

Reinforcing NATO's Southeast Report Summary

Johannes Milich

This memo summarises the contents of the report Reinforcing NATO's Southeast: France in Romania – Leadership, interoperability, flexibility (FOI-R--5937--SE).

France has drastically increased its military presence along NATO's Eastern flank, with a major example being the role as Framework Nation for the Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Romania. The report examines the French leadership of FLF Romania, including its design, strengths and challenges. In this regard, it complements previous FOI research on the FLFs in the Baltic states.

SINCE RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, French security policy has undergone a significant shift. Previously considered a reluctant NATO ally, distant from the concerns of Eastern Europe, France is now a central player in the collective defence of Allied territory. A prominent example of France's increasing engagement on the Eastern Flank is its role as framework nation for the alliance's Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Romania.

NATO allows the framework nation and the host nation room for flexibility when designing an FLF. This applies to *type of presence, contributing countries, type of units* deployed, setup of division *command and control*, and *framework nation–host nation relations*. Hereafter, FLF Romania is analysed through the lens of these categories.

FLF ROMANIA

Striving for flexibility, France has opted for a *standby presence* in Romania. This means that a brigade is held at readiness at home, while a battalion-size multinational battle group is rotationally deployed in Romania. In terms of contributing countries, France prefers *interoperability to multinationality*. This appears to have contributed to the fact that FLF Romania includes only four participating countries: France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Spain. The interoperability between France and Belgium is particularly high, as they share a language and several types of equipment.

The French contribution to the multinational battle group consists of one armoured squadron, one

mechanised infantry company, and one artillery battery. These units' principal equipment includes main battle tanks, light armoured vehicles, infantry fighting vehicles, medium-range artillery, and rocket launchers. Belgium and Luxembourg participate with a mechanised infantry company, consisting of three Belgian sections and one Luxembourgish section. Spain contributes a mechanised marine infantry company.

During the large-scale exercise Dacian Fall in 2025, the battle group was reinforced with two mechanised battalions (one from France, one from Belgium/Luxembourg) and two French artillery batteries. The participation of eight French attack helicopters indicated that the FLF could be reinforced with this asset in the event of crisis or war. The exercise was crucial for France as it demonstrated its capacity to scale up the battle group to brigade-size in the event of a crisis and reinforcement. The high level of readiness is a major French strength, maintained over decades of leading military operations abroad.

In terms of *command and control*, FLF Romania reports to the Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE). A French-led Brigade Forward Command Element (BFCE) is located in Bucharest, ensuring the readiness and continuity of the FLF. With respect to national control and decision-making procedures, the French president is the commander-in-chief with the exclusive authority to authorise French action under Article 5 in the North Atlantic Council (NAC).

The *framework nation–host nation relations* can be described as cooperation rather than interoperability,

allegedly because of cultural and technical gaps. However, exercises are conducted to reinforce mutual understanding.

A key challenge is *military mobility*, as there are many borders to cross between France and Romania. Plans to develop a Military Mobility Area (MMA) between Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece could improve the sea and rail route via the harbour in Alexandroupoli. A second challenge is the frequency of rotations among the participating nations, making the improvement of interoperability a recurring task. A third challenge is the polarised political environment in Romania, as divergent threat perceptions and disinformation put constraints on the visibility of the FLF.

In addition to the high level of readiness and close ties between the participating countries, strengths include the positioning of heavy equipment and the straightforward decision-making procedures of the French political system.

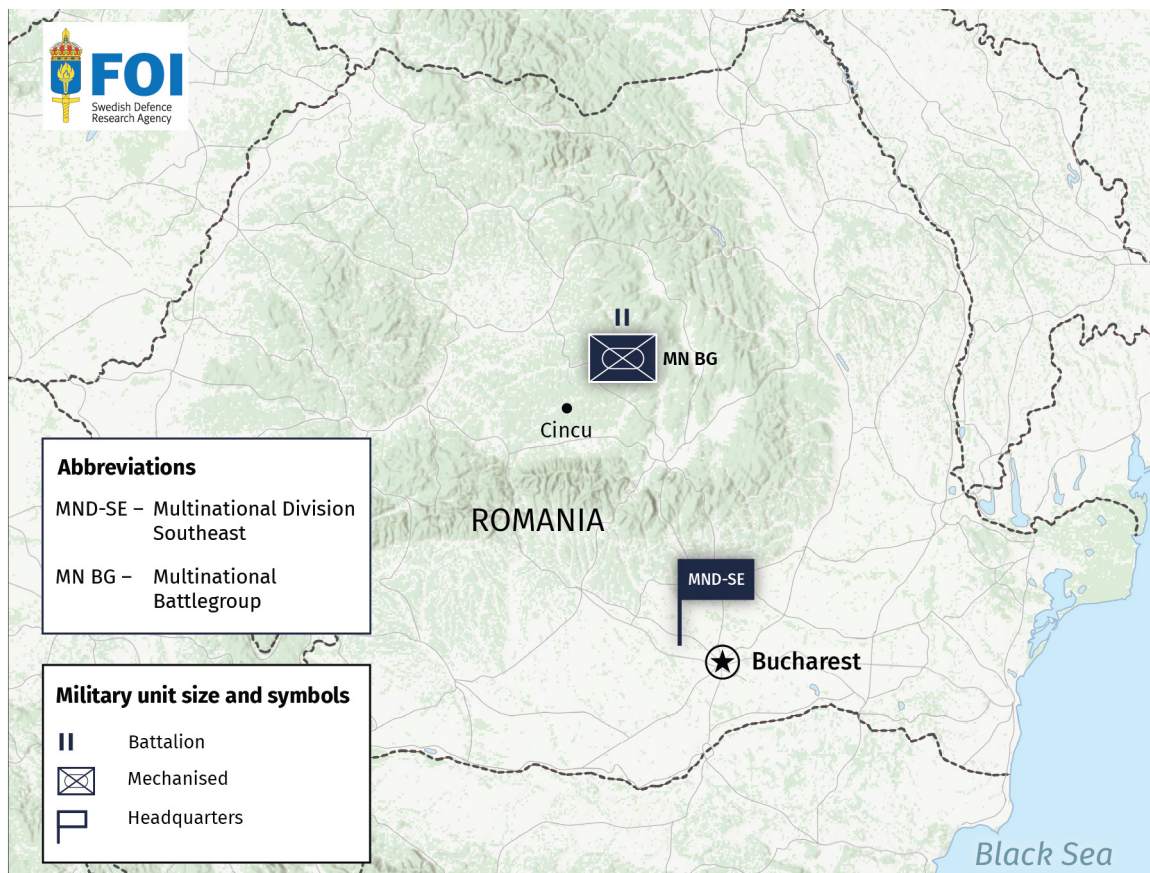
Overall, France’s prioritisation of interoperability with a limited group of allies may reflect a French view that credible deterrence is rooted more in military capability than in the number of countries represented.

Compared with other FLFs, FLF Romania shares significant similarities with the British-led FLF Estonia.

Both countries opted for a standby presence, are the least multinational FLFs, and possess similar capabilities. However, they differ in overall mass (the UK provides one additional battalion) and type of units (the French-led brigade is mechanised while the British-led brigade is light infantry).

LOOKING FORWARD

With the 2027 presidential election approaching, the French engagement on the Eastern Flank will likely persist. Despite the political turbulence in France, there is broad agreement among the political camps both to honour the country’s commitments in NATO and to increase defence spending. The threat from Russia is now prioritised in the national strategic reviews and the Military Programming Law. A victory for a centrist candidate would most likely continue Emmanuel Macron’s strategic line, while a victory for the National Rally could entail less willingness to take on more of Europe’s defence burden. Nevertheless, due to strained resources and mounting international instability, French decision-makers will have to confront difficult trade-offs between more or less flexible military postures in Europe and globally. ■



Note: FLF Romania