



Strengthening European and Ukrainian defence partnership

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1. Europe and Ukraine in a bind while Russia escalates

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is an expression of a wider and earlier revanchist ambition, which became apparent in 2008 and 2014. It is seeking to turn back the strategic clock in Europe and to restore for Russia the control over Europe taken by the Soviet Union after WWII. This ambition also fits into the historical imperialist tradition of tsarist Russia in which Ukrainian and Polish cultural and political identity were suppressed.

Putting Ukraine under violent control is just the first and vital step in this obsession. NATO and the EU, as communities of democracies are the chosen enemies of Russia's kleptocratic and authoritarian system.

In order to preserve peace, Europe needs to rebuild the ability to defend and deter against Russian aggression, coercion, political and cognitive manipulation. After years of denial of the Russian threat, including a refusal to take defensive measures in response to Russia's violation of the INF treaty¹, **Europe is now faced with a double challenge: a gap in nuclear deterrence and a gap in conventional capabilities.** This creates a situation in which European nations are self-deterred from taking decisive measures to stop Russia in Ukraine. Meanwhile European democracies are being undermined by Russian support for extreme right parties loyal to the Kremlin.

The US under Trump has abandoned its leadership role in defending and protecting European security and democracy and has itself taken on authoritarian and kleptocratic characteristics. European nations will have to be the first responder in case of Russian aggression against a NATO state. US support is conditional and transactional and is unlikely to be massive in view of other US geopolitical priorities. The situation is even more complicated in case of an attack below the NATO art.5 threshold, which Russia could easily undertake.

Meanwhile European nations and Ukraine are still in need of advanced American weapons, communication and intelligence systems. Even buying American weapons offers no certainty due to depletion of US-stockpiles because of suddenly shifting priorities (Iran or China) and so-called ITAR restrictions.

Europe and Ukraine are today essentially on their own. Ramping up European defence industrial production and technology have become strategic necessities. The fragmentation of European defence markets an enduring obstacle to responding to these strategic necessities.

¹ Declaration by NATO Defence Ministers in June 2019 that NATO had no intention to deploy new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe in response to the violation by Russia of the INF-treaty by deploying the 9M729 (aka SSC-8) systems, which pose a significant risk to Allied security.



A further complicating factor is that while European nations are uniting politically around Ukraine, this is not yet translated into hard defence commitments nor in membership of NATO or the EU.

The mutual security agreements between Ukraine and European nations remain bilateral and do not contain hard defence commitments, but only pledges of bilateral financial and material support.

Europe – after an initial hesitation – has stepped up financial and military equipment support for Ukraine, particularly after the US abandonment, and has begun collaboration in the field of defence industry and technology with Ukraine. But European nations collectively are also not offering realistic security guarantees that could deter continued Russian aggression². This has allowed Russia to continue and expand its attacks.

Russia has not been very successful recently in conquering more Ukrainian territory and has suffered more than a million casualties of war (killed and wounded in battle). The war of attrition carries also economic and social costs. Russia's economy - after an initial boom - is faltering and Russia faces severe financial problems. Dissatisfaction in Russia is growing but is severely repressed.

In this dire situation Russia has chosen to divert the attention by further escalating the war, notably by expanding its massive missile attacks against civilian targets in Ukraine and by nuclear exercises in Belarus that are intended to intimidate neighbouring states. Meanwhile Russia is exponentially increasing the mass production of missiles and drones. The winter of 2025/2026 has been particularly harsh for Ukraine and its energy system has been severely damaged, darkening prospects for the coming winter. Given Russia's aggressive policies, there is no realistic prospect for peace. The war is likely to continue for another year or more, which represent a situation of real danger for Ukraine and Europe. There is obviously a need for a qualitative jump in their mutual cooperation.

While European heads of government may have the vision that European unity in this field is needed, they are too politically weakened at home to take collective political action that could fundamentally overcome the divisions at home and in Europe as a whole. Creative ways need to be found to integrate the defence efforts of Europe and Ukraine, so that acting together becomes a plausible military option in the future.

² The discussion about security guarantees by a European coalition was tied to an unlikely peace agreement negotiated by the Trump-team and even then depended on a clear US backstop that never materialized.

2. How to break the bind?

2.1. Moving forward faster

The Kiel institute has made a detailed study of what Europe would need to do in order to fill gaps in military capabilities. It concludes that this is not an unsurmountable task³. It is demonstrated that Europe will need 3-5 years in most cases and 50 billion euro per year. The time required is the problem, as Russia could strike before Europe considers itself politically and militarily ready.

In this spirit, steps are being taken to deal with the twin gaps in nuclear deterrence and conventional capabilities. The French nuclear deterrence initiative ('dissuasion avancée'⁴) has found support from 10 European partners and is a significant contribution to countering Russian nuclear intimidation and coercion. Also, in reaction to the sudden US decision to cancel the supply of conventional Deep Strike capabilities to Germany, initiatives have been taken by Berlin for European alternatives which include cooperation with Ukraine.

Generally, in response to decision at the Hague NATO Summit, several European nations are stepping up their defence expenditures, but this process is uneven (not followed by Allies such as Italy and Spain) and fragmented along sovereign national lines. NATO defence planning is based on this reality and as such does not contribute to defragmentation.

National defence industrial production is dominated by national monopolies and therefore is costly and slow in responding to the urgency. On the other hand many new start-ups are setting a trend of rapid innovation, stimulated by the Ukrainian example. Some of them exceptionally succeed in rapid scaling up in cooperation with Ukraine.

While European financial and materiel support for Ukrainian defence remains essential, Ukraine has also developed as a security provider for Europe, a defensive shield for Europe. Ukraine has become a strategic partner for many European nations in both defence and in the defence industry.

These facts hold only as long as Ukraine is politically independent and not under Kremlin control.

Ukraine, being under direct, massive and continuous attack and without Allies fighting alongside, has - out of necessity - revolutionised the way of war fighting. It has transformed the frontline into a kill zone of 20 km, has degraded Russian air defences and is striking Russian supply lines up to a distance of 100 km. It also has developed deep strike capabilities and is damaging Russia's military industry and its oil sector more

³ [Europäische Verteidigungsautonomie ist technologisch machbar, fiskalisch finanzierbar und politisch entscheidbar - Kiel Institut](#)

⁴ [Évolution de la dissuasion nucléaire française : vers une dissuasion avancée | Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants](#)

than 1000 km away. It has reorganised its army, stimulated innovation by scheme's as BRAVE1. It has become a leader in drone technology, layered air defence, battlefield management systems, medium and deep strike. Ukraine has multiplied defence startups and scaled exponentially production of defence solutions.

Its help is now sought in developing these capabilities in Europe, the US and in the Gulf.

2.2. Convergence in military operational practice

NATO Allies are scrambling to catch-up with Ukrainian innovation, creating a convergence in new military operational practice. This is particularly notable in the sectors of unmanned weapon systems such as (air, land, sea-) drones, missiles, sensors, electronic warfare and battlefield management systems able to connect the aforementioned elements. In the new defence ecosystem free market forces operating across borders will continue to drive innovation. This could contribute significantly to integration of defence markets, provided national governments do not unduly restrict it on grounds of sovereign control.

But the defence ecosystem of Ukraine remains unique with its broad support from the civil society for the defence effort, its immediate feedback loops between brigades and supporting companies and NGO's. As the US and Europe will not easily copy that ecosystem, Ukraine will continue to have a strategic contribution to European security. Therefore, there is scope for upgrading the existing partnerships.

Ukraine's recent successes in regaining the initiative by systematically interdicting logistical supply lines of the Russian army have weakened Russia's position at the frontlines and could presage an opportunity to take back control of some territory presently occupied by Russia. These successes are a further vindication for Europe to follow Ukraine's lead in innovation of the art of war.

2.3. Adapting the concept: a partnership architecture for regional hotspots

2.3.1. Focussing on the regional hot spots

A regional approach is more likely to result in collective political agreement to obtain unity and synergy in national policies. Such an approach would not replace but

complement existing overall NATO and EU frameworks. It would not undermine but rather reinforce Allied solidarity.

Russia's threat is not limited to the NATO's Eastern Flank but extends wider, including into the Middle East and Africa. But the risk of confrontation and escalation are particularly high in the following regions:

1. The Baltic region, where points of friction multiply and intensify (hybrid war pressure on the Baltic states, violation of air space, shadow fleet escorts, attacks on cable infra, air, naval and land threat to the States in the region). Nordic states have long tradition of working together and are particularly well placed to support the Baltic states in an integral fashion.

2. The politically diverse Black Sea region, where the lines of Russia's sphere of influence are shifting. The occupied Crimea has been transformed to a military Russian outpost threatening the wider region, until Ukraine largely neutralized it (for the time being). Freedom of navigation in the Black Sea is essential for Ukrainian exports and the viability of the Ukrainian economy. Russia also seeks to destabilise the broader region. The recent successes of Ukraine in interdicting Russian logistical supply lines in the occupied south of the country seem to offer opportunities for Ukraine to restore influence in the Black Sea region.

3. High North: This area remains crucial for the control of the Atlantic: the GIUK gap, Swabard, northern passage, but this is essentially an issue of transatlantic maritime cooperation.

Accordingly, the Baltic and Black Sea region both require a partnership architecture for collective security (PACS).

2.3.2. Seeking political agreement on PACS

As the threat perceptions are more uniformly shared at the regional level, such as in the Nordic/Baltic region and in the Black Sea region, it makes sense to seek collective political agreement on the regional level. This could result in a multilateral legal agreement to make it work in practice⁵.

As the risk of escalation and armed conflict between NATO and Russia is high in the Nordic/Baltic region, there is urgency. Moreover, the nations concerned have already a long tradition of cooperation in security. **It is therefore proposed to start with the group of the Nordic-Baltic 8. Such an agreement should be open to other interested**

⁵ See also SCEEUS paper no 5, 15 April 2026: "Deepening NB8-Ukraine Defence Industrial Cooperation: A Strategic Win-Win for European Security by Klara Lindström, Vladyslav Panov & Stanislav Boiko



Allies, for instance those involve in the Joint Expeditionary Force (UK and NL) and those sharing a coastline in the Baltic sea such as Poland and Germany.

For the politically diverse Black Sea region, as a first step, Romania, supported by France, could intensify its partnership with Ukraine. This should include support for Moldovan democracy. In a second stage this effort should be broadened to include Bulgaria, Greece and Türkiye.

2.3.3. Command and control

In a recent study by a group of well known think tanks, chaired by Finland's former president Niinistö, three pathways were identified to obtain "More Europe in Defence"⁶.

- **The first** is a Europeanisation of NATO, including its command structure
- **The second** is establishment of a European Security Council supported by appropriate command structures, operational capacities and dedicated budget
- **The third** is EU-led defence cooperation.

The three pathways are institutionally distinct but have in common the need to create regional groupings. Multinational Corps sized formations such as JEF, NL/GE Army Corps and the Eurocorps, with the infrastructure able to integrate air, land and/or sea operations could be well used as new operational command centres for regional theatres.

Finally, we should consider that, as Russia is further developing its hostile drone activity against the Baltic States, Poland and Romania, diverting drones from the Ukrainian theatre to these countries, there is a need for operational coordination of air defence between those countries and Ukraine. This could necessitate an integration of air defence efforts between regional European commands and their equivalents in Ukraine.

2.3.4. Conclusion: Multilateral agreement on PACS

In conclusion: The convergence in military operational practice between Europe and Ukraine (para 2.2.), the need to deal collectively with regional hotspots such as the Baltic and Black Sea regions (2.3.1), the greater uniformity in regional threat perceptions (2.3.2.) and the need to adapt command arrangements in view of the cross border threats (2.3.3), together provide a solid rationale for achieving a previously unattainable agreement on common military requirements for the defence capabilities

⁶ More Europe in Defence, report by Steve Blockmans from a task force consisting of CEPS, Clingendael, RUSI and IEP, May 20026



to be developed and produced. These products would not need to originate all from the region, but could take advantage of the specialisation in the whole of Europe and Ukraine. Non-EU countries such as the UK, Norway and Canada should be included among the potential partners and suppliers.

Such a [Partnership Architecture for Collective Security \(PACS\)](#) would represent a paradigm shift in defence policy.

As governments control the budgets and the requirements for procurement, there is also a need for a multilateral intergovernmental agreement to opening national defence markets for cross border cooperation and investment. Governments have to harmonise by multilateral agreement regulations that hinder growth, so that defence markets are opening up for cross border investments. This is also necessary to enable innovative startups to grow and scale internationally.

In so doing Europe can significantly reduce the costly and ineffective fragmentation of the European defence market and restore its capability to deter and defend in an affordable and speedy way.