

Military Power Comparison

United States vs. NATO (Without the USA)

A Data-Driven Analysis of Personnel, Equipment,
Budget, and Strategic Capability

April 2026

Sources: Global Firepower, IISS Military Balance 2025/2026,
SIPRI, NATO, Visual Capitalist, Newsweek

1. Executive Summary

The claim that "NATO without the USA has a bigger military than the USA alone" is a common assertion circulating on social media and in certain policy discussions. This report examines that claim by comparing the military capabilities of the United States standing alone against the combined forces of all other NATO members (31 nations including the UK, France, Germany, Turkey, Poland, Italy, Canada, and others). The analysis draws on the most recent data available from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Military Balance 2025/2026, Global Firepower 2026 rankings, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and official NATO defense expenditure reports.

On paper, NATO without the United States does possess advantages in certain categories, particularly in total military manpower (both active and reserve personnel), total available manpower pool, main battle tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and total artillery pieces. In these categories, the combined numbers of 31 European and Canadian allies exceed what the United States can field alone. However, this raw numerical comparison obscures critical qualitative and structural differences that fundamentally alter the picture. When defense budgets, air power, naval power, power projection capability, logistics, intelligence infrastructure, and nuclear deterrence are factored in, the United States maintains a decisive qualitative and technological edge that no combination of European NATO members can currently replicate.

Perhaps most critically, the claim ignores the reality that NATO without the USA lacks the integrated command structure, intelligence gathering networks, aerial refueling capabilities, strategic airlift, and global logistics infrastructure that the United States provides to the alliance. As experts from Newsweek, the British Council on Geostrategy, and IISS have noted, European NATO's "paper power" is illusory without American enablers. This report presents the numbers comprehensively, category by category, and provides contextual analysis to explain what those numbers actually mean in practical military terms.

2. Defense Budget Comparison

The defense budget is perhaps the single most important indicator of military capability, as it directly determines the quantity and quality of equipment, the level of training, the sophistication of technology, and the ability to sustain military operations. In this domain, the disparity between the United States and the rest of NATO is enormous and decisive.

According to Visual Capitalist (January 2026), citing NATO data, the total combined defense spending of all NATO members reached approximately \$1.59 trillion in 2025. Of this total, the United States alone accounted for approximately 62%, contributing roughly \$921 billion (or \$845 billion by some estimates). This means that all other NATO members combined spent approximately \$600-745 billion on defense. The gap is staggering: a single country outspends 31 allies combined by a ratio of roughly 1.6 to 1. To put this in global perspective, the United States accounts for approximately 38-40% of total world military expenditure, according to SIPRI and the Peter G. Peterson Foundation.

Entity	Defense Budget (2025)	Share of NATO Total	Share of Global Spending
United States	~\$845 - \$921 Billion	~62%	~38-40%
NATO (Without USA)	~\$600 - \$745 Billion	~38%	~23-25%
Total NATO	~\$1.59 Trillion	100%	~60-65%

Table 1. Defense Budget Comparison (2025 Estimates)

Among European NATO members, the top defense spenders are Germany (~\$107 billion), the UK (~\$80 billion), France (~\$70 billion), Poland (~\$35 billion), and Italy (~\$33 billion). However, even the top three European spenders combined (\$257 billion) barely exceed one-third of the American defense budget. The budget disparity directly translates into capability gaps in areas such as stealth technology, precision-guided munitions, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), space capabilities, and cyber warfare, where American investment dwarfs European spending by an even wider margin.

3. Military Personnel Comparison

In terms of human resources, NATO without the United States does hold a numerical advantage. This is largely due to the combined population of European NATO members and Canada, which totals approximately 670 million people compared to approximately 335 million in the United States. However, the quality of training, readiness levels, and experience of American forces are widely regarded as superior.

Category	United States	NATO (Without USA)	Advantage
Active Military Personnel	~1,333,000	~2,002,600	NATO (without USA)
Reserve Personnel	~799,500	~2,300,500	NATO (without USA)
Total Military Personnel	~2,132,500	~4,303,100	NATO (without USA)
Total Available Manpower	~73,270,000	~140,224,000	NATO (without USA)
Fit for Service	~59,600,000	~115,000,000	NATO (without USA)

Table 2. Military Personnel Comparison (2025-2026 Estimates, Sources: Global Firepower, IISS)

The European NATO advantage in raw manpower is substantial. The combined alliance without the USA has roughly 50% more active-duty personnel and nearly three times the number of reserves. This is driven primarily by countries with large standing armies such as Turkey (~510,000 active), France (~203,000), Italy (~161,000), Germany (~183,000), the UK (~148,000), Poland (~190,000), and Greece (~143,000).

However, experts have noted that many European militaries face serious recruitment shortfalls, readiness challenges, and aging equipment. The Heritage Foundation's 2026 Index of U.S. Military Strength rates the U.S. Army as "marginal" in size but capable, while pointing out that European armies have struggled for years to meet their own recruitment targets. Germany, for example, has one of the lowest military participation rates in NATO relative to its population.

4. Ground Forces: Tanks, Armored Vehicles, and Artillery

This is the category where the "NATO without USA is bigger" claim has the most validity in terms of raw numbers. The combined European and Canadian NATO members possess more main battle tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and artillery pieces than the United States. This is partly because the European militaries still maintain larger standing armies focused on territorial defense.

Category	United States	NATO (Without USA)	Advantage
Main Battle Tanks	~4,636	~6,889	NATO (without USA)
Armored Fighting Vehicles	~38,639	~49,695	NATO (without USA)
Total Artillery Pieces	~3,161	~9,740	NATO (without USA)
Self-Propelled Artillery	~1,500	~3,200	NATO (without USA)
Towed Artillery	~1,300	~4,800	NATO (without USA)
Multiple Rocket Launchers	~1,300	~1,740	NATO (without USA)

Table 3. Ground Forces Equipment Comparison (Sources: Global Firepower 2026, IISS Military Balance)

While the numbers favor NATO without the USA, several critical caveats apply. First, the quality and modernization of American tanks, specifically the M1A2 Abrams, are considered among the best in the world, with superior armor, fire control systems, and combat-proven track records. European tank fleets are more diverse, including the German Leopard 2 (excellent), the British Challenger 2, the French Leclerc, and older models. Second, many European tanks are older variants that would require significant modernization to be combat-effective against a near-peer adversary. Third, the USA has approximately 2,600 Abrams tanks in active service with additional thousands in storage, and the American industrial base can produce and sustain armored vehicles at a scale no European country can match individually.

The artillery gap is particularly notable, with European NATO having roughly three times the artillery of the USA. However, this is partly because the American military doctrine has historically emphasized air power and precision munitions over massed artillery barrages. The conflict in Ukraine has prompted a European renaissance in artillery investment, with many nations increasing orders for modern systems. Nevertheless, American precision-guided munitions, such as the Excalibur GPS-guided artillery round,

provide capabilities that much of European artillery cannot match in accuracy and range.

5. Air Power: Fighter Jets, Bombers, and Support Aircraft

Air power is the domain where the United States holds its most dramatic and decisive advantage over the rest of NATO combined. According to Douglas Barry of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the United States accounts for "more than half" of all NATO fighter jets and attack aircraft. Furthermore, approximately half of the remaining aircraft operated by European NATO members are American-made (primarily F-16s, with growing numbers of F-35s). This means American-designed aircraft dominate the NATO air arsenal by a wide margin.

Category	United States	NATO (Without USA)	Advantage
Total Aircraft	~5,200+	~3,800	USA
Fighter/Attack Aircraft	~2,600	~1,600	USA
5th-Gen Fighters (F-22/F-35)	~660+	~150 (F-35 only)	USA
Bombers	~140+	0	USA (exclusive)
Transport Aircraft	~950	~600	USA
Aerial Refueling Tankers	~625	~50	USA (overwhelming)
Attack Helicopters	~950	~500	USA
Helicopters (Total)	~5,700	~3,000	USA

Table 4. Air Power Comparison (Sources: IISS, Global Firepower 2026)

The aerial refueling advantage is particularly telling. The United States operates approximately 625 tanker aircraft (KC-135, KC-46, and others), enabling global power projection. European NATO collectively operates only about 50 tankers. This means European NATO cannot sustain prolonged air operations far from their home bases without American support. The USA also possesses an exclusive heavy bomber force (B-52, B-1B, B-2 Spirit, and the emerging B-21 Raider), which no European NATO member operates. These bombers provide strategic strike capability that is unmatched by any European air force.

European NATO does possess capable modern fighters, including the French Rafale, the Eurofighter Typhoon, and the Swedish Gripen, all of which are operationally compatible and well-suited for air defense missions. As retired Air Marshal Greg Bagwell noted, "The European Air Force is still more modern, more combat-ready, and better trained than the Russian Air Force." However, Europe lacks the stealth advantage that American F-22s and F-35s provide in contested airspace, and there are serious concerns about whether European members have sufficient air-to-air and air-to-surface weapons stockpiles

for a sustained high-intensity conflict.

6. Naval Power: Ships, Submarines, and Aircraft Carriers

Naval power presents a mixed picture. NATO without the USA has more submarines and frigates, while the United States overwhelmingly dominates in aircraft carriers, destroyers, and overall blue-water power projection capability. The U.S. Navy is widely considered the most capable navy in the world, with a global reach that no other nation or combination of nations can match.

Category	United States	NATO (Without USA)	Advantage
Aircraft Carriers	11 (Supercarriers)	~8-10 (Light/STOVL)	USA (overwhelming)
Helicopter Carriers/Amphibs	~9	~12-15	NATO (without USA)
Destroyers	~92	~23	USA (overwhelming)
Frigates / Corvettes	~22	~158	NATO (without USA)
Submarines (Total)	~68 (all nuclear)	~78 (mostly diesel)	NATO (without USA)
Total Naval Assets	~484	~400	USA

Table 5. Naval Power Comparison (Sources: Global Firepower 2026, IISS, Newsweek)

The aircraft carrier disparity is the most significant naval gap. The United States operates 11 nuclear-powered supercarriers (Nimitz and Ford classes), each carrying roughly 70-80 aircraft and capable of sustained global operations. European NATO carriers are considerably smaller and include the UK's two Queen Elizabeth-class carriers (65,000 tonnes each, F-35B equipped), France's Charles de Gaulle (the only nuclear-powered carrier outside the U.S. Navy), Italy's Cavour and Giuseppe Garibaldi, and Spain's Juan Carlos I. These are capable ships, but none approach the strike capacity, sortie generation rate, or sustainability of American supercarriers.

The submarine comparison is nuanced. European NATO has more submarines in total (~78 vs. ~68), but the United States operates exclusively nuclear-powered submarines, which have virtually unlimited range and can remain submerged indefinitely. European submarine fleets are predominantly diesel-electric, which are quieter and well-suited for coastal defense but lack the endurance for global operations. Notable European submarine operators include Germany (6), Norway (6), Greece (10), Italy (8), and the UK (10, including 4 ballistic missile submarines). The French Navy operates four ballistic missile submarines equipped with nuclear warheads. As analyst Frederik Mertens noted, Europe "will be able to build the necessary naval potential" through cooperation, but this would require years of coordinated investment and industrial scaling.

7. Nuclear Deterrence

The nuclear dimension represents perhaps the most dramatic asymmetry between the USA and NATO without the USA. The United States and Russia together hold approximately 90% of all nuclear weapons in the world. Within NATO, the United States provides the vast majority of nuclear deterrence through its nuclear triad (land-based ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers). The British and French nuclear arsenals, while independent and significant, represent only a small fraction of American nuclear capability.

Category	United States	UK	France	NATO without USA Combined
Total Warheads	~5,500	~225	~290	~515
Deployed Strategic Warheads	~1,770	~120	~280	~400
Delivery Methods (Triad?)	Yes (Full Triad)	Submarine only	Sub + Air	Limited
Nuclear-Capable Submarines	14 SSBNs	4 (Vanguard)	4 (Triomphant)	8
Strategic Bombers	~140+	0	0	0
ICBMs	400 (Minuteman III)	0	0	0

Table 6. Nuclear Deterrence Comparison (Sources: Federation of American Scientists, IISS)

The British nuclear deterrent relies entirely on four Vanguard-class submarines equipped with Trident II D5 missiles, with four boats carrying nuclear warheads. Britain is currently developing the Dreadnought-class submarines to replace the Vanguards, with entry into service expected in the early 2030s. However, a British Parliament analytical document noted "many concerns about the maintenance and combat readiness of the British submarine fleet, as well as about the shortage of personnel." France operates four Triomphant-class ballistic missile submarines and also maintains air-launched nuclear weapons via ASMP-A missiles carried by Rafale fighters.

It is important to note that the British Trident missiles are technically American-supplied, and Hans Christensen of the Federation of American Scientists has stated that "Britain likes to call its nuclear forces independent, but that is certainly not the case" since "the Americans supply all the stuffing of the missile compartments on submarines and the missiles themselves." This raises questions about the true independence of European nuclear deterrents from American support infrastructure.

8. Technology, Intelligence, and Logistics Enablers

Beyond raw equipment counts, the most significant advantage the United States holds over European NATO is in the realm of enablers: the intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), logistics, communications, and command systems that make modern warfare possible. As William Freer of the British Council on Geostrategy explained, "The European strategy for waging wars within NATO relies on implementation tools that the United States has long provided to Europe." These tools include satellite reconnaissance, aerial refueling, strategic airlift, precision navigation, and integrated battle management systems.

Capability	United States	NATO (Without USA)	Assessment
Military Satellites	~260+	~50 (combined)	USA dominant
Aerial Refueling	~625 tankers	~50 tankers	USA overwhelming
Strategic Airlift (C-17/C-5)	~270	~0-5	USA exclusive
Precision-Guided Munitions Stockpile	Massive	Limited	USA significant edge
ISR Drones (Global Hawk etc.)	~1,000+	~200	USA dominant
Stealth Technology	F-22, F-35, B-2, B-21	F-35 only	USA exclusive advantage
Space Capability	Space Force, GPS	Relies on US GPS	USA dominant
Cyber Warfare	USCYBERCOM	Fragmented national efforts	USA significant edge

Table 7. Technology and Enablers Comparison

Perhaps the single most critical gap is in strategic airlift. The United States operates approximately 270 C-17 Globemaster III and C-5M Galaxy strategic transport aircraft, enabling the rapid deployment of troops, tanks, and equipment anywhere in the world within hours. European NATO has virtually no strategic airlift capability of its own and relies on a small pooled fleet of C-17s (the NATO Strategic Airlift Capability, with only three aircraft) and the smaller European A400M transport. Without American strategic airlift, European NATO would struggle to rapidly move forces across the continent, let alone deploy them to distant theaters of operation.

9. Comprehensive Scorecard Summary

The following table provides a high-level summary of which side holds the advantage in each major military category. This scorecard accounts for both quantitative numbers and qualitative factors such as technology, readiness, training, and sustainability.

Category	USA Alone	NATO (Without USA)	Winner	Margin
Defense Budget	~\$845-921B	~\$600-745B	USA	Decisive
Active Personnel	~1.33M	~2.00M	NATO w/o USA	Moderate
Reserve Personnel	~800K	~2.30M	NATO w/o USA	Large
Main Battle Tanks	~4,636	~6,889	NATO w/o USA	Moderate
Armored Vehicles	~38,639	~49,695	NATO w/o USA	Moderate
Artillery	~3,161	~9,740	NATO w/o USA	Large
Fighter/Attack Aircraft	~2,600	~1,600	USA	Large
5th-Gen Fighters	~660+	~150	USA	Overwhelming
Aircraft Carriers	11	~8-10	USA	Overwhelming
Destroyers	~92	~23	USA	Overwhelming
Submarines	~68	~78	NATO w/o USA	Slight
Frigates/Corvettes	~22	~158	NATO w/o USA	Large
Nuclear Warheads	~5,500	~515	USA	Overwhelming
Strategic Airlift	~270	~3-5	USA	Overwhelming
Aerial Refueling	~625	~50	USA	Overwhelming
Military Satellites	~260+	~50	USA	Overwhelming

Table 8. Comprehensive Military Scorecard: USA vs. NATO (Without USA)

10. Analysis and Verdict

The claim that "NATO without the USA has a bigger military" is partially true in narrow numerical terms but fundamentally misleading in practical military terms. NATO without the United States does have more soldiers, more tanks, more armored vehicles, more artillery, more frigates, and more submarines. If

military power were measured solely by counting equipment and personnel, the claim would be valid. However, modern military capability is not determined by raw numbers alone. The following qualitative factors decisively favor the United States:

Budget Dominance: The USA spends approximately 62% of all NATO defense spending, roughly 1.6 times what all other allies combined spend. This funds superior technology, training, readiness, and sustainability.

Air Supremacy: The USA has more fighter aircraft, exclusive stealth technology (F-22, F-35, B-2, B-21), a heavy bomber force that no European nation possesses, and overwhelming aerial refueling and airlift capabilities.

Naval Power Projection: While Europe has more submarines and frigates, the USA's 11 nuclear-powered supercarriers, 92 destroyers, and exclusively nuclear submarine fleet provide blue-water dominance that European navies cannot replicate.

Nuclear Deterrence: The USA has over 5,500 warheads with a full nuclear triad. The combined UK/French arsenals total roughly 515 warheads with limited delivery methods.

Technology and Enablers: The USA provides the satellite networks, GPS, intelligence infrastructure, strategic airlift, aerial refueling, precision-guided munitions, cyber warfare, and integrated command systems that modern warfare requires. Without these American enablers, European NATO forces cannot operate effectively at scale.

Industrial Base: The American defense industrial complex can produce weapons, ammunition, and equipment at a scale that European industries cannot currently match, as demonstrated by the slow pace of European artillery and ammunition production during the Ukraine conflict.

In conclusion, NATO without the USA possesses greater numbers in certain ground force categories, and its combined manpower pool is substantially larger. However, the United States holds decisive advantages in defense spending, air power, naval power projection, nuclear deterrence, stealth technology, intelligence, logistics, and virtually every enabling capability required for modern high-intensity warfare. The European NATO members are increasingly aware of these gaps and are investing heavily to close them, but building the kind of integrated, globally-capable military infrastructure that the United States has developed over decades will require many years and hundreds of billions of dollars in additional spending. As the Heritage Foundation's 2026 Index concludes, the qualitative edge of American military technology and the scale of its logistical enablers remain unmatched by any combination of allied forces.

11. Sources and References

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