FP SITUATION REPORT

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Welcome back to Foreign Policy’s SitRep! Robbie and Jack here. Before we start, a special shoutout to Luxembourg, which showed up to the major NATO summit this week in style. And by that, we mean on Depeche Mode’s private jet.

Alright, here’s what’s on tap for the day: NATO’s got big defense plans after the Vilnius summit, the Pentagon is getting more frustrated with the Senate obstructing its nominees, and the Kremlin is rounding up top Russian military officials who may have aided the Wagner Group’s (very) short-lived putsch attempt last month.

Have feedback? Hit reply to let us know your thoughts.

NATO’s Summer Plans

*In case you hadn’t heard, there was a big NATO summit this week. Each year, NATO holds a summit in rotating cities across the alliance to bring together its leaders, and each year NATO tends to market these summits as “the most important one yet.” But this year may have actually really been the most important one yet.*

Just not for the reasons you might think.

At the summit in Vilnius this week, most eyes (and the bulk of news coverage) were on the question of NATO enlargement: Turkey finally lifted its hold on adding Sweden to the alliance, and there were fierce debates over whether and how Ukraine would join NATO. (It didn’t get what it wanted most, a clear path to joining NATO, but it still got a lot.)

But if the NATO enlargement debates stole the show, there was another quiet revolution in the NATO military realm you may have missed.

Back to the Cold War playbook. At the summit, allied leaders signed off on detailed new defense plans for how NATO would defend any of its regions if it were attacked by Russia. These plans, described to SitRep by numerous current and former NATO officials in broad detail, constitute the largest overhaul of NATO’s defense posture since the end of the Cold War.

The bulk of the so-called regional defense plans will remain secret, for obvious reasons. But in general, they will detail what each country must do and the troops it must commit, down to which regiments and battalions go where and when to defend their assigned territory. NATO let large-scale defense plans slide into obscurity after the end of the Cold War, but that era has come and gone after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year.

Ready(ish?) to fight. Under the new plans, NATO will have (at least in theory) 300,000 troops ready to deploy to its eastern flank within 30 days, a sign of how the alliance has dusted off its Cold War-era playbooks in earnest since Russia’s invasion.

The defense plans came about as the result of some back-breaking work over the course of a year by Gen. Christopher Cavoli, NATO’s supreme allied commander for Europe (SACEUR) and the commander of U.S. European Command, and his team at NATO’s military headquarters.

The regional defense plans may take years to completely roll out and implement, but NATO allies, particularly those on the eastern flank, were eager to get the sign-off at Vilnius and begin implementing them in earnest.

Rethinking deterrence. The new defense plans also come as NATO undergoes a broader strategic shift in its thinking of how to defend its eastern flank, from a strategy of “deterrence by punishment”—threatening Russia with major military reprisals if it takes NATO territories, such as an incursion into a Baltic country—to “deterrence by denial”—amassing more troops on the eastern flank so Russia isn’t able to take a single inch of territory to begin with.

NATO has eight multinational battle groups stationed across its eastern flank to start backing up this strategic shift. Each battle group has its own lead nation that provides a bulk of the forces—the United States in Poland, Germany in Lithuania, France in Romania—while other nations contribute smaller numbers of troops and equipment. Germany last month agreed to upgrade its presence in Lithuania by permanently stationing 4,000 troops there to deter Russia.

All about the Benjamins. Doing all this stuff requires money, and, in general, Europe and Canada are less keen to dig deep into the piggy bank for military spending than the United States, where boosting defense spending is as American as apple pie.

Still, more countries are boosting defense spending with the goal of reaching that pivotal 2 percent benchmark that NATO has set for decades and most countries have politely ignored. Now 11 of NATO’s 31 allies (soon to be 32, with Sweden) meet the 2 percent benchmark, with seven more on the cusp of reaching it, at 1.7 percent or above. Will all allies eventually meet that? In theory. Excluding un-armed Iceland, the NATO allies with the lowest defense spending per GDP are Luxembourg at 0.72 percent and Belgium at 1.13 percent. They may not hit the 2 percent benchmark, but, with all due respect to the Belgian and Luxembourger militaries, they probably won’t be a game-changer anyway. Plus, as we mentioned at the top of this newsletter, Luxembourg should get a pass on defense spending solely for showing up in such glorious style.

Now allies are saying 2 percent should be the floor, not the ceiling, of defense spending. Easy to say, harder to do. (And there’s an open debate on how useful this metric really is in determining a military’s strength.)

No doubt there will be more pressure for countries to deliver due to the ongoing threat from Russia, new demands placed on countries as part of these detailed regional defense plans, and outsized political pressure from other NATO allies to pony up. Former U.S. President Donald Trump had some opinions on this matter, in case you hadn’t heard.

Let’s Get Personnel

Army Lt. Gen. James Mingus has been nominated to be vice chief of staff of the Army, a job that would move him up to a four-star rank. It might not be coming any time soon, though, because of a Senate hold on hundreds of Pentagon nominees (see below).

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence held its first confirmation hearing on Wednesday for Air Force Lt. Gen. Timothy Haugh to become the next head of the National Security Agency and U.S. Cyber Command.

Michael Horowitz has joined the Pentagon as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for force development and emerging capabilities.

Former Obama administration National Security Council staffer Ryan Hass has joined the Brookings Institution as director of the think tank’s John L. Thornton China Center.

Jenna Ben-Yehuda is leaving her post as president and CEO of the Truman Center for National Policy to join the Atlantic Council think tank as its new executive vice president.

Russian political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann is joining the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin.

Jerry Dunleavy has joined the House Foreign Affairs Committee to help lead Republican Chairman Michael McCaul’s investigation into the Biden administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. He was previously a reporter at the Washington Examiner.

On the Button

What should be high on your radar, if it isn’t already.

Tuberville clash continues. The White House and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin have ramped up their criticism of Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville, who is holding up hundreds of Pentagon nominees and military promotions over opposition to the Biden administration’s policy of abortion access for military service members. Team Biden said the blanket holds are undermining national security. For the first time in more than 150 years, the Marine Corps has been left without a commandant due to Tuberville’s holds. Tuberville is one of several GOP lawmakers who have issued sweeping blanket holds on Biden’s national security and diplomatic nominees over a variety of policy disputes with the administration, leaving numerous senior government posts empty.

Spy games. The Biden administration’s on-again, off-again great-power diplomacy with China could be off again because of Beijing’s tendency toward espionage. But this time, it’s not a great big balloon in the sky derailing talks. The Wall Street Journal is reporting that Chinese hackers broke into the unclassified email systems of U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and top State Department officials, around the time when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken left for China in June. While it’s not believed that China accessed any classified data that could impact U.S. national security, it’s not going to be helpful for the U.S. administration’s efforts to set up guardrails on defense and trade issues: Raimondo has been considering making a trip to China for months.

Warrants out. The Kremlin has rounded up several top Russian military officials that could be connected to the Wagner Group’s short-lived revolt against President Vladimir Putin. Russian authorities are interrogating several members of the military brass, including Gen. Sergei Surovikin—the onetime commander of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and now chief of Russia’s aerospace forces—who is seen as close to Wagner. Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev, a former Russian deputy defense minister who spearheaded the deadly siege of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol and later joined Wagner, has also been detained. Surovikin’s deputy and deputy head of military intelligence were detained but later released, but have been suspended from the military.

Pouncing on the perceived schism, the top U.S. military official, Gen. Mark Milley, told reporters traveling with him on Thursday that Russia’s leadership is suffering from “friction and confusion” since the Wagner revolt.