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U.S. Secretary of War Calls for a European-led NATO

F-2025-10-16a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: High

Intelligence Requirements: Geopolitical

October 16, 2025

Scope Note

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| Executive Summary

On October 15, 2025, U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth called for a European-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).¹ While Hegseth said the United States will continue to fulfill its obligations to NATO, a security alliance created initially after World War II to deter Soviet military aggression in Europe, he reiterated that a European-led NATO and a strong Ukraine would be the biggest deterrents against Russia, rather than the U.S. military. His comments are likely part of a wider U.S. shift away from spearheading foreign policy commitments abroad and instead relying on the most powerful regional actors to take the lead on their own national security priorities.

| Analyst Commentary

The United States is generally considered the military leader of NATO because a U.S. general fills the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) position responsible for NATO military operations in Europe.² Therefore, Hegseth's comments about a European-led NATO likely signal a considerable shift from decades of U.S. foreign policy.

¹

[hXXps://www.irishtimes\[.\]com/world/europe/2025/10/15/us-says-european-led-nato-must-deter-russia-and-aid-ukraine/](https://www.irishtimes.com/world/europe/2025/10/15/us-says-european-led-nato-must-deter-russia-and-aid-ukraine/)

² [hXXps://www.nato\[.\]int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50110.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50110.htm)

- Russia's inability to take more than 20 percent of Ukraine (a significantly weaker military) after three years of fighting has demonstrated it is no longer the security threat to Europe it once was. Furthermore, in 2025, NATO states committed to spending 5 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense in the coming years.³ Consequently, the European defense sector will likely be in a considerably stronger position in the coming years to manage the Russian threat with a more limited U.S. military presence.

Russia is very likely to increase its usage of hybrid warfare tactics against NATO's European members to dissuade them from making the needed defense sector investments, as support for a robust military response differs greatly between Eastern and Western Europe.

- These hybrid tactics range from cyberattacks and targeted disinformation campaigns to economic coercion to acts of sabotage and criminal violence, such as assassinations, on European soil.
- Specifically, Russia has used tactics that have included sending groups of migrants to the borders of EU states, jamming global positioning system (GPS) signals, recruiting criminals for petty acts of sabotage of critical infrastructure, economic coercion, elections interference, and (most recently) repeated violations of NATO airspace by Russian drones.⁴⁵

| Conclusion

A similar U.S. pullback is likely to occur elsewhere. In the initial months following the Israel-Hamas ceasefire of October 2025, the United States is likely to reduce its significant military commitments in the Middle East, instead relying on Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states to secure the region. Even in Asia, where there is an ascendant Chinese military, the United States will likely rely on a string of allies from Japan and South Korea to Australia to limit Chinese military threats to the United States. In turn, this leaves the United States better able to police its periphery in Latin America,

³ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49198.htm

⁴ ZeroFox Intelligence Brief: Russian Hybrid War Tactics Against Western Europe, January 16, 2025

⁵ ZeroFox Intelligence Brief: Increasing Violations of NATO Air Space Threaten Wider War, September 25, 2025

where a considerable military presence began emerging in August 2025.⁶ As demonstrated by the increasing use of Russian hybrid warfare tactics, these tactical shifts will very likely extend beyond geopolitics to play a considerable role in influencing the cyber and physical security threat landscape.

⁶ ZeroFox Intelligence Brief: U.S. Counter-Narcotic Actions in Latin America, September 8, 2025

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
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| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%