



Options for 2026

by François Heisbourg



François Heisbourg

Special adviser, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique

During the first three years of the full scale invasion, the war was predicated by Moscow on a straightforward military victory against Ukraine secured by a sustainable and limited mobilization of human and material resources (less than 8% of GDP and substantially fewer than 1 million soldiers deployed in theatre)(*). **This is not working as planned.**

On the Western side, the US-led mobilization of transatlantic support for Ukraine now belongs to the past: the US no longer gives materiel, although it still provides C4ISR support, and it no longer leads what used to be called the Ramstein group.

In this strategic environment, Europe(**) is faced with the challenge of taking the lead and filling in for the US.

Russian options

The Kremlin has a choice between three basic options. The first is for Russia to continue doing what it has been doing in the hope that it will somehow succeed in the fourth year of the war. If Ukraine's armed forces and home front continue to hold and the Europeans manage to fill in for a less present US (see below), the chances of this option bearing fruit for Russia soon aren't encouraging: Putin has reason to rethink his currently failing theory of victory.

Redefining victory along apparently more limited lines in the framework of the Trumpian mediation is one avenue. During 10 months, that mediation with its proposal for a un unconditional cease-fire got nowhere with Putin. Since then, Trump has accepted Russian conditions for a cease-fire. Europe and Ukraine are suddenly facing a prospective breakthrough between the 2 leaders.

(*) by comparison, the full-scale French war in Algeria (1956-1962) cost 6% of GDP and involved 500 000 troops in theatre

(**) the meaning of the word Europe (or Europeans) can either embrace NATO's European members, the EU's members and institutions, or the European democracies including Ukraine. The context will make clear which meaning applies



The other option is a Russian *Flucht nach Vorn* characterized by horizontal escalation enabled by vertical escalation. The vertical component would include all-of-society mobilization measures and increased arms procurement, maybe also from China to make up for the depletion of North Korean and Iranian stockpiles. The horizontal part would entail more diverse and more aggressive grey zone operations against and within NATO Europe in order to induce the Europeans to enhance homeland defence efforts at the expense of increased aid to Ukraine.

The spectacular weakness displayed by NATO air defences in the face of Russian drones is a harbinger of Russian attempts to create such a “new normal” in NATO European space.

New realms might be opened for intensified and more aggressive grey zone operations moving beyond ongoing airspace intrusions, info- and psy-ops, GPS harassment, Baltic cables, etc. into ASAT attacks, the derailment of trains and cutting oceanic seabed assets etc. This would be getting close to pan-European war.

Such a choice could also involve a ramping up of nuclear threats against the increase of more high-end Western arms transfers to Ukraine. Given Russia's strategic aims at the European level as laid out in the December 2021 so-called “*security treaties*” this escalation could include deliberate probing as to the meaning of NATO's Article V after President Trump has said that the commitment could be interpreted in different ways.

US no longer leading

The change in US strategy is already a here and now, with the current state of affairs being a “*new normal*”. It entails:

- 1) continued US membership of NATO since leaving NATO would be legally and politically difficult in US Congress.
- 2) the continued US allocation in the NATO framework of C4ISR and related enablers to the defence of Europe and by extension to the benefit of Ukraine.
- 2) the end of pro-bono Biden-era US military aid.
- 4) The continued US readiness to greenlight US arms sales to its NATO allies and with some restrictions to Ukraine either directly or via the Europeans (notably through the PURL scheme): in effect, a move back from the spirit of “*Lend-Lease*” to pre-1941 style “*Cash-and-Carry*”.



This new normal, which is hardly a happy choice, has now become a best case. The question is what the US posture would be if Russia moved either to an ostensibly “*limited victory*” deal or to the Flucht nach Vorn option. We are beginning to get a sense of the hardening of US policy in the wake of the recently US brokered memorandum.

Earlier this year, President Trump has already blamed European intransigence for getting in the way of a possible US-Russia deal. Moving back from early World War II “*Cash and Carry*” to the Neutrality Act of the 1930s is a potential corollary of a “dirty deal”. In that case, only non-US arms would be available for Ukraine and presumably only those without ITAR restrictions.

In an escalatory Russian scenario, the stakes would be even higher, whether on the upside (the US abides by the spirit of Article V) or the downside (the US goes AWOL).

European strategic options

Ready or not, Europe is thrust into the key role.

If one accepts the previous analyses, Europe’s task is complicated by the fact that it needs to prepare itself concurrently for each of the scenarios, *ex ante* (prevention, deterrence) and *ex post* (defence, response).

There exists however a simplifying prior consideration: for the European members of NATO (plus Canada) and the EU, Russia’s war against Ukraine and its European-scale ambitions (the 2021 draft treaties) is the centre of strategic and military gravity. This doesn’t mean other problems won’t need to be addressed, e.g. sub-Saharan Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, the power nexus in the Indo-Pacific etc. But it is the Russian threat which now dimensions our military effort and leads our strategic priorities. This is the clear choice made in recent years by France or the UK, notwithstanding their imperial or post-imperial DNA along with many others.

Furthermore, the Europeans, like the Ukrainians have to deal with the possibility of a US ready to cut back or cut off C4ISR cooperation with Ukraine or within NATO, and the US refusal to approve the transfer to Ukraine of US weapons purchased by Europe.

What will be done here is to examine European options in the face of each of the above-mentioned scenarios:

- “more of the same” in Russia and the US;
- “US-Russia deal”;



- “Russian escalation”.

In conclusion, these will be drawn together.

Coping with “more of the same”

US military aid for Ukraine has been running at some \$30 billion a year since February 2022. To do literally more of the same, the European members of the Ramstein group (plus Canada) would have to double their contribution to an annual total of some 60 billion including the purchase of US weapons such as Patriot for which European substitutes such as Aster 30 are not yet ready at scale.

Given the strength of ongoing Russian attacks, simply doing more of the same may not be enough to hold the fort: moving close to 100 billion annually may be prudent, notably to forestall increases in Russian mobilization and defence spending.

This would also serve to sustain ambitious and costly schemes, such as the Gripen and Rafale procurements (more than 200 4th generation aircraft all together).

Money should not be an obstacle, above and beyond existing national commitments and EU schemes (notably SAFE): EuroClear in Brussels is the custodian of some **250 billion euro worth of frozen Russian central bank assets**. Plans are afoot to use **140 billion to back an EU loan for assistance to Ukraine**. In political terms, this would be less problematic than asking European taxpayers to enrich US arms producers. It remains to be seen whether the European Council will meet demands from Belgium that the EU should share the legal hazards involved. The answer will be known soon.

In this scenario, overall European defence requirements will be met by the NATO commitment to raise defence spending to **3.5% of GDP** (i.e. more than the current US level of 3.3% of GDP, a superpower with global military commitments, mostly outside of Europe). This level of outlays should be in line with identified priorities (layered air defence, conventional deep-strike, space assets, C4ISR enablers, more rapid scaled-up defence acquisition development cycles...) and will help foster defence integration between NATO Europe, the EU and Ukraine.

Dealing with a US-brokered deal

The security and defence consequences of a deal brokered under US auspices will have to be sustained by the Europeans with the post-war authorities in Kyiv, assuming that



these aren't mere satraps or Gauleiters of the sort implied by the Russian "*federalization proposals*" made by the Russians in spring 2014. In these proposals circulated at the time to the US, Britain and France (and maybe others), each of the remaining unoccupied oblasts would have had a direct interface with Russian ministries with no role for Kyiv, headed by a purely decorative president "defended" by a symbolic palace guard (***).

The recently brokered US deal barely slightly less extreme, with Ukraine being authorized, at least on paper, to keep a diminished but substantial army and retain a central government in the unoccupied territories.

Until now, the putative European response to an unconditional in-place ceasefire with Russia was to deploy rear-area troops from a coalition of the willing, providing a backstop to front-line Ukrainian forces which could be part of a "*porcupine strategy*" including Rafale and Gripen. However, the current US-Russian draft memorandum rejects any NATO deployment in Ukraine.

Europe has all the more reason to speed up and increase its arms and intelligence transfers to Ukraine.

But assuming that Russia went down this unlikely road in exchange for instance of a Russian occupation broadened to the whole territory of the five invaded Ukrainian oblasts, the Europeans and their allies would have to both mount a substantial force with robust rules of engagement. In other words, it should be undergirded by formal article V or TEU article 42.7 defence guarantees.

A French-British and/or NATO nuclear deterrent, possibly along lines comparable to Russia's nuclear deterrent based in Belarus, could also be contemplated but would meet with ferocious Russian opposition even though it set the Belarus precedent.

In practical terms, the European defence effort would presumably have to at least meet the current **3.5% of GDP** goal and continue to provide may of the porcupine's quills. Given that Ukraine would still serve as a strategic shield for NATO Europe and the EU, this would not be as financially and militarily onerous an outcome as one in which Europe would have to cope with a subjugated Ukraine with Russian forces arrayed along the borders of Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.

(***) as described by Dmitri Peskov in a meeting in Moscow in March 2014, in the days following Russia's annexation of Crimea



This “dealing with the dirty deal” scenario would carry an inherently higher cost (deployed forces are expensive) and a higher risk than the “more of the same” scenario: but Europe and Ukraine together could cope.

Despite my implied criticism at the apparent vagueness of the *“coalition of the willing”* formula, our countries are right to prepare for such a contingency.

Finally, a unsatisfactory and mismanaged *“deal scenario”*, unlike the continuation of *“more of the same”* has the potential of opening the door in more or less short order to a Flucht nach Vorn by Russia.

Deterrence and defence: organising for a Russian Flucht nach Vorn

A horizontal and vertical escalation scenario puts the future of European security as a whole at stake, along with the future of the transatlantic relationship. Intelligence assessments in a number of European countries (most recently and publicly, by the head of the French Defence staff, general Mandon) now assume that such a scenario may unfold before the end of the decade.

This should mean that a planning horizon within the decade, i.e. less than five years from now- must be implemented in every dimension — defence production priorities, force deployments for both homeland defence and forward presence, contingency planning, strategic direction and operational command. This is widely understood within NATO, the EU institutions, and key European member states but only beginning to be implemented.

Despite calls for *“war economy”* defence production — first called for in France by President Macron in June 2022, **the scale and speed of acquisition remains generally unimpressive: no serious venture capital eco-system, a banking sector all too often slow to drop the reticence of the peace dividend era, limited scaling up with few exceptions (i.e. munitions production).** At least, things are moving and what needs to be done is clear enough — and crucially taxpayers’ money is on the table.

Given Ukraine’s unparalleled record of ultra-rapid record in terms of short development cycles and its valuable experience in war-fighting, Europe and Ukraine have cause to increasingly integrate their defence industries.

A particular European problem is that priority programmes remain all too often wedded to 2040-plus timetables, with UK-led GCAP or prospective French-German



FCAS combat aircraft programmes still sucking in massive political attention and public monies despite their lack of relevance to the threat at hand. As one British observer has put it, GCAP (and the like) is the equivalent of focusing in 1936 on developing a Vulcan nuclear bomber for 1956. Mercifully, the British chose to build heavy bombers such as the Lancaster fit for purpose by 1942.

In strategy and operations, timing is of the essence.

European-scale strategic planning and conduct as well as actual theatre-level operations are rightly handled at the NATO level — with the organisation's defence culture, generation of interoperability, command structure and operating procedures. These features are not present within the EU institutions and can hardly be transplanted there within a before-2030 planning horizon. There is one big exception, with defence procurement, a field in which NATO as such hasn't been a big player as we have seen in terms of arms transfers to Ukraine. The EU is more at home in this regard.

With Europe now spending adult money for the defence of the continent, NATO will necessarily become more European, whether or not the US fades ever more deeply into a 'leading from behind' role (to use the Obama White House's characterization of its 2011 decision to cease taking the lead in the campaign Gadhafi).

It is a rarely mentioned fact that more than **84%** of the close to **\$5 billion budget** of the organisation is paid for by the Europeans (plus Canada) versus less than **16%** by the US. Germany pays slightly more than the US and France and Britain together pony up more than **21%**. If NATO were a company, these stakeholder numbers would be reflected in the make-up of the C-suite and the division management figures.

Indeed, if the US left NATO — an unlikely outcome despite Trump's threat to do so during his first term- NATO's assets could be transferred in toto to the other allies.

The bigger challenge, both in NATO and within the EU, will be to generate apposite and timely strategic and military decisions in a collective bereft of a clear pace-setter in the form of traditional US leadership. Formulae like the unmentionable but quite real Quad (and more occasionally Quint) are consultative in nature, rather than decision-making. That is formally in the gift of NAC, but 32 cooks in the Evere kitchen can hardly run a war.

The addition of a European dimension of the French and British nuclear deterrents will become helpful, in addition to NATO nuclear sharing of US nuclear weapons based in Europe and lofted by the national air forces of Belgium, Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands. In the presence of political and strategic agreement will, this can actually happen quite rapidly, as displayed by the return of the UK to NATO nuclear sharing this year.



In conclusion, several points stick out:

- Speed is of the essence both in supporting Ukraine and in deterring and meeting the overall Russian ambition to dominate Europe. Of extreme urgency is the decision to use Russian assets currently frozen in Brussels.
- At present, the best option is to provide Ukraine with the means to ensure its sovereignty, independence, security and internationally recognized territorial integrity. For Europe as a whole this is morally, financially, militarily, and strategically infinitely preferable to a broadening of the war on the back of a dirty deal or as a result of a Russian theatre-level victory.
- The measures entailed by the basic scenarios at play are not mutually contradictory. This is maybe the most important finding.
- The defence of Ukraine and the defence of Europe are mutually complementary and reinforcing — and very much vice versa. Failure in supporting Ukraine will further Russian ambitions at Europe's expense. And visibly insufficient preparations for European defence as a whole will go hand in hand with Europe's failure to safeguard Ukraine.

Lviv, 21 November 2025

We welcome your feedback, suggestions and comments: info@uafp.eu

Find more materials on the website: www.uafp.eu

