



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria political briefing:
Bulgarian Defense Policy and the New National Defense Strategy
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Bulgarian Defense Policy and the New National Defense Strategy

Summary

At the beginning of October 2023, the new National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria was published in the web portal for public consultations. The project strategy was developed by an expert group of the Ministry of Defense under the leadership of Minister Todor Tagarev in coordination with other state departments. It has been published for a month's public discussion, after which it must be accepted by the government to enter into force. The time horizon of the strategy is "until 2033", leaving the possibility to be updated as the security environment changes. The draft document emphasizes that Bulgaria's defense is possible only within the framework of NATO's collective defense and within the framework of the common security and defense policy of the European Union. In view of this, the fulfillment of allied commitments is described as crucial for the country's defense. At the same time, the document states that Russia is the biggest threat to the country's national security, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

On September 4, 2023, Minister of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria, Todor Tagarev, gave a public speech at the opening of the new academic year of the largest military academy in Bulgaria. The topic of the speech was *"A vision for adapting the defense policy to the challenges of the new geostrategic environment"*. At the very beginning, the minister outlined the main challenges facing Bulgaria from the point of view of its **defense policy and strategy**.

First of all, the demographic crisis was pointed out, which, together with a number of other factors, has a negative impact on the recruitment of motivated and prepared personnel for the Armed Forces.

Second, the advent of new technologies that changed the nature of warfare was noted. Conflicts are now being fought simultaneously in several or all domains of operations – land, water, air, space and cyberspace, taking into account the physical, virtual and cognitive dimensions. This means that the armed forces have to operate in an increasingly complex electromagnetic and information environment.

Thirdly, climate change also has a significant impact on the operational aspects and effectiveness of military action.

According to the Bulgarian Minister of Defense, in order to meet these challenges, the Bulgarian military leadership has to overcome technological backwardness, to achieve interoperability with Bulgaria's NATO allies, to break with the remaining Soviet legacy and finally to break dependence on Russia in terms of armaments and military equipment, building resilience and effective interaction with other national participants who have responsibilities towards the security and defense of Bulgaria.¹

The defense policy of the Republic of Bulgaria

According to the existing legal basis, the policy of the Republic of Bulgaria in the field of defense is part of the policy for the protection of national security. That is why the main outlines of Bulgaria's defense policy are described in the **Updated National Security Strategy** of the country, adopted by the National Assembly in March 13, 2018.²

According to this document, the strategic objective of the country's defense policy is to protect and assert national interests by building, maintaining and using defense capabilities adequate to the security environment and building interoperable modern armed forces with a unified command and control system in peacetime and in crises.

Achieving this goal is not possible with the use of the military instrument alone, but requires the application of a comprehensive approach with the use of diplomatic, political, informational, economic, financial, intelligence and legal instruments as well.

The achievement of the strategic goal of the defense policy is based on the active participation of the country in the processes of planning, development and use of the defense capabilities of NATO and the EU.

The main priority of the defense policy is the implementation of the military and civilian objectives of NATO capabilities adopted by the Republic of Bulgaria and the relevant projects and initiatives for building EU defense capabilities, including using NATO agencies, the capabilities of the European Defense Fund, or through bilateral and/or multilateral projects with Bulgarian allies.³

Again, according to the National Security Strategy, the formation and implementation of defense policy is based on the adequate participation and use of *NATO's collective defense mechanisms and the EU's common security and defense policy*.

¹ https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/minister/speeches/20230905_Lekcia.pdf

² https://www.dans.bg/images/stories/Information/strategiya_za_nacionalna_sigurnost-bul-2018.pdf

³ Ibidem.

Bulgarian contribution to the efforts of the international community in support of peace and stability includes participation in alliance and coalition operations with formations of the armed forces, security and public services and with civilian capabilities.

At the same time, the armed forces of the Republic of Bulgaria ensure the military security of the country, participate in the collective defense of NATO and in the implementation of the common security and defense policy of the EU.⁴

The armed forces and the non-military component of the defense system of Bulgaria focus their efforts on: defense of the country; participation in missions and operations to strengthen international peace and security; developing, maintaining and providing the necessary military and other capabilities for the collective defense of NATO and the common security and defense policy of the EU; modernization of the armed forces, etc.

According to the National Security Strategy of Bulgaria, the missions of the armed forces are: "Defense", "Support of international peace and security" and "Contribution to national security in peacetime".⁵

The priority of the defense policy of the Republic of Bulgaria is the development of a modern defense institution based on an integrated system for effective defense management under civilian and parliamentary control. This requires the application of:

- modern defense management
- long-term planning taking into account the specific risks and threats identified by the intelligence services;
- technological rearmament of the defense system and the armed forces by applying the experience of participation in missions and operations, achievements and results of research in the field of defense;
- preparation and training of defense personnel in accordance with modern NATO standards;
- increasing Bulgaria's participation in structures, programs and projects together with its allies and partners within NATO agencies, the European Defense Agency and implementation of the EU program for security research and innovation.⁶

In this regard, on September 29, 2023, September 29, the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria adopted a decision to conduct a Strategic Review of the Defense Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria, as a regular defense review. According to the Minister of Defense Tagarev, as a result

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

of this decision, until the end of the year the Ministry of Defense will focus its attention on the following main issues: recruitment, development, retention, release and social adaptation of the personnel of the Bulgarian army; building defense resilience in the information space against disinformation, propaganda and cognitive impact; cyber defense capabilities; attraction of enterprises from the Bulgarian defense technology and industrial base to build and develop capabilities; innovation, research and development and national positioning in the European and Euro-Atlantic defense technological and industrial base; structure, numbers, deployment, command and control of the Armed Forces; wartime tasks of public and private organizations, etc.

All this should provide the necessary basis for the most effective construction and development of the country's defense capabilities and will allow the country to achieve the priority goals of the government's management program in the "Defense" sector.

It is expected that the results of the Strategic Review of the defense policy of the Republic of Bulgaria and the adapted approaches and management decisions will be presented to the public in the "Defense White Paper" at the end of February 2024.⁷

The National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria

A principle definition of what constitutes the "National Defense Strategy" of the Republic of Bulgaria is given again in the "National Security Strategy" of the country.

According to the document, the National Defense Strategy defines the role, missions and tasks of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Bulgaria, the directions for building and using the defense capabilities and the necessary resources. The strategy serves as the basis for the development of subsequent military doctrines that define the principles, forms, methods and means of using the armed forces.

The development of defense capabilities is realized with the implementation of plans for the development of the armed forces and is reflected annually in a report on the state of defense and the armed forces.

The development of defense capabilities is analyzed and evaluated by conducting periodic reviews of the defense or the structure of the armed forces. Such an analysis is also done when conducting a strategic review of national security.⁸

⁷ <https://faktor.bg/bg/articles/kabinetat-reshi-da-se-napravi-strategicheski-pregled-na-otbranitelnata-politika-na-balgariya>

⁸ https://www.dans.bg/images/stories/Information/strategiya_za_nacionalna_sigurnost-bul-2018.pdf

The National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria is a fundamental strategic document that provides a clear and coherent framework for effectively and sustainably dealing with the country's security challenges and achieving the goals of the defense policy in the long term. It is based on the role and place of the armed forces defined by the Constitution and the laws of the country and priorities of the policy for national security and protection of national interests, defined in the Updated National Security Strategy.

As a rule, the National Defense Strategy takes into account all changes in the security environment. Through the implementation of the strategy, the application of a comprehensive approach to the construction and functioning of the defense of the Republic of Bulgaria is ensured with the active participation of all Bulgarian citizens in the defense of the state.

One of the fundamentals of the National Defense Strategy of Bulgaria is that the defense of the country is carried out in the context of the collective defense of the NATO and within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy of the EU. From such a point of view, the national defense strategy is harmonized with the NATO Strategic Concept, the Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy and the EU Strategic Compass, which are an integral part of the strategic framework for Bulgaria's defense planning.⁹

It is also a principle that the National Defense Strategy is a framework and basis for strategic integration of state institutions, local self-government bodies and local administration, and legal entities for the defense of the Republic of Bulgaria. It is the basis for the joint implementation of defense planning, building defense capabilities and maintaining them in constant readiness for use.¹⁰

Elaboration of a new National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria

From the very beginning of the war in Ukraine, the state and military leadership of Bulgaria announced that *"there is no threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bulgaria."* At the same time, however, the predictions that the Black Sea region will de facto become a war zone and Bulgaria will be faced with serious challenges turned out to be true.

Over the past year and a half, Bulgarian armed forces have been monitoring the situation carefully, the intelligence services are on high alert, and daily information is exchanged with the country's NATO allies. Allied aircraft reinforced the "Air Policing" mission of the Bulgarian

⁹ <https://www.strategy.bg/PublicConsultations/View.aspx?@lang=bg-BG&Id=7857>

¹⁰ Ibidem.

airspace.¹¹ NATO's multinational battle group in Bulgaria reached full operational readiness, which was marked on December 14, 2022.¹²

A working group was established at the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense to develop a new National Defense Strategy, which was to be ready by mid-February 2023. The document was being prepared on the basis of the Strategic Concept of the Alliance, adopted at the NATO Madrid Summit in July 2022.

At the end of April 2023, the previous Bulgarian Minister of Defense, Teodora Ganchovska, stated that the Black Sea region would receive a special attention in the New National Defense Strategy. It was also stated that the main elements that will be embedded in the strategy are strengthening economic cooperation with a special focus on energy security as well as cooperation against cyber-attacks and cognitive impact. It was strongly emphasized that collective defense is the only guarantee of deterrence and conflict prevention in the region.¹³

Half a year later, the draft of the new National Defense Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria was officially published and opens for public discussion.¹⁴

The strategic document was elaborated by an expert group of the Ministry of Defense in coordination with other state departments responsible to the defense policy.

The arguments used by the Ministry of Defense in order to explain the need for a new strategic defense strategy are related to the serious changes that have occurred in the so called strategic security environment after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to the Strategy, this act violated the principles and norms of the international legal order and security architecture not only in Europe, but also on a global scale. This has necessitated a strategic rethinking of defense both in NATO and the EU, and at the national level.¹⁵

The current National Defense Strategy of Bulgaria was prepared in 2011 during the first administration of GERB, and during the second administration of Boyko Borisov's party, it was updated in 2016 with a time horizon of 2020.¹⁶

Considering this, as well as the completely different security environment, as well as the dynamics of the processes in NATO and the EU, related to understanding the need for deterrence and defense are only part of the pointed reasons for developing a new Defense Strategy of Bulgaria.

¹¹ In its essence, Air Policing is a peacetime NATO mission to control aviation and protect the airspace of NATO member states.

¹² https://www.mod.bg/bg/tema_bojna_grupa.php

¹³ <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/bylgariia-razrabotka-nacionalna-otbranjitelna-strategiia-6166762>

¹⁴ <https://www.strategy.bg/publicconsultations/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=7857>

¹⁵ <https://www.strategy.bg/publicconsultations/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=7857>

¹⁶ <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1002>

The draft of the Strategy presents the new national framework policies in defense, adequate to the identified challenges, risks, threats and trends in the development of the strategic security environment. The strategy is based on the priorities of national security and the protection of national interests, defined in the Constitution and the already mentioned National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria.¹⁷

The document once again strongly emphasizes that the defense of the Republic of Bulgaria takes place in the context of NATO's collective defense and within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy of the European Union. From this point of view, the fulfillment of allied commitments has been described as a fundamental approach to solving the country's defense task. It is also noted that the high level of harmonization of the texts with the main statements of the Strategic Concept of NATO 2022, the Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy and the Strategic Compass of the EU has been achieved in the New Bulgarian National Defense Strategy.¹⁸

The document defines the strategic framework of the defense policy, as well as the strategic goal and priorities that will be implemented within the next ten years.

The draft strategy describes defense as a complex state-wide activity, stating that a key requirement for the realization of its goals is the achievement of unity in the efforts of **the three pillars of the national security system – state, armed forces and citizens**.

A significant positive point in the new strategy is the in-depth analysis of main trends in the development of the security environment and their impact on the country's defense.

The main threat to Bulgarian National Security according to the strategy is Russia. The arguments presented in the document are that a geopolitical confrontation between NATO and Russia will continue regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, it cannot be expected that there will be a significant change in the existing power system in Russia, which has clearly taken a course towards a head-on collision with the West.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that, according to the authors of the strategy, the danger of global military and nuclear escalation is increasing, with the possibility of political-economic and conventional confrontation with the West and acceleration of the arms race. Therefore, the tendency for Russia and NATO to remain main geopolitical rivals will necessitate the long-term implementation of measures to increase the NATO **deterrent and defense potential**.

¹⁷ <https://www.strategy.bg/publicconsultations/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&id=7857>

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

According to the analysis of the Ministry of Defense, the permanent deterioration of relations with Western countries will strengthen Russia's interaction with China, increasing their economic cooperation. The document outlines as an important incentive for the expansion of Sino-Russian relations their shared vision and participation in international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, etc., as well as their efforts to enforce the use of their national currencies in international trade.²⁰

The New Bulgarian National Defense Strategy sees NATO as the main guarantor of transatlantic security, with an emphasis on expanding its global role in shaping the international security environment. Geopolitical changes and the rise of China are considered as an important reason to refocus of the efforts also in the Asia-Pacific region. That's why cooperation with strategic partners as Australia, Japan and the Republic of Korea is described as particularly important, with the goal of increasing defense capabilities in response to Beijing's growing influence and the development of the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs.²¹

According to the strategy, under the economic pressure of the markets over Russia, as well as because of the political pressure, a **new "iron curtain"** will be established. Russia's response will be to provoke discontent in individual EU and NATO member states through informational-psychological, political and economic impact.²²

The draft of the New Defense strategy emphasizes also that the conflict potential of the Black Sea region will remain high in the long term. Russia expands the scope of zones in which it imposes restrictions on freedom of navigation. This leads to an increased focus of the NATO on the region, the need to increase the Alliance presence and increase the resilience and defense capabilities of the partners.

According to the document territorial disputes will continue to hinder the integration processes, economic and social development of individual countries and will be a generator of political instability. According to the strategy, regardless of the loss of influence, Russia considers the post-Soviet area as a buffer with the West (NATO and the EU). Therefore, the long-term goals of the Russian Federation will be to prevent not only the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, but also its existence as an independent entity within internationally recognized borders.²³

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

Another problematic point noted in Defense Strategy is the observed tendency in the NATO and EU member states to support populist, non-systemic and extreme political formations, due to frustration with the lack of effective measures to deal with long-term problems such as migration, economic imbalance, intercultural antagonism, sometimes turning into xenophobia and terrorism.²⁴

Other challenges for NATO and the Republic of Bulgaria noted in the new Defense Strategy are: terrorism; the negative changes in the strategic security environment in the Middle East and North Africa; increased risks to energy security and critical infrastructure; the emergence of contradictions between NATO allies affecting the unity of the Euro-Atlantic space; the impact of climate change; migration pressure etc.²⁵

Last but not least, the strategy envisages similar Ukrainian scenarios in Moldova and Georgia.

A new section on Bulgaria's place in NATO's collective defense and the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy has been included in the proposed new defense strategy. Several times in the strategy, it is emphasized that Bulgaria must have prepared troops for the protection of other allied countries upon activation of Art. 5 of the Washington Treaty. This article of the NATO treaty obliges each country to participate in the defense of an ally under attack.²⁶

An important place in the strategy is the definition of the missions, tasks and directions for the use of the armed forces of Bulgaria, taking into account the new requirements for guaranteeing effective **deterrence and defense**. On this basis, the priority areas for the construction and development of the armed forces have been determined.

The draft introduces a redefinition of the Defense mission into a Deterrence and Defense mission. The reasons for this are as follows: Deterrence is a key military strategic objective of NATO, according to the new Alliance Military Strategy, and its achievement is linked to specific actions in which the military instrument has a key role. Enhancing the Union's deterrence and defense capacity is at the heart of the Euro-Atlantic Deterrence and Defense Concept.

Measures to strengthen deterrence and defense capabilities in all operational domains have been the focus of the last two NATO summits. The importance that the Alliance attaches to the development of its deterrence potential also found expression in the new Strategic

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

Concept 2022, in which the first key task of the Alliance was reformulated to include deterrence as an integral part and prerequisite for successful collective defense.

In addition, the geographical location of Bulgaria should be taken into account, as well as the fact that a large part of NATO's activities to increase the deterrent potential will be implemented on the territory of the allies on the eastern flank, including with the active participation of the host countries.

Thus, the Bulgarian defense strategy foresees the deployment of troops of allies from the Alliance on Bulgarian territory, as well as the participation of Bulgarian soldiers in combat groups on the territory of other NATO countries.

The text of the strategy states that the peacetime presence of multinational formations on the territory of the country is a demonstration of the NATO commitment to the security of the Republic of Bulgaria, and is a direct **deterrent and defensive asset for the country**. Forms of forward presence are permanent deployment of multinational formations and/or rotational presence for joint training. The Republic of Bulgaria will work actively for the expansion of existing and the construction of new multinational defense initiatives on its territory.²⁷

In order to achieve the goals of the National Defense Strategy, defense spending will reach 2% of the GDP as early as in the next state budget for 2024, the draft strategy says, adding that the minimum from now on will be 2% of GDP, and - henceforth they expect military expenditures to rise in line with the accepted commitments from Bulgaria to NATO. At least 20% of defense spending should be for the acquisition of new armaments and equipment.

The defense strategy also envisages a new system of salaries in the army, which should lead to higher payment. The aim is to make the military profession more attractive in order to fill the armed forces, which are currently chronically understaffed to fill all positions.

The new National Defense Strategy will have a horizon of 10 years, but it is also intended to be an open document, and its review and update will be initiated if necessary according to the changes in the security environment.

²⁷ Ibidem.

Conclusion

For the first time since the fall of the communist regime, Bulgaria's National Defense Strategy states that Russia is the biggest threat to the country's national security, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine. After the start of the war in Ukraine, NATO accelerated the process of adaptation to counter the new risks and threats in order to fulfill the role of guarantor of security and stability.

In this new strategic reality, the main focus of Bulgaria's defense policy is strengthening its national defense as an element of NATO's defense.

In this regard, the draft of the New Defense Strategy which has to be accepted by the National assembly at the beginning of November emphasizes that the defense of Bulgaria is possible only within the framework of the collective defense strategy of NATO and within the framework of the common security and defense policy of the European Union. In this regard, the fulfillment of allied commitments has been described as crucial to the country's defense.