



# European and Ukrainian security at risk

Some elements of a coping strategy

by Kees Klompenhouwer

# Preface

There are still no real indications of Russian readiness for an end to military hostilities against Ukraine and his hybrid war against Europe, let alone opportunities for peace. **The Russian aggression continues unabated.**

Trump's immediate ending of US military support for Ukraine after his inauguration and his manner of negotiating an end to the conflict confirm his basic objective: to seek accommodation with Russia at the expense of Ukrainian and European security. The prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine has been taken off the table by Trump. European integration of Ukraine could be compromised by this fact.

The fact is that rather than promoting peace, Trumps tendency to abandon Ukraine has encouraged Russia to prolong the war and has made the prospect of peace even more remote.

**Without a countervailing European effort, Russia could achieve its objective of maintaining vital parts of Ukraine occupied and weakening the country as a whole, until it eventually fully reverts to the Russian sphere of influence.**

The European strategy of supporting Ukraine while avoiding a direct confrontation with Russia is faltering. The level of European political and military support for Ukraine remains too low, too fragmented, too unpredictable to prevent the eventual realisation of Russian war aims.

A real coping strategy is needed, collectively implemented. Leadership will be of the essence to mobilise the political will of its nations and institutions and to harness the resources and arrangements needed for a real coping strategy.

*This note seeks to contribute some cognitive elements for it. A meeting of minds of strategic experts is called for to elaborate a common political understanding that could guide our leaders.*



## Kees Klompenhouwer

Former Ambassador of The Kingdom of The Netherlands to Ukraine. Member of the Coordination Committee of the **Ukraine Facility Platform**.



# European security at risk – A coping strategy

## 1. Introduction

The post WWII international liberal order underpinned by international law has eroded and is reverting to the predatory system that existed in previous centuries, presaging a multiplication of conflicts. The global power balance has shifted to Europe's disadvantage. Its economic base has eroded. Its population is aging. The Alliance with the US is under stress and Europe is incapable of securing its peace and stability, even in partnership with the US.

Europe must urgently reassess and reaffirm its position not to be overwhelmed by the new geopolitical realities. **The time for complacency is over.**

## 2. Some cognitive building blocks of the strategic context

Revanchist imperialism from Russia is the mental driver for the largest war on the European continent in the past 85 years. Russia presents its war of aggression as existential for its survival, while in fact it is a war of choice, not driven by necessity but by imperial and dictatorial ambition to restore the power of the Soviet Union. It has also been seeking to globalize this war by drawing in China, North Korea and Iran, thereby kindling wider consequences

beyond Europe alone.

China's leaders also harbour a revanchist mindset and are supporting Russia in an attempt to bind the West to this European conflict, while China is slowly but systematically extending its influence in the world. The commonly declared goal of the Russian and Chinese leadership is to undermine the pre-eminent position of the West, i.e. the USA and its European and Asian allies.

In this light, Russia's war against Ukraine is conceived as **the part of a greater global contest featuring China versus the US and its allies**. This latter contest, although still openly economic and technological, has clear military overtones.

The US administration's main concern is China, not Europe. America does not want to be drawn into a two front war, which it believes it could not manage. There is insufficient understanding at the White House today that abandoning Ukraine, and by implication putting European Allies at risk, will complicate rather than help its goal of containing China.

Seeing no alternative, both Ukraine and Europe desperately try to keep the US committed. The price attached to American protection has increased and is negatively affecting the European trade balance and putting increasing stress on its finances.

Europe's relations with China, which brought short-term economic benefits, are



under stress as China is increasingly seen as a threat also to Europe's industrial and technological position.

The radical scaling up of European defence efforts, sought by Trump, was long overdue. Europe's rearmament is a slow and uncertain process, while events are moving fast and dependency on the US is increasing rather than decreasing.

However, the fundamental trend is that the strategic interests of the USA today and Europe are diverging. European leaders have not begun to fully weigh the political, security and economic implications.

Trump's immediate ending of US military support for Ukraine after his inauguration, his public humiliation of Zelensky in the White House February and his red carpet treatment for Putin in Alaska in August confirm his basic objective: to seek accommodation with Russia at the expense of Ukrainian and European security. The next Washington Summit between Trump and European leaders accompanying Zelensky was a mitigation effort with limited effect. His expression of impatience with Putin's refusal to accept an unconditional ceasefire has resulted in sanctions limited to oil, while the wider sanctions bill prepared in Congress remain stalled.

Significantly, the White House endorsed on 20 November proposals pretending to put an end to the conflict, based on a Russian input via a backchannel of close advisers Witkoff and Dmitriev. The text has sent a shock wave through Europe as it largely satisfied Russia's immediate war aims and ignored Ukraine and Europe's vital interests, while benefiting America economically and financially. The following Geneva meetings between a US delegation led by SoS Rubio with Ukraine (and the E3 on the background) seems to have resolved some issues. However, the pattern of Trump's negotiations with Russia justify some doubt about the Geneva

outcome. How will the White House react to expected Russian opposition to the results of the Geneva meeting?

Russia under Putin has long abandoned the lofty goal of freely building a peaceful common European house with other Europeans. Instead its economy has been rooted on the kleptocratic exploitation of its natural resources and its polity has reverted to its century old orientation on totalitarian Asian powers. This also represents a deep cultural break, separating it from other Slavic peoples in Europe who made the choice of freedom in the context of a voluntary adhesion to the European Union, governed by norms of democratic accountability and good governance. The war is therefore also civilisational.

The war is also cultural. The mythical Russian soul pained by conscience, evoked by Dostoyevsky, seems irretrievably lost and morphed into a conscienceless opposite reality of boundless cruelty. For Europeans, the old idealized concept of Russian culture has been replaced by the reality of limitless cruelty of the "Russian World", internally and externally.

**Conclusion:** The fate of Ukraine and Europe have become linked in all essential domains: political, military, technology, economy and culture. It has become an existential relationship. There have been many supportive initiatives, mostly based on improvisation led by the urgency of the situation. It is now time to look at how to sustain the relationship in order to fill the gaps and use opportunities.





## 3. Elements for a coping strategy

### 3.1. Improving Strategic Goal Setting

The shift in the global balance of power affects Europe hard. It has largely de-industrialized and is facing critical economic weakness as documented in the Draghi report. Europe is not prepared politically, economically, financially and institutionally for the new reality.

Diplomatically, Europe should avoid the trap implied in Russian proposals to deal with the so-called “root causes”. This is code language for Russia’s secondary objective to turn Ukraine into a failed state by imposing on its terms of a peace treaty which would legalize the occupation of vital parts of the country, make it defenceless and keep it under Moscow’s political control.

**Europe should be able to convince Russia’s leadership that its war leads to a strategic impasse in which Russia will lose out.**

That will be a long term process which will require sustained and unified action on the European side. To attain the objectives cited above Europe needs to overcome the costly and ineffective fragmentation of effort along national lines, i.e. strengthen the political unity of the core nations, willing and able and to make institutional arrangements to make that unity work in practice.

The facts show a dire reality: In 2022, faced with Russia’s war of aggression, European nations realized they cannot sustain a high intensity war for more than a few weeks

and would be in need of American strategic enablers to do even that. But the role of the US as protector of European security has been sidelined by the Trump administration.

**Europe’s medium term military objective should be to have the capacity to sustain a high intensity conventional war over a prolonged period.** To counter Putin’s repeated nuclear blackmail it should also reinforce nuclear deterrence.

The absence of good intelligence presages defeat. Europe should therefore strive for enhancing its independent capabilities in this field. Ukraine should be associated with it. This would also contribute to a more balanced intel-relationship with the USA.

### 3.2. A European backbone structure for political unity on security

European allies are implementing their pledge at the recent NATO summit of committing 3,5 % of GNP to defence proper and 1,5 % to related expenditure. It is very important that these resources should be used efficiently and effectively.

The deteriorated strategic context requires a higher degree of common political understanding about the need to act collectively among the key European nations. It also requires the conceptualization of an agreed process for going forward jointly. This is also very important for Ukraine and Ukraine should become part of it. Since 2024, Ukraine has signed a series of bilateral security cooperation agreements with European nations, the US and Canada, but the momentum of implementation has varied over time and over nations, in particular the US.



A backbone of this process can be formed on the groundwork of the mutual defence treaties such as the Kensington Treaty of 17 July 2025 between the UK and Germany, which complements existing and agreements between France and the UK (Lancaster House) and France and Germany (Aachen/Elysée Treaty) respectively. Also important are the new defence treaties between Poland and the UK of January 2025 and Poland and France of May 2025, which encompasses “all military components”.

It is also recognized that the independent nuclear forces of France and the UK can play an important role as an additional layer of protection alongside the US nuclear guarantee. The Northwood Declaration of 10 July 2025 signals for the first time that Paris and London are prepared to align their strategic postures in new ways to counter major nuclear and non-nuclear threats to Europe. The deployment of the British and French nuclear forces across Europe should therefore be facilitated in exercises and in case of crisis. This could occur, as appropriate, in combination with forces of the so-called European DCA countries to underpin the continued validity and credibility of American extended deterrence for Europe.

This E4 (UK/France/Germany/Poland) set of agreements is a necessary but insufficient basis for the creation of a new European security architecture. Germany, as the biggest European player in the field of the conventional defence buildup could play a leadership role, in line with its officially stated ambitions. The German defence budget is increasing far too slow and the “Zeitenwende” is a slow political process.

Therefore, other European countries willing and able to contribute security should complement these efforts. The European countries most proactively supporting Ukraine, the Nordic/Baltic states, Poland and the Netherlands could be playing a lead role. The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) composed

of the NB8, the Netherlands and the UK should take on a lead. This could trigger greater contributions and closer cooperation from Germany as soon as it overcomes its operational reluctance and self-deterrence. The big arms deals between Sweden and Ukraine and France and Ukraine respectively on the provision of a total of 200 fighter aircraft will take many years to implement, while the provision of 8 advanced air defence systems (the SAMP-T Mamba) by France will still be only a third of the number of equivalent systems (Patriot) provided by the US.

Many more of these steps, implemented speedily, will give credence to and reinforce the European pillar of NATO, as well as art. 42.7 of the EU treaty, to which Ukraine would thus be closely associated.

In the not too distant future, NATO’s military command structure would need fundamental reform to reflect the greater European responsibilities. This requires fundamental agreement among the E4 and other Europeans on the division of command responsibilities, without affected the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent.

### **3.3. Bringing together military strategy and the development of capabilities**

As the West has no unified strategy to deal with the Russian threat, Europe should work with Ukraine on a common strategy encompassing diplomatic, military, industrial and technological aims.

However, forecasting the nature of the Russian threat to Europe and the specific capabilities Russia will develop (with China’s help) is difficult.

The Russian military capabilities, particularly



its armoured formations, have been largely depleted in the war against Ukraine. Unable to realize a mechanized breakthrough at the front, they are engaged in a war of attrition which they eventually hope to win based on its larger pool of human resources, drone technology from China and on strategic bombardments of civilian targets to break the will of Ukraine to continue the war. The Russian military's current status is a force optimized for positional warfare. But Western analysts believe it will not stay that way.

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) states that Western forecasts must recognize that the primary obstacle to rapid Russian advances is the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), and that NATO frontline states currently lack the capacity to field equivalents of the UAF at scale. Ukrainian forces have optimized themselves for defensive positional warfare. Their officers and many of their soldiers have nearly four years of active combat experience, prepared defensive positions that frontline units constantly adapt, and a technological-tactical-industrial integration process that no NATO state can currently match. Western analysts must avoid the trap of imagining that Russian forces cannot pose a meaningful short-term threat to frontline NATO states simply because they can hardly gain ground in Ukraine today.

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) assumes that the Russian military will most likely attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized manoeuvre by rebuilding large mechanized formations and providing them with counter-drone capabilities, investing in operationally significant precision strike capabilities, and integrating some of its adaptations in Ukraine into future capabilities. NATO planning is also based on this assumption.

Not surprisingly, the Western military-industrial complex has not been positioned for low cost attritional warfare with a high

tempo of tactical and operational innovation, as is the case in Ukraine. In the meantime Russia is also innovating fast.

The defence industries in the West rely on highly complex and expensive systems that cannot easily be produced at scale. Also the Western innovation cycle is too slow to keep pace with the development of the war. Hence the gap with Ukrainian military requirements.

The military aid to Ukraine should be as efficient/effective as possible. That will not work if NATO's vision of war and that of the reality on the battlefield are not aligned.

To bridge this gap, cooperation on military strategy and defence industrial development with Ukraine should be a priority, next to the urgent delivery of arms.

Conducting an European audit of weapon production in Ukraine might clarify concrete opportunities. Thus Ukraine can help Europe speed up the innovation cycle, produce weapons at scale and at minor costs. This should be highly relevant for Europe's defence posture, which now lacks both cost effectiveness and sustainability. Joint production of weapons would therefore work both ways A) sustain Ukraine's war needs and B) help Europe innovating and scaling. It could also help overcoming export licence and software restrictions on the actual use of weapons.

For Europe and Ukraine, investing in each other's defence industries and common procurement is therefore the obvious way forward, but many hurdles, legal, administrative and financial, must be overcome. There is a modest beginning stimulated by various European nations. The development of drones is a case in point, where Ukraine is indisputably in the lead. Ammunition and artillery production is also a subject for joint efforts. But in order to have a strategic impact this movement



needs to be considerably broadened and strengthened, for instance in the field of deep strike capabilities. Air defence remains a challenge as it requires complex technological solutions, but the development of common radar and other observation systems for early warning would serve both sides quickly.

Europe has to manage this process at the speed of change of geopolitical and battlefield realities.

### 3.4. The European Commission's proposals

In May 2025 the Council of the EU adopted the SAFE program of 150 billion euros in loans to member states to upgrade their defences. Ukraine can cooperate with member states taking the loans and also benefit. Poland is the largest beneficiary, with a massive €43.7 billion allocation. France, Hungary, and Romania will each receive over €16 billion, while Italy is set to secure nearly €15 billion. These funds are expected to finance both urgent procurement and long-term industrial capacity.

Although this is good news, the SAFE program does not fundamentally overcome the fundamental fragmentation of defence markets along national lines.

Also the European Commission has proposed that Member States should be allowed to use the so called cohesion funds also for defence purposes.

Some modest good news is the approval on 16 October by the European Parliament of EDIP, the European Defence Industry Programme. This provisional agreement comes almost two years after the European Commission first tabled its proposal for establishing the EDIP. The programme has

been granted a small budget of €1.5 billion from 2025 to 2027, of which €300 million will go to the Ukraine Support Instrument. This aims to modernise the country's defence industry and facilitate its integration in the EU.

On 16 October the European Commission also published its long awaited and more ambitious "Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030" with detailed proposals to fill critical capability shortfalls with specified timelines, based on voluntary action to be taken by member states. This Roadmap should enable Member States by 2030 to deter any aggression and to defend its borders by land, air and sea. Ukraine is to be closely associated with it. It is proposed to launch projects in all priority areas within the first half of 2026.

In addition the Commission proposed to set up 4 European Readiness Flagships: the European Drone Defence Initiative, the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Air Shield and the European Space Shield.

The European Defence Agency is to play a coordinating role in setting up the necessary voluntary capability coalitions (in coordination with NATO), while progress will be tracked by the EU Military Staff. Existing financial instruments such as the European Defence Fund, the Regional Funds, the Horizon Research Programme and the recently adopted SAFE loan instrument and EDIP should be used. The new EU budget (MFF) should support expansion of existing instruments.

Bilateral agreements are being negotiated with the United Kingdom and Canada to allow their respective defence industries and products to benefit from joint procurement under the SAFE instrument.

The Commission also wants to harness Ukraine's Qualitative Military Edge (QME). Crucial for this will be the adoption by





the end of 2025 of additional financial instruments such as the “Reparation loan” based on frozen Russian assets with an annual allowance for Ukraine to support its QME. Belgium continues to oppose using the frozen Russian assets, mainly because it derives substantial tax income from these assets located at Euroclear in Belgium.

Overall for the Defence Readiness Programme, the key variable will remain the degree to which Member States can coordinate needs, aggregate demand and organise joint procurement. It is proposed by the Commission that at least 40% of defence procurement should be joint procurement – by end 2027 (now it is at 20% despite earlier pledges to raise that percentage).

In November 2025, the EU presented a Military Mobility Package, aimed at eliminating the many barriers for the movement of troops, equipment, and military assets towards the area of potential conflict with Russia. It addresses these barriers in all dimensions - regulatory, infrastructure and capabilities and comes with a substantial budget.

### 3.5. Security guarantees under a cease fire and/or peace agreement

Trump has been seeking a deal with Putin on a cease fire. It's likely to be loaded with contradictions. Europe could be called upon to provide the security guarantees for this deal, hence arrangements for a multinational force of the “coalition of the willing” as proposed by UK and France. The US backstop in the air is unclear and cannot be relied upon given Trump's unpredictability. The force will be too weak to provide real guarantees and is likely to fail as soon as it is put to the test, similar to the UN force in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995.

Failure would durably eliminate the prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine, but would also undermine NATO itself. European integration of Ukraine could be compromised. Russia would have achieved its objective of maintaining Ukraine as a buffer state subject to further pressure until it eventually reverts to the Russian sphere of influence.

Unity of European and Ukrainian diplomatic efforts will continue to be crucial in mitigating the tendency of the Trump administration to make untimely concessions to Russia and entertain unrealistic expectations about Russia.

The fact is that rather than promoting peace, Trump's tendency to abandon Ukraine has encouraged Russia to prolong the war and has made the prospect of peace even more remote.

### 3.6. Zaluzhnyi proposals

On 20 October an analysis was presented by Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Ambassador of Ukraine to the United Kingdom, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (2021 – 2024).

He doubts whether the Commission's choice to leave the initiative to member states will work. However, on the technical level his ideas go in the same direction as the European Commission proposals.

Zaluzhnyi lists critical shortages that must be solved now. Remarkable is his recommendation to **merging Ukrainian radar and satellite data into EU command systems to create one continuous air picture from the Baltic to the Black Sea** — a practical step that would boost defence coordination now, not in 2030.



### 3.7. Ukraine a “Steel Porcupine”

The stated strategy of the Commission president von der Leyen is to turn Ukraine into a steel porcupine. It means to further build Ukraine as a potent military power able to make Russia's aggression so costly as to create a strategic impasse for Moscow. The ambitious Commission's "Defence Readiness Roadmap" does not guarantee the means for this strategy.

In order to come close to this objective, Ukraine urgently needs bilateral support for the production and deployment of sufficient and powerful deep strike weapons to achieve military-strategic effect on Russia.

Europe should also build a layered integrated air defence system, while learning from Ukraine's experience and while making inoperative Russia's campaign of destruction of civilian life in Ukraine: The equivalent of Israeli air defence capability against Iranian ballistic and drone attacks.

Eventually the air defence of Ukraine and Europe should become fully integrated.

Support for the defence of the long frontline on land should continue: artillery, shells, mines, drones and counter drone technology (kinetic, EW and laser).

**European nations have to substantially step up their support to achieve this objective.** There are too many nations

free riding. Also EU should receive the financial means it requires to implement the **“Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030”**.

### 3.8. A meeting of minds of strategic experts

UAFP organizes in Lviv on 20 November a meeting with leading European strategic experts to discuss strategy and elaborate a common political understanding that could guide our leaders.

The initiative will operate through a **Europe-Ukraine advisory group on defence strategy**, advocating a new European security architecture aligned with NATO's objectives, rooted in Ukraine's capabilities and focused on practical, implementable solutions.

The emphasis will be on consolidating collaboration among European nations, ensuring Ukraine is not just supported but structurally embedded in regional security decision-making.

This may eventually be complemented by a strategic communication effort focussing on unity of purpose and the search for solutions that are both sufficiently ambitious to deal with the real problems and implementable. that are both sufficiently ambitious to deal with the real problems and implementable.

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