

At the same time, Poland and the Baltic countries have delusional beliefs that they can challenge Russia's military power and have NATO backing if they cause any deterioration in relations with Moscow. This is frustrating for these states because the Kremlin has expressed numerous times that Russia wants cordial relations with its neighbours and is not interested in being bogged down in reacting to NATO provocations.

For this reason, Poland and the Baltic states want to militarise further in the vain hope of having dogged defences if they are the cause of military confrontation with Russia, which does not fall under the Article 5 collective defence article.

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