



# Croatia

## NATO Country Assessment —TIER TWO—

ANSWERING NATO CALL • DOMESTIC DEFENSE INVESTMENT • FALTERING ON UKRAINE



JULY 2026



# TIER 2

Average Ally



# AT A GLANCE

## *Toplines*

- **Answering the Call to Take Responsibility for European Defense:** Croatia's modernization program includes Rafales, Leopard 2A8s, Caesars, HIMARS, and Bayraktar TB2s that represents a generational equipment upgrade, and Croatia is now policing its own airspace for the first time since independence.
- **Investing in Domestic Defense Resilience:** DOK-ING's acquisition by Rheinmetall and KONČAR's €125M counter-drone contract signal Croatia's emergence as a credible defense-industrial contributor, with domestic 155mm ammunition production now approved.
- **Liability in Rejecting Trump's Call for Europe to Support Ukraine:** President Milanović's veto of Croatian participation in NATO's Ukraine training command (NSATU) is a concrete obstruction, and his 2024 re-election means this friction is enduring.



# FORCE STRUCTURE AT A GLANCE



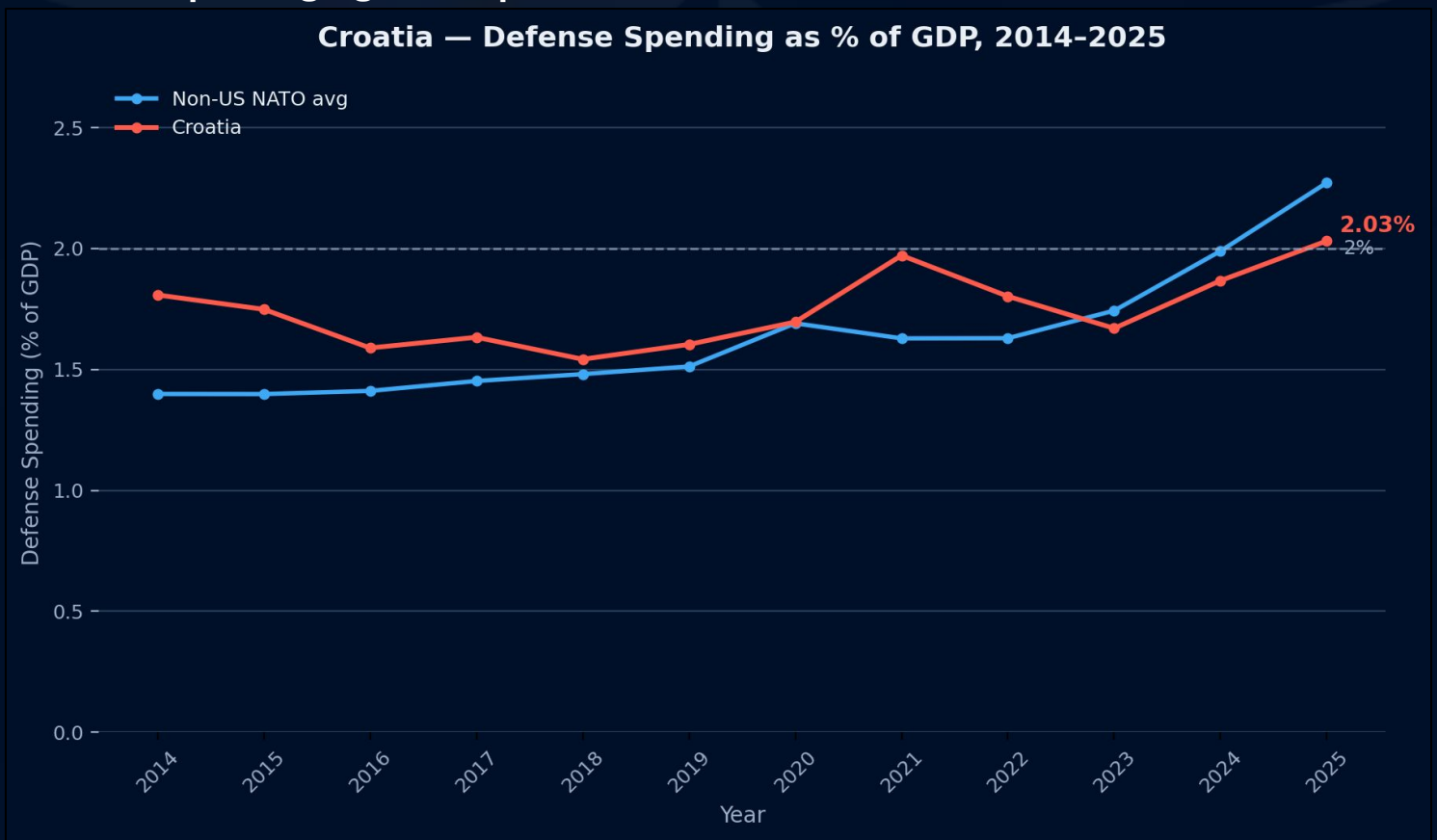
This radar chart compares a country's force structure to the Non-US NATO median (data from IISS's 2026 Military Balance) across six capability areas: Land Combat (tanks, IFVs), Active Personnel (total active-duty troops), Naval Combat (submarines, destroyers/frigates/corvettes), Air & Missile Defense (long/medium-range SAM systems), Air Combat (4th-gen+ combat aircraft), and Fires (artillery, rocket launchers). Scores are weighted, with modern platforms counted fully and legacy platforms counted at reduced weight.



# MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

## *Defense Spending Level*

Croatia's [defense spending](#) tells a relatively mixed story. It spent below NATO's 2% floor for most of its membership—only crossing the threshold in 2025 at 2.03%—but consistently outspent the non-US NATO average until recently, meaning Croatia was outperforming the average NATO ally. The [2026 budget reached](#) €1.626B (2.08% of GDP), up 20.9% year over year, with plans for 2.5% by 2027 and 3% by 2030. For a country of under 4 million people, the trajectory should be celebrated. The caveat is absolute scale—€1.626B remains modest, smaller than some single procurement programs elsewhere in the alliance—and Defense Minister [Anušić's own framing](#) of the current push as correcting fifteen years of neglect suggests the baseline was weaker than the relative spending figures imply.

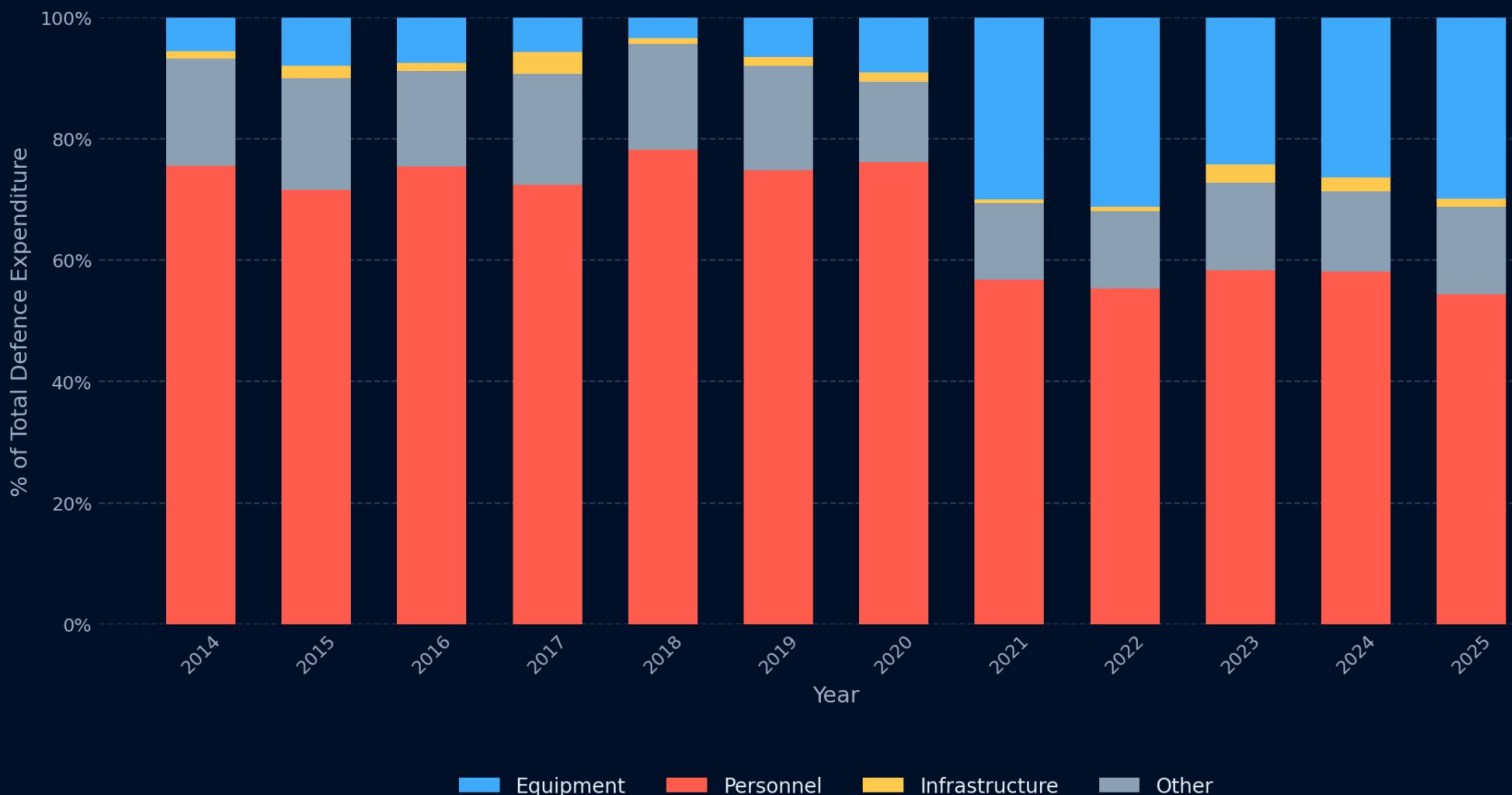


# MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

## *Equipment Share*

Croatia's [equipment share](#) transformation is one of the most dramatic in the alliance. From essentially negligible equipment investment in 2014 (under 6% of the defense budget) equipment share has risen to roughly 30% by 2025, well above NATO's 20% benchmark. The chart shows the inflection point clearly: from 2021 onward, equipment spending surged as the Rafale, Caesar, HIMARS, Leopard 2A8, and Bayraktar procurement programs began registering in actual expenditure. At roughly 30%, Croatia now sits comfortably above the NATO equipment-share guideline and ahead of many alliance members who have struggled to reach 20%. The transition is ongoing but the equipment trajectory is among the strongest modernization stories in NATO's southern sector.

Croatia — Defence Expenditure by Category, 2014-2025

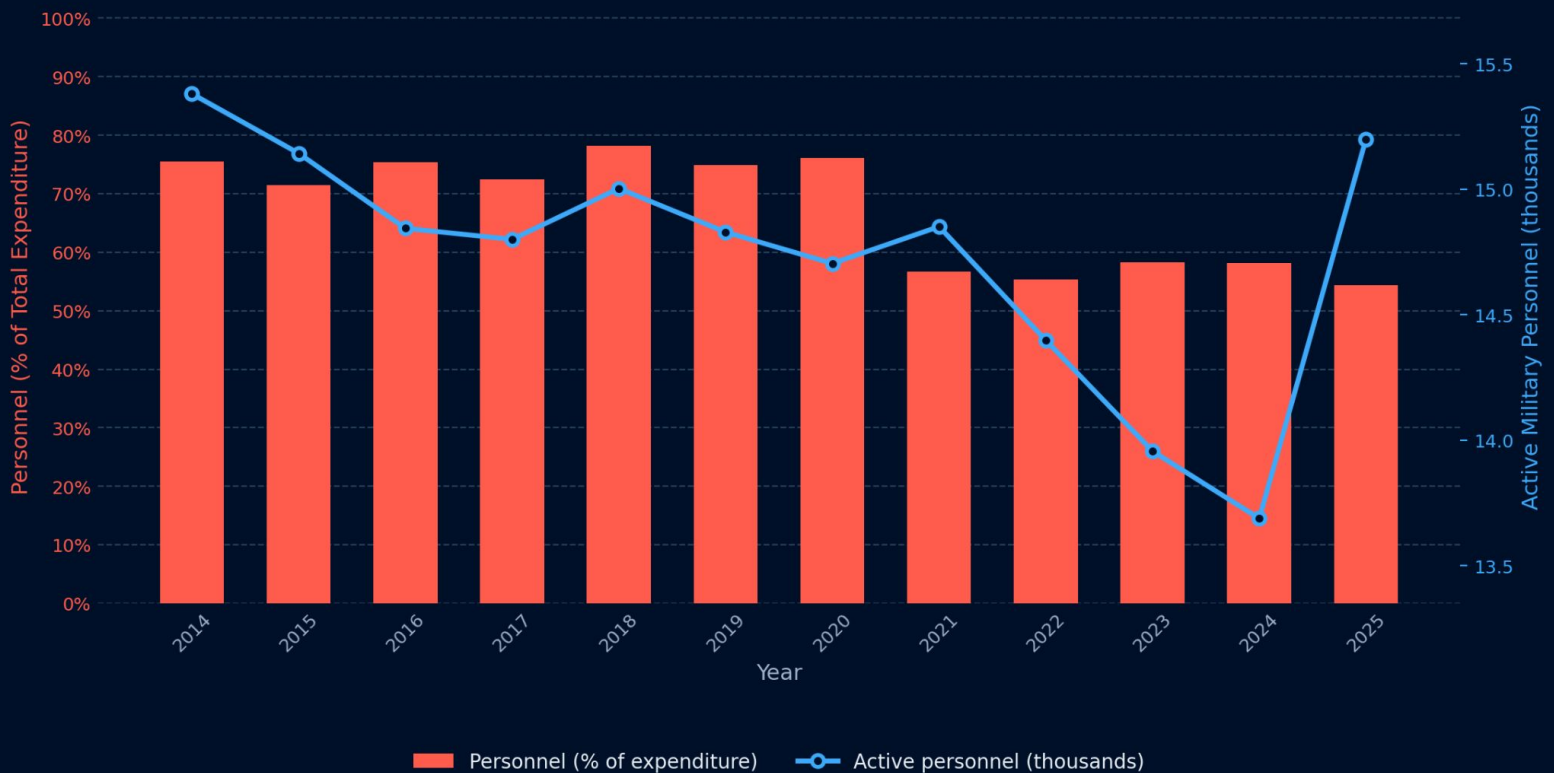


# MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

## *Manpower & Recruitment*

Croatia's active military numbers declined steadily from roughly 15,500 in 2014 to a low of approximately 13,700 in 2024 before jumping sharply to around 15,200 in 2025. This was driven by the November 2025 reintroduction of mandatory two-month military service, which Croatia had abolished in 2008. Personnel costs as a share of the budget have fallen from roughly 75% in 2014 to approximately 54% in 2025, a critical rebalancing. The conscription revival is significant. Croatia is explicitly trying to rebuild a mobilizable reserve base that atrophied over seventeen years of all-volunteer force structure.

Croatia — Personnel Cost Share & Active Personnel, 2014-2025



# MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

## *Capability Modernization*

Croatia's modernization is compressing a [generational equipment upgrade](#) into a short window. Croatia completed delivery of 12 Rafale F3-R fighters in April 2025 and began policing its own airspace for the first time in January 2026. Behind it: 44 Leopard 2A8 tanks, 18 Caesar Mk2 howitzers, 8 HIMARS systems, Bayraktar TB2 drones, and a €125M counter-UAS contract. Conscription was reinstated in November 2025, growing active personnel from 13,688 to 15,200. The critical gap remains air defense: no Patriot, no NASAMS, no medium or long-range coverage. This leaves Croatia dependent on allied systems. Defense Minister Anušić has framed the entire program as correcting fifteen years of neglect, and the procurement list suggests he means it.



# MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

## *Force Posture*

Croatia's force posture is modest in scale but geographically distributed across NATO's eastern front. [Active contributions](#) include 69 troops with an artillery battery in Poland's eFP, 152 troops in KFOR Kosovo, and 67 in Hungary's eFP. Croatia also hosts the [NATO Multinational Special Aviation Programme](#) and training center, providing allied aviation training in the Adriatic region. Croatia does not host permanent US military bases.



# MILITARY CONTRIBUTIONS

## *Industrial Base*

Croatia's defense industrial base is limited but has two critical assets. DOK-ING's robotic demining vehicles are [deployed in Ukraine](#) (assembling 8 machines and supplying 3,630 spare parts in 2024 alone, with localization above 30%) and the March 2026 [Rheinmetall majority acquisition](#) integrates DOK-ING into a major NATO industrial prime, opening a pathway for unmanned ground systems expansion. KONČAR's €125M counter-drone contract marks its emergence as a sophisticated electronics prime. The March 2025 approval of domestic 122mm and 155mm ammunition production is the most strategically significant industrial decision, shifting Croatia toward a potential supplier role for national stocks and Ukrainian needs. Additionally, participation in Caesar, Leopard 2A8, and HIMARS programs embeds Croatian industry in allied supply chains at the component level, but sovereign platform design capability remains absent.



# STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

## *Declared Posture*

Croatia's strategy documents are all outdated. Its [National Defence Strategy](#) dates to 2002—predating NATO accession, Crimea, and the full-scale invasion—and the [2017 National Security Strategy](#) does not explicitly name Russia or China as threats. By post-2022 alliance standards, this is a significant doctrinal gap. The Plenković government has compensated through action rather than updated doctrine, backing EU sanctions, delivering 14+ Ukraine aid packages, and executing Croatia's most ambitious procurement program in history. On China, Croatia abstained on the October 2024 EU EV tariff vote, placing it in the trade-cautious cluster. Croatia does not participate in EU Operation Aspides. The conduct is stronger than the doctrine suggests, but Croatia remains overdue for a declaratory strategy document.



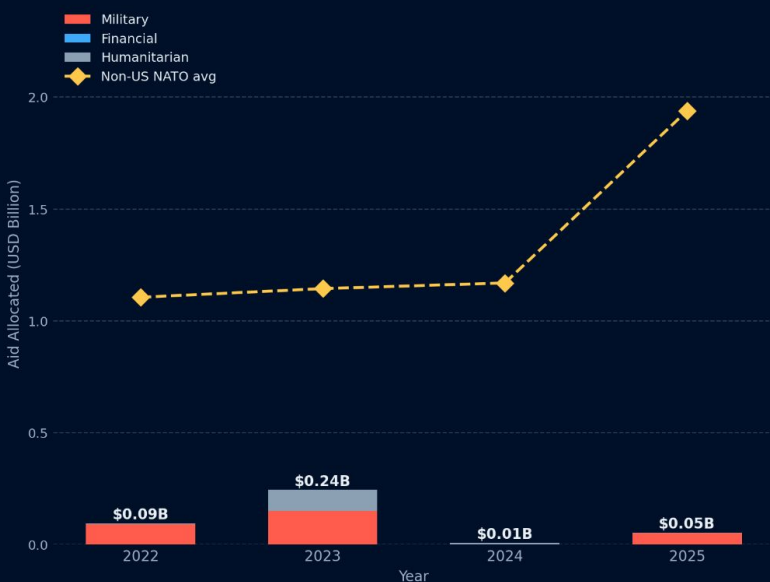
# STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

## *Ukraine Support*

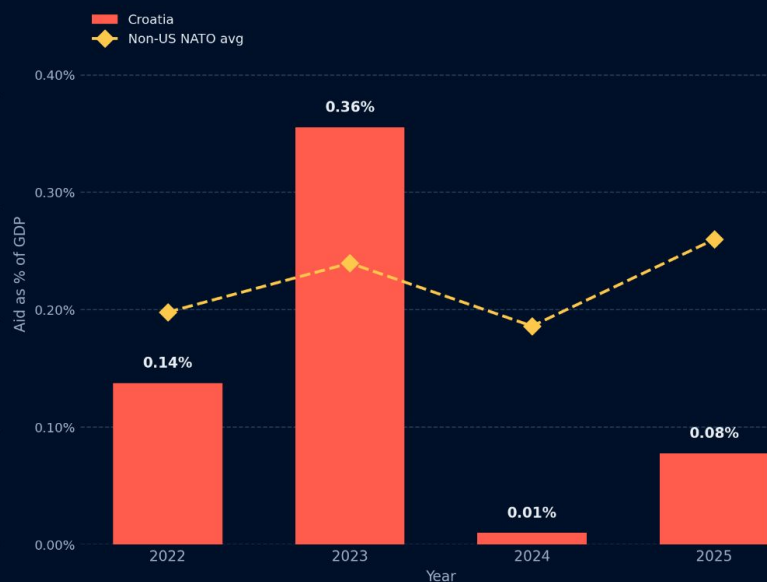
Croatia's Ukraine aid peaked at 0.36% of GDP in 2023 before dropping sharply. Croatia fell below the non-US NATO average in 2024 and recovering only modestly to 0.08% in 2025. The headline Kiel figures (€0.355B allocated, €0.360B committed) understate the significance of Croatia's donation. Croatia donated its entire Mi-8/Mi-17 helicopter fleet, transferred 30 M-84 tanks and 30 M-80 IFVs linked to its Leopard 2 transition, and DOK-ING demining systems are actively deployed in Ukraine. Fourteen aid packages delivered through October 2025 with a 15th in preparation. The defining constraint is Milanović's presidential veto: his October 2024 veto blocked Croatian officers from NATO's Ukraine training command, and his opposition to weapons transfers creates a persistent gap the Plenković government cannot override without a two-thirds parliamentary majority it doesn't have.

Croatia — Ukraine Aid, 2022-2025

Croatia: Aid to Ukraine by Type



Croatia: Aid to Ukraine as % of GDP



# STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

## *Russian Decoupling*

Croatia has minimal Russian energy exposure and has become a critical regional diversification asset. The [Krk Island LNG terminal](#) now supplies non-Russian gas to Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Austria, making Croatia an important node to European decoupling. The Krško nuclear plant and JANAF Adriatic oil pipeline reinforce Croatia's role as a [Central European energy hub](#). Croatia has supported every EU Russia sanctions package through the 20th without obstruction. The caveat: Krk's strategic value depends on downstream consumers maintaining the political will to keep using non-Russian routes.



# STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

## *Public Support & Political Resilience*

In the [2024 NATO polling](#), 77% of Croats said they would vote to stay in NATO, 59% agreed Croatia should defend another ally if attacked (below the alliance median of 63%), and Ukraine support was middling at around 53% combined. Sixty-eight percent agreed NATO membership makes a foreign attack less likely, but only about 63% said Russia's war had affected their country's security, lower than most Central European neighbours. The HDZ government under Plenković is a reliable NATO member that has increased defense spending toward 2%, while the main opposition SDP is also broadly pro-NATO, sustaining a mainstream consensus. The principal complication is President Milanović, who has repeatedly questioned NATO solidarity and Ukraine policy from a constitutionally weaker role, producing a split-executive dynamic that muddies Croatia's external messaging without fundamentally altering government policy. Milanović's 2024 re-election to the presidency means this friction will persist for the duration of the assessment period.



# STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

## *Hedging Behavior*

Croatia's hedging behavior record at the government level is clean. Plenković has made multiple [visits to Ukraine](#), visited Washington in May 2025 to strengthen US-Croatia ties, backed all EU Russia sanctions through the 20th package, and pursued exclusively Western arms procurement. No PM-level visits to Moscow, Beijing, or Tehran during the war period. The Pelješac Bridge, [built by China Road and Bridge Corporation](#), is the most visible Chinese infrastructure footprint on EU territory, though EU-funded and Croatian-owned. The counter-alignment [risk is Croatian President Zoran Milanović](#). He opposes standard alliance support for Ukraine and often undermines alliance goals. His obstruction is institutionally directed rather than reflecting actual diplomatic engagement with Moscow—but the damage to Croatian alliance credibility is real regardless.



# STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

## *Operational Cooperation*

Croatia has a track record of contributing to US-led and NATO operations beyond its immediate neighborhood. It deployed forces to [Afghanistan under ISAF](#) and contributed to coalition [operations in Iraq](#). Current [forward deployments](#) span Poland's eFP with an artillery battery, KFOR Kosovo, and Hungary's eFP. Croatia does not participate in EU Operation Aspides in the Red Sea. On the 2026 Iran war, Croatia's response reflected the same Plenković-Milanović split that has defined its Ukraine policy, with the prime minister broadly aligned with US positions while Milanović sought distance from the conflict. Croatia had no public role in Operation Epic Fury and does not participate in Operation Prosperity Guardian. The sharpest operational gap remains NSATU: [Milanović's refusal](#) to approve Croatian participation in NATO's Ukraine training command is an alliance liability that no procurement program can offset. The Rafale fleet, now policing Croatian airspace independently from January 2026, gives Croatia genuine NATO-interoperable air-combat capability for the first time.

