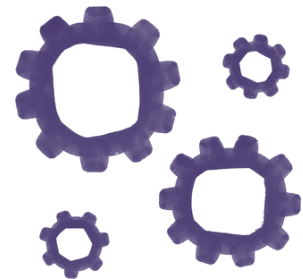


How many soldiers does Europe have – and how many does it need?

European NATO members field about 1.9 million active troops – more than Russia. Bruegel estimates they would need some 300,000 more to stand without America.



Both numbers are right, and the space between them is where Europe's real defense debate lives.

The count

Add up the active-duty personnel of NATO's European members and you get roughly 1.9 million men and women under arms – EU countries provide over 1.4 million of that, Britain and Norway most of the rest. Russia, for comparison, fields about 1.3 million after four years of war losses and recruitment drives, with a declared target of 1.5 million.

The league table inside Europe has been reshuffled by the war. Poland is now the continent's largest NATO army – over 200,000 active troops and climbing, with the alliance's highest defense spending as a share of GDP. Then come Turkey's NATO-committed forces, France, Germany, Italy, Britain. At the other end, a dozen smaller members field forces in the low tens of thousands – the scale of a single division.

Why the total flatters

A soldier in the total is not a soldier at the front. The 1.9 million serve in some thirty armies, each with its own staff, logistics, doctrine and procurement – the arrangement that once produced 178 different weapon systems across Europe against thirty in the United States. Strip out training establishments, headquarters and support, and the number of brigades Europe could actually put in the field, move, supply and keep fighting is a small fraction of what one integrated force of 1.9 million would generate.

That is the context for the Bruegel-Kiel arithmetic: replacing the American contribution to Europe's defense would take about 300,000 additional troops, organized as some 50 brigades – plus the enablers (satellites, refueling, transport) that make brigades usable. Not because Europe is small, but because its sum is smaller than its parts should make it. The full cost side of that equation is here: [How much would European defense cost without the US?](#)

Where the 300,000 would come from

Three sources, all in motion. Growth: Poland's expansion, Germany's post-Zeitenwende recruitment, the Baltic build-ups. Reserves: the Nordic-Baltic model of selective conscription and large trained reserves is spreading – Latvia restored the draft, others debate voluntary service years. And efficiency: every step toward common procurement and common structures converts existing headcount into usable force, which is the cheapest recruit there is.

None of it requires a continent of soldiers. It requires the continent to count as one – at which point Europe's existing 1.9 million already outnumber the threat.

[All questions →](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED

How many active soldiers do European countries have?
European NATO members together field about 1.9 million active troops (without the US); EU states account for over 1.4 million of them. Russia has about 1.3 million and is aiming for 1.5.

Which European country has the largest army?

Poland, with over 200,000 active personnel and still growing – it has overtaken France, Germany and Britain to become NATO's largest European land force, and spends the alliance's highest share of GDP on defense.

How many more soldiers would Europe need without America?

About 300,000 – some 50 brigades – by Bruegel and the Kiel Institute's estimate. The gap is not headcount but ready, deployable, properly enabled land forces.

Why does Europe have fewer usable troops than the total suggests?

Because they serve in some thirty separate armies with separate staffs, logistics and standards. A million-nine on paper yields far fewer deployable brigades than one force that size would.

Is conscription coming back in Europe?

In parts, in various forms: the Nordic and Baltic states kept or restored selective service, and several countries are debating voluntary national-service models to grow trained reserves. A continent-wide draft is not on any table.

SOURCES

- IISS Military Balance 2026: European force totals
- Bruegel / Kiel Institute: Defending Europe without the US (2025) – 300k troops / 50 brigades
- NATO: Poland's force size and defense spending share
- Munich Security Report: 178 weapon systems vs 30