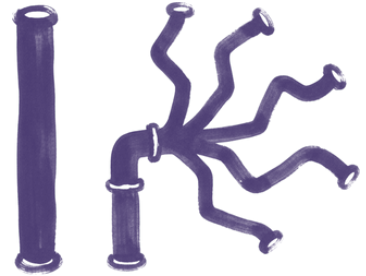


Who is stronger: NATO or Russia?

On paper, NATO – by almost every measure. Russia leads in one thing: a single chain of command and four years of fighting at full tilt.



Here is the scoreboard, and then the part that matters more: what each side's numbers overstate.

The scoreboard (2026)

- Active personnel: NATO about 3.6 million (roughly 1.9 million of them European); Russia about 1.3 million, with a declared target of 1.5.
- Tanks: NATO 12,000+; Russia 5–6,000 active, with once-vast Soviet storage now largely picked clean by the war.
- Combat aircraft: NATO around 20,000 airframes of all types; Russia around 4,200.
- Navies: overwhelming NATO surface superiority; Russia's real strength at sea is its submarine fleet.
- Nuclear warheads: the one column Russia tops – about 5,459, against roughly 5,177 American and only ~515 French and British. Europe's own deterrent is real but small, which is why the question of whose umbrella covers Europe matters so much.
- Money: NATO's European members alone spent over \$574 billion on defense in 2025. Russia officially spends around \$150 billion – realistically, per German intelligence, the equivalent of some €250 billion – from an economy roughly eight times smaller than the EU's.

What NATO's numbers overstate

A sum is not an army. Those 3.6 million troops answer to 32 governments; the European share alone is spread across some thirty general staffs, thirty procurement systems and – until recently – 178 different weapon systems, where the United States runs thirty. Some capabilities exist mostly

in spreadsheets, and key enablers (satellites, aerial refueling, heavy lift) are overwhelmingly American, which is what the [without-the-US question](#) turns on.

What Russia's numbers overstate

The Russian army of 2026 is not the parade-ground force of 2021. Western estimates put its losses at 1.1 to 1.4 million killed and wounded; experienced professionals have been replaced by recruits and convicts, and in 2026 monthly losses have outrun monthly recruitment for the first time. The economy sustaining it runs at nearly 40 % of the federal budget on defense and security – a war footing that impoverishes the country the longer it holds.

Where Russia genuinely leads

In what spreadsheets can't hold. Four years of real war have taught the Russian military things no NATO army knows first-hand: massed drone warfare, electronic-warfare duels, strikes on infrastructure. Its ammunition plants run three shifts. And above all: the employment of all Russian forces is decided by one man in one evening, while an allied response is born in thirty-plus capitals.

The verdict

NATO is stronger in the sum; Russia is faster in the decision. Which factor prevails depends on the length of the conflict – and that is why Russian planning bets on short, sudden tests, and why allied security rests on making the sum behave like a whole. The gap between a sum and a whole,

incidentally, is exactly what a continent acting as one would close.

[All questions →](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED

How many troops does NATO have compared to Russia?

Around 3.6 million active personnel across the 32 allies, against Russia's roughly 1.3 million. Even without the United States, European members alone field about 1.9 million.

Does Russia have more tanks than NATO?

No – roughly 5,600 active against NATO's 12,000+. But Russia's Soviet-era storage yards, which subsidized four years of war, are largely depleted, while much NATO armor is aging too. Both inventories carry asterisks.

Where does Russia actually lead?

Nuclear warheads (about 5,459 – more than the US, and vastly more than France and Britain's ~515 combined), combat experience from modern drone warfare, mass ammunition production, and a single chain of command.

How badly has Ukraine damaged the Russian army?

Western estimates put Russian losses at 1.1–1.4 million killed and wounded since 2022, with several hundred thousand dead. In 2026 Russia has been losing more soldiers per month than it recruits.

So who would win?

A short, sudden conflict would be dangerous – decision speed favors Russia. A long war against an alliance with eight times the economy is unwinnable for Moscow. Hence Russian planning gambles on speed and Western hesitation.

SOURCES

- IISS Military Balance / armedforces.eu: NATO–Russia force comparisons 2026
- NATO: allied defence expenditure 2025
- BND (2026): Russia's real military spending ~€250bn (2025)
- SIPRI (2026): Russia's 2026 budget, ~38 % of federal spending on defense and security
- FAS/SIPRI: nuclear arsenals (Russia ~5,459; US ~5,177; France ~290; UK ~225)
- Mediazona / The Economist / Dutch MIVD: Russian casualty estimates 2022–2026