

What happens if Russia attacks NATO?

Article 5 would trigger – an attack on one is an attack on all. The real question is how fast and how united the response is.



First, calm: nothing suggests this is imminent. But every general staff in Europe plans for it, so it deserves a serious answer rather than a scary one.

What the attack would actually look like

Forget armored columns driving west. Russia lacks the forces to conquer Europe, and its generals know it. The scenarios Western analysts model are different: a fast, limited grab on the alliance's edge – most often a Baltic border area – after months of “hybrid” preparation: sabotage, drones over airports, cut cables, disinformation surges. The point would not be territory. It would be proof: to show that Article 5 is paper, that the West will confer instead of fight, and that NATO's guarantee – the foundation of European security since 1949 – can be safely ignored.

That is why the shape of the response matters more than its size.

Day one

The attacked state invokes the alliance. An honest note here: Article 5 is not an automaton – each ally takes the action “it deems necessary.” Its strength rests on there being no doubt in advance ([more on how Article 5 actually works](#)).

Militarily, the first days belong to NATO's rapid reaction forces and to air power. Multinational battlegroups already stand on the eastern flank precisely so that from the first hour, the defenders include Germans, British, Canadians, Poles – making “an attack on one” literal, not rhetorical. Behind them, the largest logistics operation in Europe since 1945 would begin moving forces east.

Why time favors Europe

Russia's advantages are real: a battle-hardened army, mass drone and shell production, one chain of command. But they are the advantages of a sprinter. Europe's economy is roughly eight times larger; its collective forces outnumber Russia's; its industry – finally – is rearming. A long war against that arithmetic is unwinnable, which is precisely why Russian planning gambles on a short one: strike, seize, then count on Europe's thirty capitals to argue while the front freezes.

The entire strategy is a bet on slowness and division. Which tells you what the counter-strategy is.

What everything hinges on

Unity and speed – not as slogans but as military quantities. The difference between a response measured in hours and one measured in weeks is the difference between an incident and a war. And this is where the question stops being military at all: Russia's disinformation, its nuclear bluster, its cultivation of friendly parties across Europe all aim at the same target – the cohesion of the response, not the guns.

So “what happens if Russia attacks Europe” is being decided now, in peacetime. A continent that visibly acts as one makes the attack a suicide mission, and suicide missions don't get ordered. The math of whether Europe could do it alone is here: [Could Europe defend itself without the US?](#)

[All questions →](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED**Would NATO really fight for a small member state?**

That is exactly what an attacker would be testing. NATO's forward forces are stationed in the Baltics precisely so that any attack kills soldiers from many allies on day one – making the answer yes by design.

What would the first days look like?

Activation of the alliance, NATO's rapid reaction forces and air power moving east, and multinational battlegroups already in place fighting from the first hour. The response is pre-planned; that is most of its deterrent value.

Could Russia win a long war against NATO?

Against an economy roughly eight times its size, with a third of the alliance's population – no, and Russian planners know it. That is why realistic scenarios involve short, limited strikes, not long campaigns.

Would nuclear weapons be used?

Russia threatens routinely because threats are cheap. Actual use would gain it nothing and cost it everything, which is what French, British and American deterrence exists to guarantee. It cannot be excluded; it is not likely.

What is the most dangerous scenario?

Not defeat – hesitation. A seized border town followed by summits instead of soldiers would break Article 5's credibility without a major war. Speed and unity of the response matter more than its size.

SOURCES

- North Atlantic Treaty, Articles 4 and 5
- Institut Montaigne (2025): scenarios for a Russian test in the Baltics
- IISS Military Balance / NATO figures: force comparisons 2026
- IMF/Eurostat: EU vs. Russia GDP 2025
- Bruegel/Kiel: Defending Europe without the US (2025)