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OUTLOOK

Heed the warning: how NATO can find and fill the gaps in its warning systems

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Why do NATO Allies, confronted with similar warning signals, come to different conclusions? That is a conundrum with important implications for the Alliance. After every crisis, it is common for accusations of "intelligence failure" to arise. Yet such accusations are too broad and often counterproductive, for they suggest that the entire warning system has failed. In reality, parts of the warning chain tend to function well while others break down. Even more importantly, politics may heavily influence what is done with intelligence once it reaches decision-makers.

This paper rejects a binary success/failure judgment and instead proposes a spectrum for assessing the effectiveness of warning processes across four dimensions.
Analysis: Was the threat detected correctly and in time?
Process: Did the warning move through institutions to the right decision-makers?
Political context: Did political preferences shape how the warning was handled?

Summary

Intelligence warning failures are too often viewed in binary: Either intelligence succeeded or it failed. In reality, often only segments of the warning chain collapse while others operate well.

This Outlook paper treats warning success as a spectrum rather than as a pass/fail test in a new framework for warning performance. It illustrates the use through three recent case studies: the fall of Kabul (2021), Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022) and the Niger coup (2023).

The decisive shortfall across all three cases was the failure to reconcile divergent NATO member state views into an operational consensus within NATO.

There are practical solutions for integrating NATO capabilities to institutionalize rapid after-action reviews, conduct periodic divergence drill exercises, prepare contingency packages and further embed red team analyses.

Allied integration: Did NATO mechanisms allow divergent national views to be picked up and reconciled into an adequate Allied position?

On each of these dimensions, performance will be rated on a five-point scale:

1. Critical gap: key elements are missing or severely impaired, blocking the warning chain
2. Constrained: serious obstacles limit effectiveness and require remedial action
3. Developing: core functions operate but notable weaknesses need attention
4. Strong: solid performance with only minor room for improvement
5. Optimal: everything worked as intended

The warning process is thus seen as a chain that has several potential points of failure. For practitioners, to "disaggregate" the warning chain in this way is more useful than to apply a blunt judgment of "intel failure" or success, because it gives more insight into what went wrong and thus what can be remedied.

This more gradual assessment also fits the realities of intelligence much better. In practice, a warning process is not a linear chain that reaches from analysts to leaders. What is collected and eventually covered by agencies is shaped by prior political decisions, which in turn shape the assessments leaders see and the options they consider.

Three important cases illustrate the key findings of this paper: the fall of Kabul (2021, US/UK), the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022, US/Germany) and the coup in Niger (2023, US/France). The case selection is designed to see the framework in action across different types of shock (collapse, invasion and coup). The cases also involve Allies with major intelligence capabilities in varying regional and institutional contexts. The US plays a role in all three cases because its intelligence capacity makes it structurally central to NATO warning processes. In addition, its actions are well-documented in open sources, enabling a thorough comparison.

Because NATO intelligence processes are classified, this paper relies on publicly available national case studies to assess warning dynamics. The question therefore is whether Allied assessments diverged and whether they were reconciled and acted upon as visible through national actions and open records. The three cases provide a window into how national practices and political contexts affect NATO's collective warning capacity. The analysis also builds on three interviews with officials formerly involved in cases or in the NATO Intelligence and Warning System (NIWS), plus practitioner feedback on drafts of this paper. The result identifies recurring patterns and offers practitioners actionable lessons rather than retrospective verdicts.

Strategic intelligence:

Alliance-wide analysis that informs political decision-makers (NAC, Secretary General, Military Committee). It underpins long-term warning tools such as the NIWS and explains which developments matter for Allied security, and why.

Operational intelligence:

Time-sensitive, mission-focused reporting that supports commanders (SACEUR, SHAPE J2, NIFC). Such information focuses on the present moment to help commanders conduct ongoing operations.

NATO warning infrastructure

NATO has invested heavily in its intelligence systems, shifting from earlier ad hoc exchanges towards a more formalized mechanism in recent years. In 2017, Allies created the post of Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence & Security (ASG-I&S) and brought civilian and military analysis together in the Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD) at NATO HQ, reducing duplication. At the core of NATO's "intelligence enterprise" sits the JISD, linking HQ analysts to operational commands and national services. While there remain cultural frictions between "need-to-know" (civilian security) and "need-to-share" (military) attitudes, this revised structure is intended to produce fused, policy-relevant assessments for the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the Secretary General and the Military Committee.[1]

At the core of NATO's warning function stands the NIWS. The NIWS is a collaborative, analyst-driven early-warning process that NATO redesigned in the early 2000s to move beyond Cold War "mechanical" indicators towards a qualitative, scenario-based anticipation of crises that could affect Allied security interests.[2] The NIWS frames each issue as a clearly scoped "warning problem," builds alternative scenarios, identifies critical indicators and then tasks the collection and assessment of additional information against those indicators, updating its products according to a fixed rhythm. Most often these take the form of 90-day outlooks, refreshed every 30 days, which get transmitted to senior decision-makers as well as to NATO's crisis-response structures. The process and standards of this system are institutionalized: NATO conducts an annual Warning Intelligence Working Group to improve NIWS methods and share experiences, and Oberammergau offers courses to analysts on the policy and the production of formal NIWS warning reports. The aim is to process individual national inputs into standardized, time-bound judgments that can inform Allied discussion and, if needed, collective action.

1 Jan Ballast, "Trust (in) NATO. The Future of Intelligence Sharing Within the Alliance,"*NATO Research Paper* September 2017, no. 140 (2017), https://www.rieas.gr/images/rieasnews/NATOarticle17.pdf.

2 John Kriendler, "NATO Intelligence and Early Warning," *Conflict Studies Research Centre* 6, no. 13 (March 2006).

Beyond the NIWS, NATO has invested in its intelligence at the operational level. The NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre (NIFC) at Molesworth became fully operational in 2007. It merges all-source intelligence for the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and for Allied Command Operations. NIFC analysts can deploy forward or provide reach-back, working around the clock to give commanders a common picture. The J2 Division at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons is tasked with complementing this work, producing operational intelligence and contributing to intelligence policy while feeding into the Comprehensive Crisis and Operations Management Centre (CCOMC).[3]

The Alliance has set up Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR) capabilities, combining NATO-owned platforms such as the Airborne Warning and Control System surveillance aircraft and the new NATO ISR Force (NISRF) with national contributions across space, air, land and maritime domains in order to collect information.[4] The intelligence gained through these assets feeds into exercises such as Unified Vision, NATO's largest JISR event, which tests how data from seabed to space can be used and shared among Allies.[5] Capturing the operational lessons is the Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC), which is also tasked with feeding them back into doctrine and processes. This provides a standing venue for structured, time-bound reviews after operations and major exercises.[6]

Two limits persist. First, most collection and assessment processes remain national. NATO does enable the fusion and dissemination of views, amongst others through shared procedures, but it does not own a full-spectrum strategic information collection system. Secondly, and more pertinent here, visibility is uneven. NIWS products and internal processes are highly classified. As a result, most information about NATO's warning performance that reaches the public is based on what national capitals later disclose or what inquiries uncover. As others note, national mistrust and divergent threat perceptions continue to bog down sharing; intelligence is still more willingly passed bilaterally than through the institutions.[7]

In sum, NATO's intelligence architecture is now far more structured and coherent than a decade ago. This is especially the case for operational awareness. The persistent bottleneck, however, remains the rapid reconciliation of differing national strategic assessments into a single Allied position. For that reason, this Outlook paper elevates "Allied integration" to a fourth dimension of warning performance. The Alliance can only translate intelligence into quick, collective action if the national judgments converge or are meaningfully reconciled.

A diagnostic approach to warning performance

After NATO member state publics have been caught by surprise, as was the case in the three cases studied here, the phrase "intelligence failure" comes up quite quickly in the public verdict. But that judgment is too blunt to be useful. Warning processes, in practice, tend to work well in some places while they fail elsewhere, much like a car that breaks down due to engine failure while brakes and steering continue to work perfectly. Warnings may have lost urgency as they moved up the chain, or they may have been discarded by the decision-maker at the top. Other modes of failure can be caused if different allies hold different assessments of the same situation and are unable to unite them into a single Allied position.

The simple question of "did intelligence fail" is not useful in showing practitioners the specific weaknesses of the warning chain. A better approach is to use a spectrum-based approach that examines in detail the links where the chain held and where it broke. This Outlook paper does so across four dimensions of the warning chain: analysis, process, politics[8] and Allied integration.

This is a diagnostic effort, not a punitive one. It does not judge the policy outcome as a whole.[9] While real-world outcomes are always shaped by constraints like force availability or domestic politics as well as by factors like timing or appetite for risk, this approach helps practitioners discuss reforms in terms of specific gaps and shortcomings instead of reducing every crisis to either total success or complete collapse.

Key findings and patterns

Three recent strategic shocks – the fall of Kabul (2021), the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) and the Niger coup (2023) – were experienced by four NATO members (US, UK, Germany, France). They reveal a consistent pattern. No NATO Ally succeeded across all four dimen-

3 "A New Era For NATO Intelligence," NATO Review, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20230324223901/https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/10/29/a-new-era-for-nato-intelligence/index.html.

4 NATO website, "Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance," https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/joint-intelligence-surveillance-and-reconnaissance updated 30 July 2025; Sebastiaan Rietjens, "NATO's Struggle for Intelligence in Afghanistan," *Armed Forces & Society* 49, no. 4 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x221116138.

5 NATO, "Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance."

6 "How NATO Learns and Adapts to Modern Warfare," Atlantic Council, updated 3 December 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/how-nato-learns-and-adapts-to-modern-warfare/.

7 Ballast, "Trust (in) NATO. The Future of Intelligence Sharing Within the Alliance."

8 Politics, while labelled as one of several framework dimensions, actually shapes every stage: It sets the questions, filters intelligence and determines if warnings prompt action or are sidelined. Even exemplary intelligence can become moot if policy timelines or reputational concerns close the window for response.

9 Nikki Ikani, "Beyond the Binary: A New Typology for Evaluating Warning Success and Failure in Strategic Surprise," *International Studies Review* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaf009.

sions, and success in one dimension rarely compensated for weakness in others. A close review of the case studies below brings forth five consistent shortcomings that reveal why warning chains broke down in practice:

1: Accurate analysis collides with politics

Across the cases studied it becomes clear that NATO members often had fairly accurate and useful tactical warnings. Analytical gaps did exist, but these gaps were not decisive by themselves. The bigger blockage came from politics. Once leaders had fixed commitments in place, warnings became harder to act on. For example, the US withdrawal deadline from Kabul, set at August 31, made threat warnings about the Taliban politically inconvenient rather than catalysts for action. Similarly, in Ukraine, European policy assumptions made US warnings that clashed with their own, well-established preferences easier to discount. This pattern holds true in all four cases: When policy constraints are rigid, intelligence, however accurate, risks becoming a casualty of the political process.

2: Data sharing does not equal interpretation sharing

NATO's intelligence warning infrastructure has grown increasingly robust over the years. It aims to provide all Allies with access to the same signals. But seeing the same data has never guaranteed reading it the same way. Based on shared intelligence, some member states expected war in Ukraine to be imminent, whereas others continued to believe in a possible resolution through negotiation. In Niger, the French and US services tracked the situation separately without sharing their conclusions on the specific warning signs. The issue here was the absence of systematic processes to reconcile divergent readings under time pressure.

3: Processes fail at the leadership level

The cases reveal that intelligence warnings issued at the analyst level were often prescient. The CIA correctly assessed the risk situation in Afghanistan months in advance. Similarly, the German intelligence service BND detected Russian troop movements towards the borders of Ukraine. In the case of Niger, the French intelligence service DGSE did flag the country's instability. The problems arose later in the chain. When frontline analysts alerted their superiors, their warnings were toned down as they made their way towards national leadership. Crossing the various bureaucratic layers, field judgments lost urgency or clarity, and key decisions were slowed down when senior political leaders were unavailable or lacked real-time channels to act.

4: Peripheral crisis, peripheral consensus

NATO's challenge of integrating diverging internal views worsens dramatically if the crises are of low salience. While Kabul and Ukraine concerned multiple Allies, the coup in Niger engaged primarily France and the US. When the stakes are high for only two to three Allies, the difficulties in creating a collective assessment become exponentially greater. Regarding Niger, French and US intelligence services operated in parallel. Because both countries had only a limited physical presence on the ground due to skeleton crews, limited diplomatic presence and competing regional priorities, the Alliance found it extremely difficult to form a common picture. Such peripheral theatres thus expose the vulnerabilities of the Alliance: Without sufficient Allied engagement, warning remains national rather than collective.

5: Integration is the core challenge

This insight redefines the entire warning problem. Under political pressure, NATO in all three cases lacked the institutional capacity to merge divergent national assessments into unified positions. All four earlier patterns can be traced back to this issue: gaps in analysis or collection mattered far less than the political impediments, and the sharing of data alone works poorly when interpretations are not aligned. NATO has invested substantially in its intelligence-sharing infrastructure. What it would now benefit from most are systematic processes to bring to light divergent interpretations, test competing hypotheses and encourage integration of assessments early on to limit the space for politicization.

Diverging responses to shared threats: NATO warning performance in comparative view

Three case studies of recent strategic crises provide the empirical foundation for the analysis of this Outlook paper. To give a short overview of the findings, each of the three sections begins with a diagnostic dashboard which shows how NATO member warnings performed in the four separate areas, ranked on the aforementioned performance scale of 1 (critical gap) to 5 (optimal).

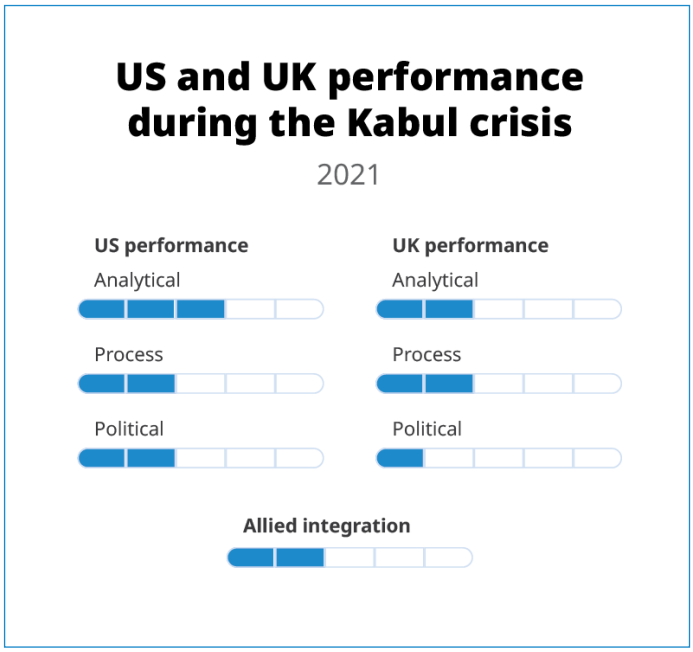

Figure 1. US and UK performance during the Kabul crisis. *Author's generation.*

United States: "A significant risk"

Analytically, US intelligence identified Taliban capabilities and Afghan vulnerabilities well in advance of the planned full withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by August 31, 2021. In April, CIA Director Burns warned Congress that withdrawal presented "a significant risk," and by July, multiple assessments questioned Afghan security readiness.[10] Yet predictions about the timeline proved inaccurate: An "Executive Memorandum" on July 7 stated that the Afghan government would hold Kabul. The next day – five weeks before Kabul fell – President Biden declared a Taliban takeover "highly unlikely."[11][12][13] Intelligence proved more accurate regarding tactical warnings: By August 25, agencies were "near certain" of an ISIS-K attack at the airport, prompting immediate security alerts.[14]

Process gaps were severe. Reports circulated but lost urgency in bureaucratic channels, with agencies presenting conflicting narratives, thus preventing decisive action.[15] The military's "can-do attitude" obscured vulnerabilities, creating an environment where the importance of uncomfortable assessments was minimized.[16]

The fixed withdrawal deadline of the Biden administration created an impenetrable political barrier that prevented decision-makers from heeding the warning.[17] The commitment to an August 31 exit date meant that intelligence about accelerating Taliban advances was acknowledged but deemed insufficient to alter the policy course. Reporting was accurate, but the political space to act on it did not exist.

United Kingdom: "No military path to victory"

Analytically, UK assessments misjudged Taliban capabilities and Afghan military resilience. On July 8, Prime Minister Johnson asserted there was "no military path to victory for the Taliban," mere weeks before the eventual Taliban takeover. General Nick Carter later acknowledged the government never had "a true understanding of the political dynamics on the ground," focusing on troop counts rather than morale and leadership quality.[18] The overreliance on measurable inputs such as troop counts, equipment levels or deployment timelines rather than qualitative factors like unit cohesion and leadership quality, combined with limited language skills and an "optimism bias," led to a fundamentally flawed understanding of ground realities.[19] UK diplomatic staff remained isolated in Kabul, which severely restricted ground-level intelligence collection.

Process weaknesses were severe. A July 22 risk report by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) explicitly warned of "rapid Taliban advances," yet these warnings failed to prompt adequate contingency planning. More critically, when Kabul fell, the Foreign Secretary, the minister responsible for Afghanistan, the FCDO's top civil servant and the Prime Minister were all simultaneously on leave, leaving real-time coordination paralyzed until the crisis forced their recall.[20]

Politically, London treated the US withdrawal announcement as provisional, assuming Washington might delay or reverse course.[21] Such wishful thinking impaired the UK's ability to prepare for the impending crisis. The Foreign Affairs Committee later reproached "the failure to plan,

10 "Intelligence Warned of Afghan Military Collapse, Despite Biden's Assurances," updated 23 June 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/us/politics/afghanistan-biden-administration.html.

11 Warren P. Strobel Vivian Salama, "Four US Intelligence Agencies Produced Extensive Reports on Afghanistan, but All Failed to Predict Kabul's Rapid Collapse," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 October 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/four-u-s-intelligence-agencies-produced-extensive-reports-on-afghanistan-but-all-failed-to-predict-kabuls-rapid-collapse-11635415201.

12 Sohail Mahmood, "United States, NATO, and Afghanistan: An Analysis of the Politics," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 26, no. 1 (2022), https://www.jstor.org/stable/48674368.

13 Shane Harris, "After Afghanistan Falls, the Blame Game Begins," *The Washington Post*, 17 August 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/taliban-us-intelligence-afghanistan/2021/08/16/c59f4416-febd-11eb-85f2-b871803f65e4_story.html.

14 Mahmood, "United States, NATO, and Afghanistan: An Analysis of the Politics."

15 "Intelligence Warned of Afghan Military Collapse, Despite Biden's Assurances," 17 August 2021, *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/us/politics/afghanistan-biden-administration.html.

16 Lara Seligman, "Kabul's Collapse Followed String of Intel Failures, Defense Officials Say," *Politico*, 16 August 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/16/kabul-afghanistan-collapse-intel-failures-505101.

17 "White House Releases Afghanistan Exit Review Blaming Trump and Intel Failures," 6 April 2023, Le Monde, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/afghanistan/article/2023/04/06/white-house-releases-afghanistan-exit-review-blaming-trump-and-intel-failures_6021964_218.html.

18 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Missing in Action: UK Leadership and the Withdrawal from Afghanistan, First Report of Session 2022–23* (2022), https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22344/documents/165210/default/.

19 Ibid, 11.

20 Ibid, 20.

21 Mahmood, "United States, NATO, And Afghanistan: An Analysis of the Politics."

the failure to prepare and the failure to lead at a moment of extraordinary national emergency."[22]

Allied integration: a critical gap

In the Kabul case, NATO's intelligence picture was not so much a mosaic put together from information contributed by Allied nations but rather a set of national fragments. US and UK warnings were raised separately and were never integrated into a collective position once Washington had fixed its withdrawal date. The result: Accurate warnings from some Allies remained politically irrelevant while flawed assumptions prevailed. Without a trusted process to reconcile divergence, the warnings went unheard.

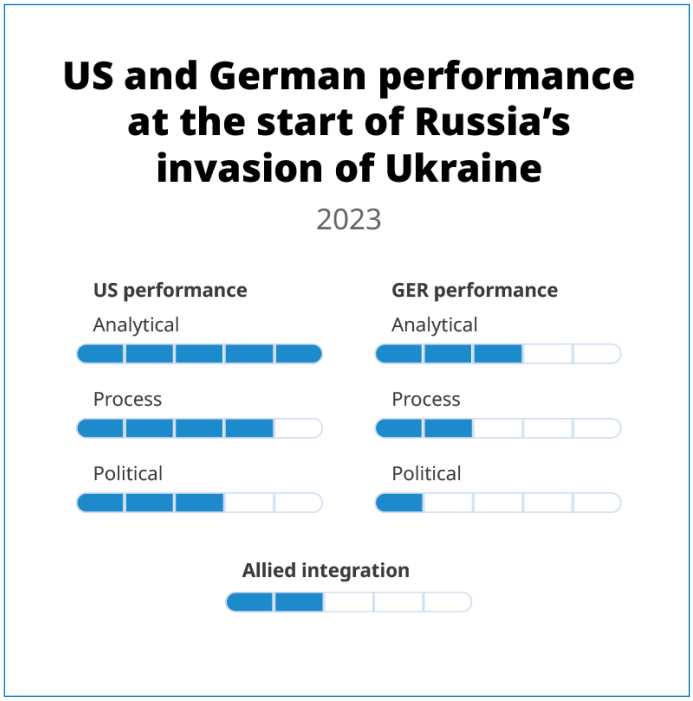

Figure 2. US and German performance at the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
Author's generation.

United States: "They were very trained eyes"

Analytically, US intelligence achieved an exceptional success. By October 2021, the CIA and other agencies had successfully infiltrated multiple levels of Russian political, military and operational structures. The intelligence community accurately predicted the timing of the invasion, key tactical elements like the Hostomel airport assault and troop movements. As noted by Vice Admiral Frank Whitworth: "There were very trained eyes who had seen exercises, and they had not seen this."[23] Yet some blind spots remained. While the invasion was predicted, how the conflict would unfold was not, particularly regarding the overestimation of Russian military capability and underestimation of Ukrainian resistance. Russian cyber capabilities were also overstated.[24]

In terms of process, the mechanisms for sharing warning information within the government and with allies were effective. US National Security Adviser Sullivan instituted daily NSC meetings with senior officials covering military evaluations, sanctions, diplomacy and intelligence to coordinate a whole-of-government response.[25] The intelligence community also successfully processed seemingly contradictory data, namely significant indicators of an imminent invasion despite such an action appearing strategically irrational. For NATO practitioners, it would be important to replicate this type of disciplined, recurring coordination effort at the Alliance level. A NATO equivalent of NSC-style daily formats at the NAC could ensure that intelligence, diplomacy and military planning are cross-referenced in real time, rather than left siloed in national capitals.

Politically, the "non-provocation" strategy of the Biden administration initially limited weapons deliveries and intelligence sharing, dampening the impact of the analysis. Yet the subsequent decision to declassify intelligence on Russia's invasion plans proved powerful: It undermined Moscow's attempts at deception, bought Ukraine time and accelerated Allied cohesion.[26] The point here is to recognize how political framing filtered every part of the warning chain. The declassification attempts were an example of how political decisions can amplify intelligence. In contrast, restrictive timetables and the tendency to avoid political risk show how warnings may be muted.

Germany: "The worst will not happen"

Analytically, German assessments diverged sharply from Anglo-American intelligence. The BND, according to accounts that came out later, had correctly identified the risks internally. However, these warnings did not get translated into a cohesive institutional assessment or a timely policy response. As late as mid-February 2022, the German leadership publicly maintained that a Russian invasion was unlikely.[27] Deputy Chancellor Robert Habeck later revealed that the government had considered the Russian troop movements to be "an exercise" and believed "the worst will not happen."[28] This public posture, it has been argued, is a legacy of Germany's Ostpolitik as well as a by-product of its energy dependence on Russia, which led

22 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Missing in action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan First Report of Session 2022–23*, 9.
23 Shane Harris et al., "Road to War: US Struggled to Convince Allies, and Zelensky, of Risk of Invasion," *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2022 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war/.
24 Mary Louise Kelly, "What US Intelligence Got Right and Wrong About the War in Ukraine," NPR, updated 6 April 2022, accessed 3 April 2025, https://www.npr.org/2022/04/06/1091308714/what-u-s-intelligence-got-right-and-wrong-about-the-war-in-ukraine.
25 "'Something Was Badly Wrong': When Washington Realized Russia Was Actually Invading Ukraine," Politico, updated 24 February 2023, 2023, accessed 3 April 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-oral-history-00083757.
26 Nicholas J. Romanow, "The Promise and Danger of Declassifying Intelligence for Effect," *Proceedings US Naval Institute* 149, 4 (2023).
27 Eva Michaels, "Caught Off Guard? Evaluating How External Experts in Germany Warned About Russia's War on Ukraine," *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2330133.
28 Laura Pitel, "Robert Habeck Adds to Criticism of German Intelligence Blunders," *Financial Times*, 24 August 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/cc0b1300-89fc-4df8-863b-f691e0aac758.

officials to underestimate Putin's willingness to absorb the costs of an invasion as well as Ukrainian resistance to it.[29]

The analytical challenge was compounded by procedural weaknesses. Even when warnings were issued within the intelligence apparatus, they were not passed on to higher levels and did not gain traction in policy circles. The BND participated in intelligence exchanges, but internal assessments remained compartmentalized, lacking the mechanisms to reconcile divergent views or to elevate dissenting analyses to senior decision-makers in time to produce a potential policy shift. After Russia invaded, BND Chief Kahl had to be evacuated by special forces from Kyiv – a fact that underscores how disconnected German officials were from ground realities and available intelligence.[30]

In Berlin, politics filtered intelligence through a mix of history, economics and credibility concerns. Leaders discounted the assessments declassified by the US (in part due to the legacy of the Iraq weapons of mass destruction debacle), clinging to the belief that negotiation remained possible. As former Defence Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer later admitted, Germany had been "taken in by an illusion… shattered in the most brutal way possible."[31]

Allied integration: constrained

In the informal Group of Five (US, UK, France, Germany, Italy), starkly different interpretations coexisted. Anglo-Saxon services judged invasion imminent; Germany and France argued that negotiation remained possible.[32] This divergence persisted even with access to broadly similar intelligence. NATO mechanisms to reconcile these views fell short, underplaying accurate assessments and allowing flawed assumptions to be disproportionately influential. The lesson from that experience is that integration is not just data-sharing but the alignment of interpretations. Washington's targeted declassification was a strong attempt to build such trust and accelerate a convergence of views. Again, the takeaway for NATO is to strengthen institutional validation tools so a high-confidence warning from an Ally can be stress-tested and, if it holds, adopted as the basis of an Alliance position quickly.

France: "We didn't see anything coming"

In July 2023, General Abdourahmane Tchiani overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum, marking the seventh coup in the Sahel since 2020. Crowds in Niamey attacked the French Embassy, chanting "Down with France," which underscored how the crisis carried both local and Alliance-wide consequences.

Analytically, the French record is contested. DGSE Chief Bernard Emié claims he flagged risks as early as January 2023 and urged the deployment of special forces to protect

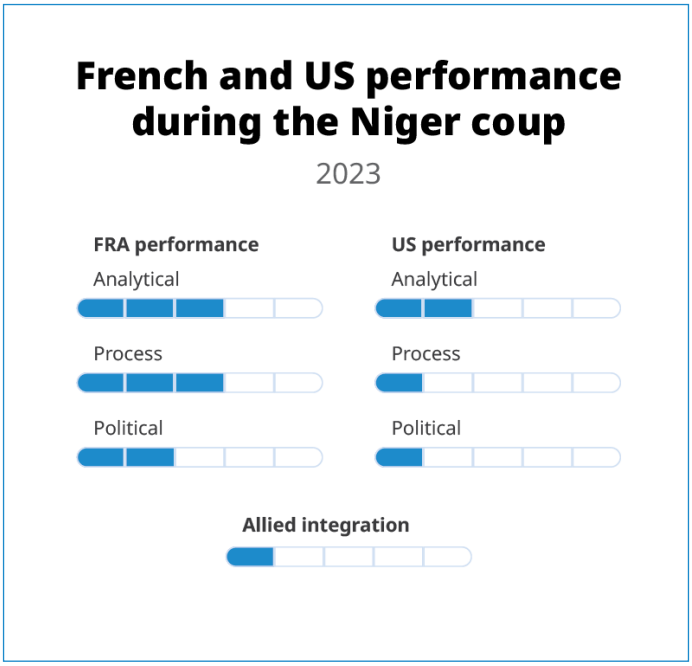

Figure 3. French and US performance during the Niger coup.
Author's generation.

President Bazoum. Yet President Macron reportedly told advisers, "We didn't see anything coming," and rebuked Emié during a Defence Council meeting.[33] The contradiction suggests that either warnings may not have been clear or that they were politically discounted or that communication broke down between analysts and policymakers. Past failures to anticipate coups in Mali and Burkina Faso also raised questions about France's overconfidence in its Sahel coverage.

There were several acute process gaps. Some warnings appear to have been produced but did not translate into clear guidance or coordinated planning. Reports were either too ambiguous to prompt action or lost credibility once leaders questioned their reasoning. Civil-military information flows were patchy, and agencies worked in silos. One official's comment captures the mistrust: "Either we're all stupid, or the report was incomprehensible."[34]

Politically, Macron had invested political credibility in his relationship with Bazoum as a symbol of French partnership. As a result, French officials found it harder to accept intelligence pointing to the fragility of Bazoum's rule. Overconfidence in a "solid ally," combined with caution over avoiding neo-colonial tendencies, narrowed the spec-

29 Jonas J. Driedger and Mikhail Polianskii, "Utility-Based Predictions of Military Escalation: Why Experts Forecasted Russia Would Not Invade Ukraine," *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2259153.

30 Justin Huggler, "Embarrassment as Head of German Intelligence Trapped in Ukraine After Failing to Foresee Invasion," *The Telegraph*, 26 February 2022, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/02/26/embarrassment-head-german-intelligence-trapped-ukraine-failing/.

31 Laura Pitel, "Robert Habeck Adds to Criticism of German Intelligence Blunders," *Financial Times*, 24 August 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/cc0b1300-89fc-4df8-863b-f691e0aac758.

32 Eva Michaels, "Caught Off Guard? Evaluating How External Experts in Germany Warned About Russia's War on Ukraine," *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2330133.

33 "French Spy Row as Macron Accuses Intelligence Chief of Failure Over Niger Coup," *Arab News*, updated 4 August 2023, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2349651/world.

34 Ibid.

trum of politically acceptable options. Intelligence that might have prompted contingency planning was sidelined.

United States: "Not gonna happen. Don't worry, we got this."

Analytically, the US struggled. The CIA station chief assured colleagues months before the coup: "Not gonna happen. Don't worry, we got this."[35] Hours before Tchiani seized power, American diplomats still judged Niger "more stable than others in the region."[36] Yet US Africa Command (AFRICOM) analysts warned that a coup was "likely at any time."[37] These contradictions reflect blind spots: scarce collection assets, overreliance on signals intelligence and a focus on counterterrorism that crowded out attention to civil-military relations. Also, US forces had minimal ground awareness because their mobility was severely limited after the Tongo ambush of 2017. One official noted: "We simply don't have enough people on the ground, and we've become too dependent on signals intelligence." [38] The US operated with "skeleton crews" and "inadequate technology and funding." [39]

Process failures were acute. Warnings from AFRICOM did not reach senior policy makers due to personnel gaps. When the crisis broke, the US had no ambassador in Niger or Nigeria, and the Africa desk at the National Security Council was in flux.[40] With only skeleton crews in situ and poor interagency coordination, contradictory assessments circulated without resolution, leaving Washington underprepared.

Politically, Niger had long been regarded as a low strategic priority, resulting in limited diplomatic, intelligence and military presence. As one official remarked: "The entire National Defense Strategy for the US includes exactly one paragraph about Africa. That tells you how much we prioritize the continent."[41] President Biden had tried to reverse this trend in the face of growing Chinese and Russian influence in Africa. Yet with such strong Islamist militant presence in the region, US policy in the Sahel remained overwhelmingly focused on counterterrorism. When the takeover in Niger did happen, the administration proved reluctant to label it as a "coup" in order to be able to maintain economic support. This shows to what extent political considerations can outweigh security concerns.[42]

Allied integration: critical gap

For both France and the US, the Niger coup is an example of divergent national warnings that never converged into a common NATO picture. Some in Paris claimed to have seen the crisis coming, but their assessment was probably highly contested and did not get widely shared. Washington oscillated between reassurance and alarm, with no shared assessment emerging. NATO's role in the Niger crisis has not been documented publicly. What is observable is that divergent French and US assessments never converged into a shared view, leaving the Alliance without a clear line as events unfolded. For practitioners, a takeaway from the Niger case is that integration challenges are magnified in regions where only a subset of Allies are heavily engaged. Here, France carried the main stake while US intelligence was distracted by counterterrorism priorities and Europe's larger Allies were peripheral. That asymmetry left NATO without a coherent picture.

For NATO, this suggests a need for standing procedures to obtain and compare assessments even in "secondary" theatres, so that when events escalate, the Alliance does not start from zero. Another lesson concerns the danger of thin coverage. Both French and US services admitted to operating with skeleton crews and limited intelligence. NATO could designate "shared blind spots,"[43] for which several Allies would be asked to pool scarce resources. Finally, the Niger case underlines that even accurate intelligence will be sidelined if leaders dismiss it for political reasons (e.g. France's fear of appearing neo-colonial). NATO cannot dictate national politics, but it can encourage a habit of documenting examples where politics overrides warning in order to make those blind spots visible in post-event reviews.

What NATO can do now

The case studies about the fall of Kabul, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the coup in Niger strikingly illustrate that NATO's warning problems have been the result of fragmented and divergent interpretations rather than missing data. Allied countries looked at the same indicators yet reached different conclusions, and concerns often did not reach policymakers in time for them to frame appropriate responses. NATO does not require new structures to improve its performance in these respects. The JISD is already in charge of the NIWS, and there exists a longstanding tradition of the use of a variety of techniques, such as red teaming, Team A/Team B debates and pre-mortems. But these need to be integrated systematically into the warning process.

35 Jonathan Broder, "US Intelligence Surprised by African Coup," *SpyTalk*, *Substack*, 5 October 2023.
36 Mosheh Gains and Dan De Luce Courtney Kube, "Blindsided: Hours Before the Coup in Niger, US Diplomats said the Country was Stable," *NBC News*, 14 August 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/blindsided-hours-coup-niger-us-diplomats-said-country-was-stable-rcna99708.
37 Jonathan Broder, "US Intelligence Surprised by African Coup," *SpyTalk*, *Substack*, 5 October 2023.
38 Ibid.
39 Mosheh Gains and Dan De Luce Courtney Kube, "Blindsided: Hours Before the Coup in Niger, US Diplomats Said the Country Was stable."
40 Benoit Faucon and Joe Parkinson Drew Hinshaw, "How the U.S. Fumbled Niger's Coup and Gave Russia an Opening," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 August 2023, https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/niger-coup-us-russia-africa-86cf1454.
41 Mosheh Gains and Dan De Luce Courtney Kube, "Blindsided: Hours Before the Coup in Niger, US diplomats said the country was stable."
42 "Why the US Isn't Calling the Crisis in Niger a 'Coup'," *The Hill*, updated 2 August 2023, accessed 4 April 2025, https://thehill.com/policy/international/4133517-why-the-us-isnt-calling-the-crisis-in-niger-a-coup/.
43 This may also serve other regions such as the Mediterranean, cf. "NATO Has a Mediterranean Blind Spot—and it Puts the Alliance's Security at Risk," Atlantic Council, updated 30 June 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-has-a-mediterranean-blind-spot-and-it-puts-the-alliances-security-at-risk/.

To begin with, short divergence drills could be organized each time major national warnings differ substantially or when NIWS reports a warning problem. Each Allied nation would need to provide a short statement setting out its assessment of the threat, the probability of its occurrence, the relevant timeframe and the policy consequences of a potential event. These submissions could then be combined by JISD into a "gap map" showing convergence and divergence of views in sorted order, indicating which of the minority analyses warrant further investigation. Where significant political divergences persist, the issue can be brought to meetings of the NAC to ensure that political leaders are fully aware of issues on which the Alliance is split.

Secondly, NATO could institutionalize red teaming in the warning cycle. The Alliance already makes significant use of red teaming in various forms, including in planning exercises, but its deployment can be extended to live warning problems. A small rotating red team composed of staff from JISD and SHAPE J2 as well as national specialists could test assumptions that seem the hardest to question, for instance, about an adversary's decision timing or the possibility of deception. Their "challenge notes" must be brief and to the point and should be sent to the Permanent Representatives without their views being diluted.

Third and perhaps more difficult, it might be helpful if NATO "pre-packages" minor bundles of operations that could be swiftly executed when certain NIWS indicators are triggered. Examples might include airlift support for evacuations, prompt force protection increments, defensive cyber support or coordinated diplomatic signalling around a particular development. Connecting these options directly to NIWS indicators and thresholds would grant warnings an immediate operational relevance. Even if there was disagreement over the best course of action as a whole, an agreed immediate reaction to specific triggers would thus be more feasible.

Finally, NATO could make post-event reviews a matter of routine. The NATO JALLC, the Alliance's dedicated entity for analysing and disseminating lessons from operations and exercises, could lead this effort. Within thirty days of a surprise or near-miss, a review of the warning chain could be initiated. JALLC regularly conducts structured after-action reviews and maintains NATO's Lessons Learned Database and has sufficient organizational legitimacy, culture and access to professional networks to rapidly collect, analyse and disseminate lessons, even if it is not currently focused on strategy. Such a review should cover the four critical dimensions mentioned here (analysis, process, politics and Allied integration) to identify what succeeded and what went wrong. The purpose would not be to assign blame but to enable more rapid learning, assign owners of such learning and follow up on the lessons.

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