The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Shields and Spears

Nuclear-Conventional Force Balancing and the European Deterrence Architecture

Davis Ellison and Tim Sweijs

January 2026

The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Shields and Spears

Nuclear-Conventional Force Balancing and the European Deterrence Architecture

Authors:
Davis Ellison and Tim Sweijs

Quality Assurance:
Frank Bekkers

Contributors:
Pierre-Etienne Courrier, Julie Ebrard and Laurence Krakow

January 2026

The research for and production of this report has been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, not should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

The European deterrence architecture, based in part on American extended nuclear deterrence and forward deployments on the continent for over three quarters of a century, is set to change. After a four-year interregnum under the Biden administration in which the American security commitment was "ironclad", the second Trump administration has shaken NATO Europe once more. European leaders had four years to prepare for the possible renewal of American retrenchment, but this time was less than well spent. European armed forces have also been slow to adapt in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, primarily focused on filling shortfalls that existed prior to the outbreak of the war.

Defence planning is as much about politics and political decisions as it is about the translation of higher-level political objectives into force postures. Establishing a more independent European posture requires first and foremost an explicit political decision to move away from American dependency. An effective European force posture to deter Russia should consist of deterrence by denial based on conventional military capabilities and deterrence by punishment based on conventional deep precision strike capabilities complemented by more tightly coordinated UK and French nuclear arsenals as ultimate backing. This regionally specialised dual "shield and spear" posture allows for geographical groupings to offer and pay for different force packages that can enhance one another in different domains. It can benefit from a close military relationship with Ukraine, which now possesses the largest and most combat-experienced force in Europe outside of Russia. It prioritises particular tasks across the European theatre and aligns concepts and capabilities to these tasks. They are:

- Ensuring a strong defence of the Central Region, including the Baltic States, Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Scandinavian countries.
- Isolating Kaliningrad.
- Denying use of the North Sea and the wider Atlantic beyond.
- Denying the Black Sea and closing off the Bosphorus.
- Protecting from air, missile, and drone attacks on population centres.
- Securing lines of communication and port security in the Mediterranean.

This enhanced posture can hedge against US retrenchment, while aiming to limit escalation risks from Russia during a crisis. Furthermore, by emphasising conventional capabilities as vital components of both deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment, and relegating nuclear questions to issues of strategy and doctrine discussions between London and Paris, it relieves escalatory pressures that any discussions of a Polish or German nuclear weapons programme, even if only latent, would cause. Europe can only defend itself if it can secure its most vulnerable points and vital approaches. Ultimately, it can only defend itself if it can find a more confident place in the world in which it starts actively shaping the strategic environment in its own favour, rather than remaining a reactive actor.

1. Introduction

The European deterrence architecture, based on American extended nuclear deterrence and forward deployments on the continent for over quarter of a century, is set to change. Despite a four-year interregnum under the Biden administration in which the American security commitment was "ironclad",[1] the second Trump administration has shaken NATO Europe once more. Though European leaders had four years to prepare for the possible renewal of American retrenchment, but this time was less than well spent. European armed forces have also been slow to adapt in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, primarily focused on filling shortfalls that existed prior to the outbreak of the war. Europe thus remains vulnerable to the whims of the 47th President of the US.

Going forward the US is unlikely to re-centre European security.

Indeed, this second Trump administration clearly has a reduced desire to engage in European security affairs. In the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), the administration has shifted to a focus on "homeland defense" and the Western Hemisphere, with an underlying focus on China that may reassure some allies such as South Korea or Japan, depending on its execution in practice, but that leaves Europe in the cold.[2] Over the past year, multiple rounds of US-Russian negotiations about Ukraine have been held in both Saudi Arabia and Alaska without Ukrainian or European presence. The historic 5% defence and infrastructure investment pledge from The Hague Summit in the summer of 2025 came about after Trump put a significant amount of pressure on European allies and is seemingly based on the logic of future US force reductions.[3] Also in the summer of 2025, European leaders accepted American imposition of 15% of trade tariffs on European exports to the US in a US-EU trade deal (note: not a treaty) following what can only be described as a coercive campaign from Washington.[4] The Trump administration has also continued to threaten the territorial sovereignty of Greenland and Canada. The NSS also openly discusses intervening in Europe's domestic politics to ensure "patriotic" parties come to power, drive a wedge within the EU, and prevent "civilizational erasure".[5] It would be imprudent to consider that both general attitude and actual actions will suddenly shift to be more pro-European or Atlanticist. Given the continued, more fundamental shift towards the Pacific by successive presidential administrations, going forward the US is unlikely to re-centre European security.

On the eastern front, Russia has continued to diversify its nuclear arsenal in an arms race with the U.S that is slowly but steadily building up. Although this modernisation has been slow,

1 'Statement by President Biden on the Applications to NATO by Finland and Sweden', Biden White House Archives, 18 May 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/18/statement-by-president-biden-on-the-applications-to-nato-by-finland-and-sweden/.

2 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', The White House, November 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

3 Eric Ciaramella and Eric Green, *Ukraine, NATO, and War Termination*, Council Special Initiative on Securing Ukraine's Future (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025), https://www.cfr.org/report/ukraine-nato-and-war-termination.

4 Camille Gijs, 'EU Concedes Trade Deal with Trump Falls Short of WTO Rules', Politico EU, 24 September 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-concedes-trade-deal-with-us-donald-trump-falls-short-of-wto-rules-sabine-weyand/.

5 Meghann Myers, '"Make Europe Great Again" and More from a Longer Version of the National Security Strategy', Defense One, 9 December 2025, https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2025/12/make-europe-great-again-and-more-longer-version-national-security-strategy/410038/; 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', 25.

particularly in the development of "non-strategic" systems,[6] Russia's primary progress has been in the qualitative and quantitative improvement in delivery systems through a suite of missiles. This has included a focus on novel systems like the *Burevestnik* nuclear-powered cruise missile, the improved RS-28 *Sarmat* intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), and the *Poseidon* nuclear unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV).[7]

According to a variety of assessments from intelligence agencies and thinktanks, the Russian armed forces are likely to be in an improved, rather than degraded position by 2030.[8] The reactivation of the Leningrad Military District in response to Finland joining NATO, and the stationing of more than five land divisions in it, has greatly strengthened Russia's western borders with NATO. Its forces will also have a dearth of direct experience and lessons from sustained, high-intensity, theatre-level warfare, something that NATO forces do not possess.[9] Even though its losses in Ukraine are considerable. a reconstituted Russia and an absentee US will be able to pose a credible military threat to European forces.

Indeed, European forces face significant shortfalls, which have been well-rehearsed in the professional literature over the past decade, and whose addressal remains a work in progress. Across the continent, forces remain structured to generate for out-of-area operations, reminiscent of a time when it was acceptable to cannibalise from units to allow at most a single national brigade to deploy. This focus on readiness to deploy for a mission far from Europe's borders has left many services severely short of personnel and equipment. Take for example 3 UK Division, the core of the British Army and an important element in NATO plans. Put by RUSI's Jack Watling, 3 UK Division has been hollowed out to the point that it can deploy, at most, a single brigade and only with significant effort. It lacks logistical and maintenance equipment, has no infantry fighting vehicles, a dwindling number of tanks, and has no drones or electronic warfare capability.[10] The core of the British Army, considered one of the most capable in NATO outside the US, is effectively a paper tiger.

Meanwhile, the US-Russian arms control regime has largely collapsed, with both states (along with China), breaking their Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments to disarmament, and abrogating or suspending their adherence to all major arms control treaties including the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM), Intermediate Nuclear Forces, Conventional Forces in Europe, and New START treaties in recent years. Nuclear weapons states around the world have accelerated qualitative and quantitative modernisation programmes. The Trump administration has even considered a return to explosive nuclear testing.[11] Europe has been left with no regime in place with Moscow upon which to build stability, except for the Organisation for Security and

6 Hans Kristensen et al., *Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2025*, Nuclear Notebook (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2025), 509, https://thebulletin.org/premium/2025-05/russian-nuclear-weapons-2025/.

7 Dara Massicot, *Russian Military Reconstitution: 2030 Pathways and Prospects*, The Return of Global Russia: A Reassessment of the Kremlin's International Agenda (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024), https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/09/russian-military-reconstitution-2030-pathways-and-prospects?lang=en; Kristensen et al., *Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2025*.

8 Massicot, *Russian Military Reconstitution: 2030 Pathways and Prospects*.

9 Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, 'Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence? Strategic Culture and Coercion Innovations', *International Security* 49, no. 3 (2025): 50–83; Stephane de Spiegeleire and Hryhorii Pavlenko, *A Militarily Regenerated Russia as a Future Threat to NATO? Perspectives from Russia Itself* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025), https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/A-Militarily-Regenerated-Russia-as-a-Future-Threat-to-NATO-HCSS-2025.pdf.

10 Jack Watling, 'The British Army's Armoured Division Does Not Really Exist', *The Telegraph*, 18 February 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/02/18/british-army-3-uk-division-tanks-armour-artillery/.

11 Steven E Miller, *Hard Times for Arms Control: What Can Be Done?*, Arms Control (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022), https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/AC1-Hard-Times-For-Arms-Control-2022-HCSS.pdf.

Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), in which actual cooperation has grinded to a halt because of Russia's war against Ukraine.

Europe therefore needs to actively shape a new defence deterrence architecture, having relied for too long on the Americans to do this for them. In this study we specifically zoom in on a European posture to uphold deterrence in the European theatre, and a first cut assessment of the concepts and capabilities that underpin it. When we discuss the European deterrence architecture, it is important to stress several factors. First and foremost is the reference to 'European'. This could be taken to mean collective action by the European Union or European members of NATO within the structures of those organisations. When we use the term European, it is taken as a more flexible shorthand to refer to coalitions of European states regardless of whether it is in the context of a European pillar within NATO, as part of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, or a Coalition of the Willing. In the case of nuclear matters, it is most often an exclusive reference to the United Kingdom and France.

Establishing a more independent European posture requires first and foremost an explicit political decision to move away from American dependency.

Relatedly, there is the role of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Armed Forces are as of writing arguably the most militarily capable and certainly the most battle hardened on the continent next to Russia. Ukraine is on a slow path towards EU membership and is deeply aligned and cooperating with many European states. Importantly, any future Russian calculations against any European state will have to take Ukraine into account. A total pullout of all US forces and withdrawal from NATO, is often used as an analytical scenario. Denmark must also now consider the possibility of military coercion from Washington involving Greenland. Yet it also appears the US intends to continue playing some role in Europe, if only viewed through the lens of stabilisation with Russia. The study seeks to delineate a posture for 'Europe' whilst appropriately scoping the Ukrainian and American role in future balances.

More fundamentally, this study is about the big political choices European leaders need to confront at this moment in time. It is time for deliberate choices by European leaders in terms of "future forces, force postures, and force capabilities."[12] Defence planning is often seen as a technical endeavour that is relegated to defence planning staffs. But defence planning is as much about politics and political decisions as it is about the translation of higher-level political objectives into force postures. As characterised by "strategy's evangelist" Colin Gray defence planning involves "preparations for the defense of a polity in the future (near-, medium-, and far-term)".[13] Magnus Håkenstad and Kristian Knus-Larsen describe defence planning as the "process by which a given state arrives at political decisions regarding the future development of the structure, organisation and capabilities of their armed forces.[14] Ultimately, future force postures evolve around a state's survival.

Establishing a more independent European posture requires therefore first and foremost an explicit political decision to move away from American dependency, instead of muddling through and responding to the whims of American leaders. This shift towards greater independence in defending Europe from Russia would not be easy, politically, financially, or militarily. An effective European force posture to deter Russia should consist on deterrence by denial based on conventional military capabilities and deterrence by punishment based on

12 Miller, *Hard Times for Arms Control: What Can Be Done?* Paul K. Davis (2018) Defense planning when major changes are needed, *Defence Studies*, 18:3, 374-390, 375

13 Freedman, Lawrence (2021) "Strategy's Evangelist," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 74 : No. 1 , Article 4; Colin Gray, *Strategy and Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty*; Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 4.

14 Knus Larsen, Kristian and Magnus Håkenstad (2012) *Long-term defence planning: A comparative study of seven countries* (Oslo: Oslo Files on Defence and Security, No.5, Volume 1, 2012), p.12.

conventional deep precision strike capabilities complemented by more tightly coordinated UK and French nuclear arsenals as ultimate backing.

As argued by Emma Ashford, this regionally specialised dual "shield and spear" posture allows for geographical groupings to offer and pay for different force packages that can enhance one another in different domains.[15] It also prioritises tasks across the European theatre and align concepts to these tasks. In this study we argue that this dual-pillared posture will help Europe maintain strategic stability on the continent by independently dissuading future Russian aggression, across various scenarios of US retrenchment. There are conventional, nuclear, and arms control considerations in these questions. Further, any choices will have an impact on NATO and the EU, which will also be considered. We argue that evolving, independent European security arrangements should prioritise strengthening conventional capabilities within specialised, regional coalitions of European states. We take a more sceptical view of potential European nuclear sharing arrangements, noting possible Russian perceptions of the French and British nuclear deterrents and the political and technical barriers. Finally, we argue that from a position of strength, a sustainable European defence architecture built on a new arms control regime, one that is negotiated, verified, and updated independently of Washington, is needed. It is ultimately Europeans that share a landmass with Russia, and will have to find pathways for coexistence, however uneasy.

A Note on Method

This study has built upon past HCSS and external research, specifically studies on crisis and escalation dynamics,[16] escalation scenarios and risk reduction measures,[17] inadvertent escalation[18] deterrence, dissuasion, deterrence by denial mechanisms, and deterrence of Russia[19], competitive arms control,[20] arms racing and emerging technologies,[21] conventional counterforce,[22] and Europe's nuclear options.[23] It has thereby benefited from years of prior fieldwork in Washington, Brussels, London, Paris, Kyiv, Seoul and Taipei. It further uses data analysis, archival research, interviews, and surveys. This past work is cited throughout. In

15 Emma Ashford, *First Among Equals: US Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World* (Yale University Press, 2025), 157.

16 https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/HCSS_StratMon_Back_to_the_Brink-4.pdf

17 https://hcss.nl/news/new-snapshot-preventing-the-unthinkable-escalation-scenarios-and-risk-reduction-measures-for-russia-and-nato-following-the-war-in-ukraine/

18 Paul van Hooft et al., *Pathways to Disaster: Russia's War against Ukraine and the Risks of Inadvertent Nuclear Escalation*, Strategic Stability: Deterrence and Arm Control (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023), https://hcss.nl/report/pathways-to-disaster-russias-war-against-ukraine-and-the-risks-of-inadvertent-nuclear-escalation/.

19 Rob de Wijk et al., *Hoe moet Rusland worden afgeschrikt?* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022), https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Hoe-Moet-Rusland-Worden-Afgeschrikt-HCSS-2023.pdf; Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs, *Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies (TMC Asser Press, 2020).

20 Paul van Hooft and Davis Ellison, *Good Fear, Bad Fear: How European Defence Investments Could Be Leveraged to Restart Arms Control Negotiations with Russia*, Strategic Stability: Deterrence and Arm Control (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023), https://hcss.nl/report/good-fear-bad-fear-how-european-defence-investments-could-be-leveraged-to-restart-arms-control-negotiations-with-russia/.

21 Davis Ellison et al., *Deterring or Spiralling? Emerging Technologies, Strategic Stability, and Prospects for Sino-European Arms Control*, PROGRESS (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025), https://hcss.nl/report/deterring-or-spiralling-emerging-technologies-strategic-stability-sino-european-arms-control/.

22 Davis Ellison, 'The Role of Conventional Counterforce in NATO Strategy: Historical Precedents and Present Opportunities', *Georgetown Security Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2024): 1–11.

23 Davis Ellison et al., *From the Euronuke to a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone: Europe's Options in an Era of Eroding American Extended Deterrence*, PROGRESS (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025), https://hcss.nl/report/from-the-euronuke-to-a-nuclear-weapon-free-zone/.

addition to this, novel field work was conducted through site visits and discussions at NATO Headquarters, multinational closed-door discussions in tandem to the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, site visits to London to meet with Defence and FCDO Ministry staffs of the UK government and fellow researchers, and an event held with French nuclear experts and policymakers in September 2025.

While many of these events and consultations were held under the Chatham House rule, they each nevertheless elicited important insights that are reflected throughout the Chapters below. Taken together, they have provided insights on actual policy practices and discussions being held across London, Paris, Washington, and Brussels on nuclear matters, precisely the discussions this study aims to inform.

2. European Debates on Deterrence and Stability: A Brief Historical Primer

Fears of American abandonment and the need for more independent European defence are hardly novel. NATO itself was preceded by several other alliances between 1947 and 1948, with both the Treaty of Dunkirk (between France and the UK) and later the Treaty of Brussels (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the UK), concluded specifically out of fear of a resurgent post-war Germany. Continued American presence after the war was hardly a given, as was its subsequent NATO membership, both being a result of tense negotiation between the Truman White House and Congress.[24]

The defence politics of Europe were not quite so simple as balancing to deter the Soviet Union.

Early debates on independent European deterrence were in part bound up in questions regarding Europe's new role in the world. With fading ambitions of empire, and with the rapid defeats of the Second World War fresh in the minds of leaders and citizens alike, defence discussions came to be focused on deterring direct territorial aggression from the Soviet Union. Indeed, efforts to maintain imperial holdings by European powers often faced criticism as being a distraction from the core effort of defence on the continent.

Yet, the defence politics of Europe were not quite so simple as balancing to deter the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. West Germany and its role in Europe was also core a concern for leaders in the context of the broader conflict between East and West. Historian Marc Trachtenberg argues that this was the material point at the core of Europe's security arrangements, noting that "a truly independent Western Europe would have to include a nuclear-armed West German state...such a state was unacceptable to the Soviet leadership... West Germany would remain non-nuclear and the Soviets would live with the status quo in Europe...US forces would have to remain in Europe."[25]

[24] Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 11–27.

[25] Marc Trachtenberg, 'The Rules-Based International Order: A Historical Analysis', *International Security* 50, no. 2 (2025): 50. For the broader see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement: 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

After the Cold War, there was a renewed effort on the part of Europeans to achieve some level of autonomy after the failings by European powers in the face of the successive Balkan wars in the 1990s. In this case, the aim was to bolster European capabilities after it became painfully clear that Europe relied on the US to lead militarily. This sparked a burgeoning of different initiatives including the creation of a Common Foreign and Security Policy in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the Petersberg Declaration (1992) outlining crisis management missions, the establishment of various mechanisms such as the Franco-German Eurocorps (1992) and the German-Netherlands Corps (1995), the Anglo-French St. Malo Declaration (1998) calling for "the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises,"[26] the Helsinki Headline Goals (1999) to create the forces as required by the Petersberg Declaration, Berlin Plus (2002) arrangements to enable the EU to draw on NATO assets in operations, followed by the inauguration of the EU battlegroup concept (2004). This culminated in the strengthening of an EU common security and defence policy in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007).

Throughout this post-Balkan ambition, concerns about the impact of a stronger European defence identity undermining the transatlantic relationship and NATO persisted. The newer members of both the EU and NATO were particularly concerned, with the view across capitals that the anchor of this new era of *Westbindung* remained the US Stark divisions grew, as did American opposition to a stronger Europe, followed by a diplomatic crisis over the legality of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, during which Europe split between 'the old' and 'the new'.[27]

This chapter covers the above-mentioned periods in greater detail, focusing on the questions of extended nuclear deterrence, the building of independent European capabilities, and the reflection of these debates in Europe's institutional landscape. This is to contextualise the remainder of the study within the longer debates on similar questions, highlighting that many of the same questions today were as difficult to answer 75 years ago.

2.1. The British and French Nuclear Deterrents

Doubts about the viability of US extended nuclear deterrence are hardly new. British military officials recommended as early as 1946 that London required an independent deterrent, particularly after the US suspended cooperation with the UK shortly after the Second World War.[28] The French programme began later, being authorised in 1954. US intervention against the UK, France, and Israel during the Suez Crisis as well as the refusal to support French troops in Indochina by the Eisenhower administration led to the acceleration of the French project.[29]

France would go on to maintain a fully independent triad (air-, sea-, and ground-launched weapons) until 1996, though having now decommissioned the land component. The UK maintained a primarily sea-based deterrent, though both in the Cold War and today the

[26] https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/franco_british_st_malo_declaration_4_december_1998-en-f3cd16fb-fc37-4d52-936f-c8e9bc80f24f.html?

[27] Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

[28] Humphrey Wynn, *RAF Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Forces, Their Origins, Roles and Deployment, 1946–1969. A Documentary History* (The Stationery Office, 1997), 16–18.

[29] Scott D. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb', *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 76–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539273.

deterrent was at least in part dependent on US support, with the missiles aboard UK SSBNs (nuclear-armed submarines) being built and maintained by the Americans even though the warheads are British. In both countries, the sole person able to authorise a nuclear strike was the president of France and prime minister of the UK, though there has been historical evidence to show that in both countries there was devolution to some military officers in certain periods.[30] Both states essentially operated a 'minimum deterrent' strategy that relied on counter-value (population and economic targets) doctrine against the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states.[31]

Coordination from London and Paris with other European allies throughout the Cold War experienced changes over the course of the Cold War. While the UK at least partly pledge its deterrent role to NATO's defence, France was a more complicated picture. France never left NATO, but it did leave the integrated military structure in 1966, due in part to differences with the US over alliance nuclear policy and strategy. Further, it never, and does not as of this writing, participate in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). Behind the scenes, however, successive French officials noted that a Soviet attack against NATO territory, particularly a nuclear attack, would most likely lead to a French nuclear counterattack.

The notion of not being able to rely on Washington in the event of a crisis has always featured in discussions on Europe's nuclear posture.

The relationship of the French and British nuclear deterrents to both US nuclear strategy and in which situation they might be used has been subject to much debate over the decades. Given the forward deployment of US low-yield ground nuclear weapons with British troops in West Germany, the UK deterrent was in some ways extended by default onto the continent, though it is an open question under which circumstances SSBN strikes against the Soviet Union would have been authorised. The French deterrent was not considered a "warfighting" force in the same way, being considered political weapons to be used to prevent enemy forces from encroaching on French territory (i.e., a Soviet Army reaching the Franco-German border) or from striking the French homeland with nuclear missiles.[32]

The difference between the French and British deterrents with the American one was, of course, that what was considered a nuclear theatre of operations for the Americans was (and is) a matter of homeland defence for London and Paris. For Washington, the European theatre was envisaged as only one theatre of what would have been a global nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union. This was even the case during the era of flexible response in the latter half of the Cold War, though the historical evidence does show that such flexible thinking never actually appeared in US military plans. Europe was always one theatre of many in a general war plan, a plan in which there was only one step on the escalation ladder, global strikes against Soviet targets.[33]

The history of the British and French programmes highlights that while dependency on the US to deter the Soviet Union has always been considerable, there has always been independent thought on deterring a Soviet/Russian attack against Europe. The notion of not being able to rely on Washington in the event of a crisis has always featured in discussions on Europe's nuclear posture, if only so behind closed doors. Discussion about European deterrence including the nuclear component is now bursting out in the open because of

30 Benoît Pelopidas, *France: Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications* (Technology for Global Security, 2019), https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03456118v1/file/2019-06-pelopidas-france-nc3-special-report.pdf.

31 Bruno Tertrais, *A Comparison between US, UK and French Nuclear Policies and Doctrines* (Sciences Po Centre de recherches internationales, 2007), https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/art_bt.pdf.

32 Austin Cooper, 'Eurostrategic Forces: Transatlantic Nuclear Cooperation and the Making of Superpower Détente', Guest Lecture, Leiden University, 29 October 2025.

33 Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 30–57.

the enormous uncertainty created by US President Trump about his lack of commitment to Europe's security. This is also a useful reminder that while Moscow has and remains the primary focus, political factors within Europe and within the transatlantic relationship are just as likely to shape strategy and posture as assessments of the Kremlin's capabilities or intentions. Whether managing occasionally tense relations with West Germany then or navigating the European Union's internal fraught relations now, a certain insularity is a permanent feature of strategic dialogues on the continent. This can lead to strategic compromises that while perhaps incoherent vis-à-vis Russia may play an important role in holding Europe's institutions together.

2.2. Cold War Scenarios and European Deterrence and Defence

Cold War scenarios for European defence always featured massive reinforcement from the United States. There was indeed very little planning for possibilities that the US would not arrive in force in the event of war. The planning amongst European forces which were intended to blunt a Warsaw Pact attack and buy time for North American reinforcements is worth considering here. Discussions on these matters from the 1950s onwards to the end of the Cold War are indicative in that they provide a sense of what level of posture was considered necessary to prevent the conventional collapse of NATO.

Throughout the Cold War, it was generally envisaged that the opening phases of any NATO-Warsaw Pact war would be conventionally waged by European forces, supplemented by locally deployed American units. A US Congress Conventional Defense Study Group report from 1988 specifically identified that the first 48 hours of any war would almost exclusively be fought by the West German *Bundeswehr* and the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR), alongside elements of the US Army's V Corps.[34] This is of course a relative statement, however. During the Cold War the US had on land three fully deployed divisions in West Germany, along with a nuclear-equipped field artillery brigade. This is alongside twelve Bundeswehr and four British Army o the Rhine (BAOR) divisions. This is without even considering the contributions from Dutch, Belgian, Italian, Greek, Canadian, Danish, Norwegian, or Turkish forces, much less the combined air and maritime forces on the continent. Suffice to say, NATO's Cold War forward deployment of blunting forces by Europeans was significant in scale.

Of central importance to the Cold War context is the nuclear shadow looming over any NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict. Virtually every strategic and military concept from the period envisages that just about every conflict imaginable would escalate to deliberate nuclear use. Most often, also in NATO's own exercise series (most especially the FALLEX and WINTEX political-military exercises), NATO forces used nuclear weapons first. Indeed, across exercises NATO escalated to nuclear use to stop Warsaw Pact advances in as short as 24 hours (FALLEX 68) and at the longest after seven days of conventional warfare (WINTEX 87). In nearly all exercises, it was assumed that within at least a week of fighting, selective nuclear use had been initiated.[35]

---

34 Charles A. Bowsher, 'NATO-Warsaw Pact: US and Soviet Perspectives of the Conventional Force Balance', United States General Accounting Office, December 1988, 30, https://www.gao.gov/assets/nsiad-89-23a.pdf.

35 Davis Ellison, 'Alliance Politics: Revisiting NATO's History Through Civil-Military Relations' (PhD, King's College London, 2025), 194, https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/348083599/2025_Ellison_Davis_1766970_ethesis.pdf.

What can this Cold War thinking provide today? First and foremost is a sense of scale. Across Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania (NATO's eastern flank line), there is a shared capacity to field approximately twelve-fifteen divisions of ground forces, across the entire front.[36] This pales in comparison ed to the Cold War height of over twenty European and US divisions in West Germany alone, and a total of 88 theatre-wide, placed against 167 Warsaw Pact divisions.[37] Historians dispute this high number of divisions however, particularly when considering the actual versus reported readiness and force numbers of the Soviet forces.[38] While ground force strength was not and is not an ideal way to assess military strength, and the current Russian Ground Forces do not come near the heights of Soviet power, the current correlation of forces that could be used against NATO's eastern flank nevertheless outnumbers that of the alliance. The overall takeaway is that Europe will need much larger force numbers independent of US retrenchment.

Second is the assumed role of nuclear weapons. Though contemporary NATO conventional scenarios downplay the role of nuclear weapons, prolonged direct combat between nuclear-armed adversaries of course risks nuclear escalation, and the Russian leadership has shown repeatedly in recent years it does not fear to use nuclear threats, based on a much more developed nuclear discourse within a nuclear community that is tightly knit civilian defence experts, the military, and even the Orthodox Church.[39] Even if Europe emphasises deterrence by conventional means, as we argue it should, it will need to urgently work on its nuclear IQ. Finally, all these forces came at significant costs, both political and financial. Many NATO allies had mandatory military conscription, leading to large active ground forces supplemented by reserves. Coupled to this was an established network of 'civilian wartime agencies' (CWAR) which could be activated in the event of war. This was all underpinned by at least 3% spent on defence across allies, with some even reaching nearly 12%.[40] The defence spending targets as agreed upon at the NATO Summit in the Hague in July 2025 are considerable but certainly in line with historical patterns.

2.3. From Security and Defence Identity to Strategic Autonomy

After the Cold War, largely in response to the failures in the Balkans in the first half of the 1990s, initiatives began to burgeon to increase the ability for European states to act more independently. Many of these initiatives were explicit in their aim to not duplicate NATO structures. One of the first initiatives, the 1996 European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI), was a NATO-led initiative to allow for NATO assigned assets to be deconflicted with needs coming from Western European Union operations if needed.[41] Attempting to balance European Union and NATO efforts would remain a common feature of European thinking until today.

Differences over the relative roles of NATO and the EU arose quickly, with divisions between capitals over the future relationship and reliance on the US In 1999, French President Jacques

36 *The Military Balance 2025*, The Military Balance (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), 125:52–151.

37 'NATO and the Warsaw Pact 1984-Force Comparisons', NATO Archives, 1 January 1984, 7–10, NATO Archives, https://archives.nato.int/nato-and-warsaw-pact-force-comparisons.

38 Matthew A. Evangelista, 'Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised', *International Security* 7, no. 3 (1982): 110–38.

39 Dima Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

40 Joseph E. Kelley, 'US-NATO Burden Sharing: Allies' Contributions to Common Defense During the 1980s', United States General Accounting Office, October 1990, 24, https://www.gao.gov/assets/nsiad-91-32.pdf.

41 'European Security and Defence Identity', EUR-Lex, accessed 9 December 2025, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/european-security-and-defence-identity.html.

Chirac, echoing his predecessor de Gaulle, argued that the European Union "could not fully exist until it possessed autonomous capacity for action in the area of defence."[42] This issue of autonomy, nowadays discussed with reference to strategic autonomy, specifically from the United States, remains the core debate between the traditionally Atlanticist European states and those that look to end traditional dependency on the US military.

By 2002, this had evolved into the Berlin Plus agreement, itself underpinned by the NATO-EU Declaration on ESDP (European Security and Defence Policy). Under Berlin Plus, NATO planning capabilities and assets could be used in support of EU crisis management operations. This also extended to the inclusion of possible EU-led contingency operations into NATO defence planning. What was particularly novel about Berlin Plus however, is that it updated the terms of reference for NATO's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR), traditionally a senior UK military officer, to allow for DSACEUR to command EU troops using NATO command assets.

Transatlantic tensions over the US invasion of Iraq, particularly with France and Germany, renewed debates about autonomy in European defence. Within Europe, debates became heated between what the late US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld described as "Old Europe" (France and Germany) and "New Europe" (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Baltic states).[43] While "Old Europe" opposed the US invasion, including by preventing UN sanction for the invasion, "New Europe" joined the US by providing troops.[44] It was an imperfect division however, as many "Old Europe" states also joined the invasion or offered support, including Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands. For those who did join, there was often significant domestic opposition to participation, and by 2006 most Old Europe states had withdrawn and shifted forces to the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the rift over Iraq was deep enough to spur renewed discussions in Berlin and Paris about a more autonomous European foreign and security policy. In response to this rift, the first High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Javier Solana and his staff developed the European Security Strategy. This strategy, explicitly noting that Europe does not face the "threat of invasion", called for a focus on crisis management and conflict resolution, the primary threat then being terrorist groups.[45]

Though evolving over the following decades, this focus on crisis management within the European Union and European states was the driver of more autonomous action, especially across the African continent. But there too the dependency on the Americans turned out to be enormous, as the French and British leaders discovered in 2011 when they initiated a military campaign against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddaffi, with the US ostensibly leading from behind, which in turn transitioned into a NATO mission. European forces were very reliant on the US for command and control and suppression of enemy air defence and on ammunition

---

42 *European Defence Initiatives: Hearing before the UK Parliament Defence Committee* (1999), https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1999-12-13/debates/9244b5ba-8ded-4db5-a210-0850f4caef51/EuropeanDefenceInitiatives.

43 Donald Rumsfeld, 'Secretary Rumsfeld Briefs at the Foreign Press Center', Department of Defense, 22 January 2003, http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=1330.

44 On the divide between the US and Europe, see Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*.

45 Javier Solana, 'European Security Strategy', Publications Office of the European Union, 8 December 2003, 9, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15895-2003-INIT/en/pdf.

stocks that were quickly depleted.[46] In the period 2003-2025, the European Union undertook seven military and nine civilian missions across Africa, with particularly intensive efforts in the Sahel since the 2010s. Despite these operations being European-led, there was still a serious dependency on the US military. France's counter-terrorism mission Operation *Barkhane* in that region from 2014-2022 was almost entirely dependent on US airlift to move forces around the region and even to and from Europe.[47] Despite US support, and despite *Barkhane* overlapping with both EU and UN missions in the region, it has been widely judged a failure.[48] In the face of military coups across the Sahel, a surge in terrorist activity, and even an increase in Russian influence, France and its European allies have now largely withdrawn from the region. It was an ignominious end to Europe's most intensive effort at strategic autonomy in its own backyard.

In the intervening years, the European Defence Agency was established (2004), followed by the European External Action Service (2010), the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (2017), and the Commission's Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (2019). Though a significant amount of institutional development had occurred, this was not underpinned by an equivalent level of development in capabilities. US defence industry continued to supply and service many aircraft and provide important enabling capabilities such as strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling aircrafts, larger drones, space-based intelligence, and command and control systems.[49] Major shortfalls in personnel and munitions persisted. Furthermore, after Brexit, the Berlin Plus arrangement under which a British DSACEUR could command EU troops became unfeasible.[50] European-level development continued to remain a work in progress.

Alongside these institutional developments, new funding and procurement schemes were being developed to more coherently develop collective capabilities. Prior to the onset of full-scale war of February 2022, the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) were the two most prominent. EDF created a centrally funded effort to support joint capability development and defence research across the continent, and PESCO being an EDA coordinated programme for states to develop collaborative projects aimed at reducing duplication and improving interoperability. Major projects include Military Mobility, a jointly developed tank (the Main Ground Combat System), and the EURODRONE.[51]

The desire for a more autonomous European defence continued, with French leadership under President Emmanuel Macron in response to the first Trump administration. In a speech

---

46 For reliance, see https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/950/950.pdf . For reliance and depletion, see https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR676/RAND_RR676.pdf, e.g. 193, and 278.

47 Quentin Lopinot, 'What Does "European Defense" Look Like? The Answer Might Be in the Sahel', *War on the Rocks*, 19 March 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/what-does-european-defense-look-like-the-answer-might-be-in-the-sahel/.

48 Tony Chafer et al., *France's Strategic Failure in Mali: A Postcolonial Disutility of Force?* (Royal United Services Institute, 2025), https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org; Christophe Châtelot, 'How France was driven out of the Sahel', Africa, *Le Monde* (Paris), 5 September 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/09/05/how-france-was-driven-out-of-the-sahel_6124522_7.html; David Coffey, 'Did France's Operation Barkhane Win the Fight against Terror in the Sahel?', RFI, 12 November 2022, https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20221112-what-did-france-s-operation-barkhane-achieve-in-fight-against-terror-in-the-sahel.

49 Luigi Scazzieri, *Towards an EU 'Defence Union'?* (Centre for European Reform, 2025), https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/pb_LS_defence_union_29.1.25.pdf.

50 Anne Bakker et al., *European Defence: How to Engage the UK after Brexit?* (Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2017), 14, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/Report_European_defence_after_Brexit.pdf.

51 PESCO Secretariat, 'Permanent Structured Cooperation', PESCO, accessed 9 December 2025, https://www.pesco.europa.eu/.

at the Sorbonne in September 2017, Macron argued for "Defence Europe", and that "our aim needs to be ensuring Europe's autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO."[52] He then proposed yet another initiative, the European Intervention Initiative, a non-NATO and non-EU minilateral format consisting of thirteen European countries which aim to build a "common strategic culture" through increased exchanges of personnel, while also preparing to respond quickly to crises outside of the usual institutional processes. Though ministerial meetings were held in 2018 and 2019, little more has been done in this format, and no missions have been launched by this grouping.[53]

All in all, between 1991 and 2022, European efforts at autonomy were stymied by political division, a deepened dependency on the US, and failed attempts at independent operations. It was also coupled with the proliferation of institutions across the continent, often with competing mandates and demands for resources and staffs between the national and European levels. Tensions between Atlanticist and Europeanist camps remain, reflected in the institutional jockeying between NATO and the EU. Without the organising principle of the transatlantic alliance, rationalisation of the various strands of defence efforts to achieve a more coherent and effective deterrence architecture have lagged. The question is what organising principle will take its place.

The latest era of ambition has been spurred by the dual shocks of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024. European capitals rolled out a plethora of new initiatives, including new capability targets, force structures, defence industrial plans, and budgets after these two crises hit, and could also build on the hard lessons of failed independent missions in the Sahel. The following chapter examines these options to enhance Europe's ability to act independently in the face of Russian aggression and a recalcitrant US, including those that build from the history described in the chapter.

All in all, between 1991 and 2022, European efforts at autonomy were stymied by political division, a deepened dependency on the US, and failed attempts at independent operations.

52 Emmanuel Macron, 'Initiative for Europe - Speech by President of the French Republic M. Emmanuel Macron at the Sorbonne', Speech, Paris, 26 September 2017, 4–5, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/english_version_transcript_-_initiative_for_europe_-_speech_by_the_president_of_the_french_republic_cle8de628.pdf.

53 Dick Zandee and Kimberley Kruijver, *The European Intervention Initiative Developing a Shared Strategic Culture for European Defence* (Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2019), 4–5, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/The_European_Intervention_2019.pdf.

3. The Future of European Deterrence: From Considerations to Concepts

When Russia invaded Ukraine, Europe had an early-2000s institutional structure built for crisis operations and its two nuclear powers had evolved little since the end of the Cold War. Three year later, the second Trump administration unfolded plans to withdraw forces from Europe, maligning European democracies, imposing punitive tariffs on the Common Market, and excluding both Ukraine and European states from talks with Russia. In response to the war, through various formats, European states have engaged in a continent-wide crash programme to strengthen their defence posture and industries. The uncertainty of the American guarantee has required revisiting assumptions that have been baked into defence planning since the Cold War. This chapter reflects on the important strategic questions that emerge that practitioners and experts should consider and then continues to examine the feasibility of existing defence posture proposals. It concludes with recommendations for a more realistic vision of strengthened strategic autonomy.

3.1. Key Underpinning Considerations

A serious debate amongst strategists and defence planners is whether NATO is currently deterring a wider Russian attack beyond Ukraine.[54] It is a staple of NATO's communication strategy to claim that deterrence is being upheld at every moment.[55] This is a contestable notion, however. As noted by Matúš Halás at the Institute of International Relations in Prague, it could well be that Russia does not see any strategic value in risking a direct, military confrontation with NATO. The absence of an attack is not necessarily evidence of successful deterrence.[56] This has bearing on whether Europe's present rearmament efforts would be effective.

---

54 Polina Sinovets and Muhammed Ali Alkış, 'Deterrence, Compellence, or Credibility Fatigue? Russian Nuclear Threats in the War on Ukraine', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 0, no. 0 (2025): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2586386; Christopher F. Chyba, 'Nuclear Deterrence After Ukraine Review', *Arms Control Today*, November 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-11/features/nuclear-deterrence-after-ukraine-review; *Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Hearing before the US Helsinki Commission* (2025), https://www.csis.org/analysis/deterrence-natos-eastern-flank; Karl-Heinz Kamp et al., *Deterring Russia from Military Aggression Against Europe's NATO Allies | DGAP* (Deutsche Gellschaft für Auswärtiges Politik, 2025), https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/deterring-russia-military-aggression-against-europes-nato-allies-1.

55 'Setting the Record Straight', NATO, 6 November 2025, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/wider-activities/natos-approach-to-counter-information-threats/setting-the-record-straight.

56 Matus Halas, 'NATO's Sub-Conventional Deterrence: The Case of Russian Violations of the Estonian Airspace', *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 2 (2022): 350–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2028464.

If Russia does not have wider designs on Europe, and rearmament becomes politically fractious and financially unfeasible, then it could be a self-defeating endeavour, that would not have deterred anyway. If Russia does have wider designs on European territory, and the US is less committed to conventional reinforcement, then Europe has a different problem. Its current rearmament efforts, while well-funded, are spread too thin across projects, are managed through too many initiatives, and relies on the political will of increasingly unstable domestic political systems.

Europe's options will be shaped by the depth of American retrenchment from the continent.

At this moment in time, it would be foolish for Europe not to prepare for the worst. Given Russia's revisionist and expansionary policies in combination with the dire state of European defence, it is necessary to be able to independently deter and defend against a Russian attack. This requires continental level effort of many years to come.

When it comes to deterring Russia, European strategists will have to contend with questions that have often been answered by the presence of an American backstop. Europe's options will be shaped by the depth of American retrenchment from the continent. Described well by Luis Simon and Lotje Boswinkel, the scenarios for a reduction in US presence range from a total withdrawal from NATO to a slight adjustment to the existing status quo.[57] Those scenarios are summarised in Table 1 below. The most likely scenarios appear to be somewhere between choices 'residual but significant' and 'status quo minus', with even serious NATO critics proposing maintaining some residual force presence on the eastern flank.[58] Relatedly, past research has shown that almost no policymakers or experts in Washington support the end of the extended nuclear umbrella, though there are debates around NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.[59] This likely residual presence creates challenges as Atlanticist allies are more likely to continue relying on this presence for strategic capabilities, while the presence will not be sufficient to answer demands for reassurance. At the same time, options 1 and 2 – 'Europe on its own' and 'Cut to the bone' – should not be entirely discarded. Indeed, faith in a residual presence arguably undermines a real initiative to transform Europe's defence.

Table 1. US Retrenchment Scenarios from Simon and Boswinkel in 'What If Hell Breaks Loose? Imagining a Post-American Europe'

Scenario	Details
1. Europe on its own	Full-fledged US withdrawal from NATO, end of nuclear umbrella
2. Cut to the bone	Strategic nuclear umbrella, SACEUR retained, naval and intelligence presence only
3. Residual but significant	1-2 brigades on the eastern flank, Europeans takes over JFC-Naples and LANDCOM, US keeps SACEUR, AIRCOM, and B-61s in theatre
4. Status quo minus	US reduces footprint by 20,000 troops, all C2 and nuclear arrangements remain

[57] Luis Simon and Lotje Boswinkel, 'What If Hell Breaks Loose? Imagining a Post-American Europe', *Centre for Security, Diplomacy, and Strategy*, 11 June 2025, https://csds.vub.be/publication/what-if-hell-breaks-loose-imagining-a-post-american-europe/.

[58] Ashford, *First Among Equals: US Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World*, 154–55; Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Beyond NATO A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe* (Brookings Institution Press, 2017), 101–2.

[59] Ashford, *First Among Equals: US Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World*, 48–79; Davis Ellison and Paul van Hooft, *Twilight of Atlanticism? America's Shifting Approaches to Europe* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024), https://hcss.nl/report/twilight-of-atlanticism-americas-shifting-approaches-to-europe/.

Beyond the US, there is the question of the role of Ukraine. Ukraine's current wartime strength on land consists of 75 combat arms brigades (the largest contingent being mechanised infantry).[60] These forces are well equipped, and more importantly deeply experienced in combatting NATO's primary threat, Russia. For over a decade as of this writing, Ukraine has faced Russian aggression at just about every level of aggression NATO scenarios envision, except for nuclear use (so far). Defining Europe's relationship with Kyiv is arguably more important than with the relationship with Washington.

An eastern flank front that incorporates Ukraine into the planning of other large and capable forces, such as Poland, puts these land powers into the same role as Cold War West Germany. This is of course an imperfect analogy, and risks asking more of a country that has already lost much in its fight with Russia to do more. Seen differently, however, this would be a natural outcome of Ukraine's continued path towards Europe. European Union membership would connect Kyiv to Europe's defence through the Lisbon Treaty's Article 42.7 mutual defence clause, a phrase that arguably goes further than NATO's article 5 commitment by noting the "obligation" of Member States to use "all means in their power" to assist any victims of armed aggression.[61]

In the longer-term, close cooperation between European forces and Ukraine would allow not only for force multiplication but also what is effectively "reverse security assistance". Though the current level of Ukrainian forces is of course a wartime necessity, any post-war force is almost certain to remain large with a substantial professional core. European forces, and US forces as well, will need to learn from the Ukrainians. Other than the Russians themselves, there are few forces in the world that have sustained such heavy combat for this long. Nearly all contemporary military concepts warn of the need for preparedness against prolonged and highly attritional warfare, and there is a partner with just such experience directly neighbouring the EU.[62]

Europe's options then will be a result of triangulating between Washington, Moscow, and Kyiv. The results of any settlement related to the war will strongly shape any emerging options, as will any related Russian and American force dispositions. Particularly important will be any concessions made to Moscow regarding both Ukrainian and European force posture, reductions of which have been top Russian demands even prior to the war. For the purposes of this study, several assumptions are made about the security environment in which Europe's options are shaped. First, is a residual presence of American forces, primarily headquarters staff and perhaps one or two rotational brigades in Poland. In this, it would be expected that the NATO Command Structure will be gradually Europeanised, especially for land forces. It may also be the case, as suggested by US Ambassador to NATO Matthew Whitaker, that Europeans may even take over the role of SACEUR.[63] Second, is a largely reconstituted Russian military that balances its posture between Ukraine and NATO, as well as maintaining nuclear forces in Belarus. Finally, it is assumed that Ukraine maintains a sizable peacetime military that still receives some level of assistance from European partners, is on the path towards EU, but not NATO, membership.

---

60 *The Military Balance 2025*, vol. 125.

61 Camille Grand et al., *Preventing the next War: A European Plan for Ukraine* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025), https://ecfr.eu/publication/preventing-the-next-war-a-european-plan-for-ukraine/.

62 Alexandra Chinchilla et al., 'The Polish Experiment in Military Advising: Improving the European Union Training Mission to Ukraine', Modern War Institute, 14 October 2024, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-polish-experiment-in-military-advising-improving-the-european-union-training-mission-to-ukraine/.

63 Oliver Moody, 'Trump "Wants to Give Nato Role to Germans for First Time in 70 Years"', Europe, *The Times* (London), 19 November 2025, https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/trump-germany-lead-nato-europe-5q8gt6hdz.

With this background, the following sections explore the nuclear and conventional options available for European states, with an emphasis on what is realistically achievable politically, financially, and technically. They range from expanded nuclear sharing and even proliferation to a reinforced deterrence by denial posture complemented by deep precision strike. Any strategic benefits are carefully weighed against the political costs and technical hurdles.

3.2. Nuclear Deterrence Options

In the more extreme scenarios 1 and 2, in which there is *no* American nuclear sword with which to threaten Russia with punishment or American troops fighting conventionally, and Europe is truly on its own, would some sort of European nuclear sharing arrangement be a workable stand-in? In previous research we outlined a variety of pathways, summarised in Table 2 below:[64]

Table 2. Pathways for European deterrence, from Ellison et al., From the Euronuke to a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone.

Pathways	Possible States	Challenges	Pros	Cons
1. Nuclear proliferation	Germany, Poland	Political opposition, US opposition technical hurdles, lack of clear strategic logic	Complicates Russian calculations; reduces dependency on the US	Undermines non-proliferation regime; increases risk of nuclear accidents and escalation
2. Nuclear latency	Germany, Netherlands, Poland	Domestic political opposition, US opposition, technical hurdles	Complicates Russian calculations; could leverage into a US conventional presence	Undermines non-proliferation regime; invites outside interference into the programme
3. Euronuke	All EU Members	Control issues, political opposition	Cost sharing; force multiplication by European forces	Pressure on non-proliferation regime; command and control issues
4. Expanded NATO nuclear sharing	Poland	US opposition, some technical hurdles	DCA and DOB burden sharing; greater dispersal; complicating Russia's calculus	Counter to current NATO policy; increased risk of nuclear accidents
5. Strategic Conventional Weapons	UK, France, Germany, Poland, Italy, Spain, Norway, Finland, Netherlands, Türkiye	Technical hurdles, lack of mass, lack of enabling capabilities	Reduced dependency on US forces in theatre; domestically developed enabling systems can serve multiple purposes	Risks of escalation due to miscalculation; risk that conventional systems do not prevent nuclear coercion from other states
6. European NWFZ	EU excluding France	Domestic political opposition (in Eastern Europe), US opposition, alliance strategy issues	European compliance with disarmament pillar of the NPT; possibility of a 'cooperation spiral' with Russia	Risk of Russian nuclear blackmail; Risk of US coercive measures in response to forced removal of B-61s

Revisiting these pathways in light of discussions held with policymakers and experts in London, Paris, and Brussels, quite a few are beyond the political pale. At either end of the spectrum, nuclear proliferation and a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone are beyond what is achievable within the wider European defence politics world. Proliferation would be widely seen as both escalatory and a violation of the NPT by any state, and a NWFZ would be seen by most national governments as unilateral disarmament while still facing a threat from Russia. The same can be said of nuclear latency, a pathway with little to no political support and little

64 Ellison et al., *From the Euronuke to a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone*.

technical feasibility. Further, both proliferation and latency risk Russian preventive action. These three are, effectively, out.

On the 'Euronuke', most often expressed as the idea of an extended and/or cost-shared French nuclear deterrent, discussions with French experts have ranged from caution to scepticism. Bruno Tertrais of the *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique* (FRS) was particularly sceptical, noting that European nations, such as Germany, would struggle to find the political capital to do cost-sharing, and France would not in practice want any outside involvement in the development, maintenance, or operations of its deterrent force.[65] It would indeed be difficult to imagine close connections between French nuclear forces and others in the same way that NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements work. Doing so would require quite a significant degree of non-French staff, personnel, and systems becoming familiar with the internal workings, and vulnerabilities, of Paris's deterrent.[66] Importantly, sharing with the French could (falsely) imply to partner states that they have a say in French nuclear doctrine over use, the countervalue nature of which would be difficult to manage politically between allies.

Extended NATO nuclear sharing could possibly seem the most feasible option connected to nuclear forces. The most likely candidate for this wider sharing is Poland, which has already expressed interest in joining the arrangements. The willingness from Washington to expand sharing is however more likely to be dependent on post-war arrangements with Russia, which will likely include language similar to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 to not station nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states.[67] Also, and more importantly, this does not actually solve the problems of American extended deterrence and would in any case not apply in the scenario of full US withdrawal. NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are built around the American B-61s as discussed above, and if not released by Washington they are effectively unusable.

What is also quite feasible, but not elucidated in the table above, is greater consultation on strategy, doctrine, and plans by France and the UK with European allies. Existing mechanisms within the Lancaster House (UK-France), Aachen (France-Germany), Trinity House (UK-Germany), and Nancy (France-Poland) treaties offer consultative arrangements on these topics.[68] It could be envisioned as a multilateral equivalent of the US-South Korean nuclear consultative group. This would be a mechanism for the nuclear allies to share information regarding plans and doctrine, as well as for the non-nuclear participants to offer conventional support options (anti-submarine warfare, air support, deep precision strike) to complement the planned nuclear options.[69] This would duplicate some work of the NATO Nuclear Planning

---

65 Bruno Tertrais, 'Franco-Dutch Defence Talks', *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, 30 September 2025, https://hcss.nl/news/franco-dutch-defence-talks/.

66 Sophie Kippen, *UK-French Nuclear Cooperation in a New Nuclear Age*, LLNL-MI-2013778 (Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Center for Global Security Research, 2025), 7, https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-11/UK-Fr-Nuc-Coop_Sophie_CGSR%20Fellow_Finalv2.pdf.

67 Monika Sus and Łukasz Kulesa, 'Breaking the Silence: Explaining the Dynamics behind Poland's Desire to Join NATO Nuclear Sharing in Light of Russian Aggression against Ukraine', *The Nonproliferation Review* 30, nos 4–6 (2023): 241–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2024.2432807; Liviu Horovitz, *US Extended Nuclear Deterrence in Europe: Three Scenarios* (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2025), https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/us-extended-nuclear-deterrence-in-europe-three-scenarios; Alexander K. Bollfrass and Annemiek Dols, 'Investment in Nuclear Sharing Continues despite European Doubts about US Extended Deterrence', *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 1 December 2025, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/12/investment-in-nuclear-sharing-continues-despite-europe-an-doubts-about-us-extended-deterrence/.

68 Amanda Dziubinska and Artur Kacprzyk, 'Poland and France Sign Treaty on Enhanced Cooperation and Friendship', The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 13 May 2025, https://www.pism.pl/publications/poland-and-france-sign-treaty-on-enhanced-cooperation-and-friendship.

69 Kippen, *UK-French Nuclear Cooperation in a New Nuclear Age*, 6–9.

Group, but for the most interested and involved states it would go even deeper while also being less dependent on the US

The audience for all of this is of course Russia. Consideration of these options is best when done with the impact on Russian thinking and policy in mind. Some research has argued that the UK nuclear deterrent is viewed as less credible by Moscow due to British dependence on US support to maintaining *Vanguard* submarines and *Trident* missiles. Similar arguments are made about the French deterrent, given its primary reliance on countervalue targeting with higher-yield weapons, creating the "trade Paris for Tallinn" dilemma.[70] Both of these criticisms are valid, and backed by at least some evidence. It is the case that the UK deterrent is not entirely independent. There are reasons to doubt any extension of Paris's guarantee to eastern allies. At the same time, the UK sea-based deterrent has been dependent on American support since the early 1960s, and on extended deterrence it also applies to the US, as there is still little reason to believe the US would trade New York or Chicago for Warsaw or Bratislava. Indeed, Lawrence Freedman has written that "European countries have a much more direct stake in the security of their continent than does the United States," and that it is in fact the inflexibility of their arsenals that instils concern in Moscow, given the greater risk of unexpected, catastrophic escalation.[71]

Knowing what would deter Russia in advance is nearly impossible.

Knowing what would deter Russia in advance is nearly impossible. Put by French expert Francois Heisbourg, "it is virtually impossible to prove that deterrence has worked. Philosophically, this is comparable to proving an absence."[72] What should be obvious, however, is that nuclear deterrence is insufficient on its own. Based on the UK and France's countervalue doctrines, use under any circumstances risks unacceptable damage to both countries and their allies from Russian retaliation. Any sharing arrangement connected to the UK and France does not diminish any of these concerns, and only further risks a degradation of credibility. The key point here is that the British and French nuclear weapon arsenals certainly have deterrent value as a tool of ultimate resort, but that they need to be complemented with other conventional capabilities.

From the above analysis, what is perhaps best pursued is the strategic conventional weapons pathway, a path that as indicated many European and partner states are already pursuing. The following section explores this in greater detail.

3.3. **Conventional Deterrence Options**

Turning to conventional deterrence, what are Europe's options in the event of US retrenchment and Russian reconstitution? Much is already underway within Europe, from NATO defence planning to the EU's Readiness 2030 initiative. In a more challenging scenario, in which many NATO requirements are not met due to a US withdrawal, how can Europe's defence best organised? What we propose here is a regionally specialised, conventional deterrence by denial concept complemented with deterrence by punishment capabilities.

70 Zsofia Wolford et al., *Evolving Russian Perceptions of the British and French Nuclear Deterrents* (RAND Europe, 2025), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3900-1.html.

71 Lawrence Freedman, 'Europe's Nuclear Deterrent: The Here and Now', *Survival* 67, no. 3 (2025): 19–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2508078.

72 Niels Heukelom, 'Experts Discuss Nuclear Deterrence in Europe: More Weapons, More Security?', *Leiden University*, 22 January 2025, https://www.staff.universiteitleiden.nl/news/2025/01/experts-discuss-nuclear-deterrence-in-europe-more-weapons-more-security?cf=service-units. See also https://hcss.nl/report/dancing-in-the-dark-the-seven-sins-of-deterrence-assessment/

One in which local advantages are maximised in effectiveness, and key strategic points can as assuredly as possible be denied to Russia. This is not a novel suggestion, as regionalisation and specialisation have been suggested by experts for some time.[73] Indeed, this style of thinking underpinned NATO's Cold War deterrence posture, though it requires updating.

This foundations of such concept would be as follows:

- **Military alliance with Ukraine**. Whether through the EU and its mutual defence clause article 42.7, or another coalition format, formalising a military alliance with Ukraine would not only significantly increase the capabilities of any European coalition, but also complicate Russian thinking. If any escalation against the rest of Europe would lead to the reopening of a large, bloody front to the south, this could induce caution in Moscow.[74]
- **Ensuring a strong defence of the Central Region**. Europe's eastern flank towards Russia runs thousands of kilometres, from northern Finland to the Mediterranean. Forward defence does not have to occur across the entire line however, with several major points requiring focus. These points are the Finnmark region of Norway, the Karelian Isthmus in Finland, and the Baltic Defence Line down to the Suwalki Gap. This is where the operations of the bulk of European land forces are most logical and urgent. It is also where existing capable national forces, backed with reserves and reinforcement, can effectively defend their own ground.[75]
- **Isolating Kaliningrad**. Likely with Poland in the lead, isolating the air and sea approaches to Kaliningrad and degrading the ability of the garrison to strike from the region will be crucial both to securing the Baltic Defence Line, but also maintaining the safety of the Baltic Sea itself.[76]
- Denying the North Sea. For the UK, Dutch, and Scandinavian navies this is especially important for the maintenance of sea lines of communication and to reduce the ability of the Russian Navy to fire from the North Sea or Atlantic.[77]
- **Denying the Black Sea and closing the Bosporus**. As already effectively done by Ukraine without a navy, and by Türkiye through the Montreux Convention, Europe should be able to close off the Bosporus. Given that Montreux also can lead to the closure of the straits to European ships, this puts a particular premium on assets in Romania and Bulgaria.[78]
- **Protection from air, missile, and drone attacks on population centres**. Again, as demonstrated in Ukraine, population protection is crucial both in the moral and political sense. Ensuring sufficient systems and stocks that major population areas can be defended from air, missile, and drone attacks is a core task for armed services.[79]

---

73 Alexander Mattelaer, 'Rediscovering Geography in NATO Defence Planning', *Defence Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018): 339–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2018.1497446; O'Hanlon, *Beyond NATO A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*; Ashford, *First Among Equals: US Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World*; Ben Barry et al., *The Future of NATO's European Land Forces: Plans, Challenges, Prospects* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023), https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2023/06/the-future-of-natos-european-land-forces/.

74 Camille Grand et al., *Preventing the next War*.

75 Barry et al., *The Future of NATO's European Land Forces*.

76 Jen Judson, 'Army Europe Chief Unveils NATO Eastern Flank Defense Plan', Defense News, 16 July 2025, https://www.defensenews.com/land/2025/07/16/army-europe-chief-unveils-nato-eastern-flank-defense-plan/.

77 Sidharth Kaushal, *Conference Report: RUSI Sea Power Conference 2022* (2022), https://static.rusi.org/352-CR-SeaPower-web-final.pdf.

78 Alessio Patalano, *The Maritime War in Ukraine: The Limits of Russian Sea Control?* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025), https://hcss.nl/report/the-maritime-war-in-ukraine-the-limits-of-russian-sea-control/.

79 Paul van Hooft and Lotje Boswinkel, *Surviving the Deadly Skies: Integrated Air and Missile Defence 2021-2035* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2021), https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Integrated-Air-and-Missile-Defense-HCSS-Dec-2021.pdf.

- **Secure the Mediterranean**. Likely with Italy, Greece, and Spain in the lead, both denying Russian access but also generally ensuring freedom of navigation and the approaches to the Suez Canal and Straits of Gibraltar remain important tasks given Russia's ability to project power around Europe.[80] Protecting port infrastructure from Russian efforts at disruption would also be critical to ensure the ability of European states to reinforce each other around the continent. Preventing Russia from doing to Piraeus or Naples what Ukraine did in its raids on Sevastopol is a critical task.[81]

From a planning perspective, much has already been done that Europe can build on. The development of NATO's regional defence plans (RPs) and the alignment of national defence plans within this regional thinking have achieved a strong base which NATO Europe and Türkiye can maintain despite any US conventional reduction.[82] There is no shortage of contingency plans and scenarios across states and organisations, so there is a wealth of information and operational experience which can be drawn upon and shared.

Beyond plans, Europe also does not lack for headquarters staff structures. Between NATO, the EU, the Joint Expeditionary Force, and any number of regional and bilateral coordination and planning mechanisms (e.g., NORDEFCO, Central European Defence Cooperation, and the Franco-German Defence and Security Council) there is no shortage of staffs. It is crucial for European states to avoid becoming bogged down in discussions of command structure "wiring diagrams" that duplicate past efforts to develop European command organisations that are complementary to NATO. Instead, existing structures may require streamlining into regional commands in line with the major tasks identified above. This would already be an option with a reduced role of the US in NATO, with greater Europeanisation of roles such as Joint Force Command (JFC)– Naples and Land Command in Izmir. The Multi-Corps Land Component Command Northwest being established in Finland would further strengthen this. What could also be useful is a revisiting of the Berlin Plus agreements, to again clarify the possibilities of using NATO assets by the EU in the event of US (or other non-EU allied) disinterest. Given that after Brexit, the traditionally British DSACEUR cannot assume the role of an EU Operational Commander, it is necessary to identify an equivalent national role to step in, for example the traditionally German SHAPE Chief of Staff or the rotationally German-Italian JFC Brunssum.

After plans and commands comes force generation. Europe's attempts to build a coalition of the willing have been informative that much work needs to be done. In light of the August 2025 US-Russia talks over Ukraine in Alaska, *The Times* argued that "even if it remains unwavering in its diplomatic stance, Europe lacks the strength to back Kyiv in negotiating favourable terms in a future peace agreement or enforcing a ceasefire."[83] Despite a pressing threat and existing capabilities amongst Europe's biggest actors (namely, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Poland), it has thus far remained too politically fractious to build an actual force and deploy it

80 Sidharth Kaushal, 'The Death of Gorshkov's Navy: The Future of the Russian Surface Fleet', Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 1 June 2022, https://rusi.orghttps://rusi.org.

81 Sidharth Kaushal, 'Ukraine's Uncrewed Raid on Sevastopol and the Future of War at Sea', Royal United Services Institute, 2 February 2023, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraines-uncrewed-raid-sevastopol-and-future-war-sea.

82 Stephen R. Covington, 'NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA)', Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2 August 2023, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/natos-concept-deterrence-and-defence-euro-atlantic-area-dda.

83 Liz Cookman, 'JD Vance Tells Europe to "Step up and Take a Bigger Role" in Ukraine', Russia-Ukraine War, *The Times* (London), 10 August 2025, https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/jd-vance-europe-step-up-ukraine-fnwrxm2sw.

to Ukraine. This has not only been reputationally damaging, but it also displayed to Russia the inability of Europeans to act quickly if needed.

Rectifying this force generation process is urgent. It is the connective tissue between latent and actual capability. It requires a serious review at the national and international institutional level at how requirements and procedures conflict, what terms of reference for senior commanders are, and to also conduct joint and multinational exercises. Simply assuming that governments and armed services would be able to quickly generate an effective force in a more urgent situation is insufficient both procedurally and from a deterrence perspective. The yet to be established European reassurance force is now the baseline for Moscow in seeing Europe's ability to generate its own force. That baseline can only be changed through demonstrating the opposite and developments in late December in which European powers stated intent to bring together a multinational force to " assist in the regeneration of Ukraine's forces, in securing Ukraine's skies, and in supporting safer seas, including through operating inside Ukraine," lays the foundation for such an effort.[84] If the Russian leadership believes that if under pressure force generation will be a slow, laborious process, it may be just enough to give confidence that conventional incursions may succeed.

Lastly, but certainly not least, comes the necessary capability investments. In relation to the tasks laid out above, several core capabilities are necessary. Fully equipped and filled land manoeuvre divisions (infantry, armour, and mechanised), multi-purpose frigates, submarines, anti-submarine warfare capabilities, fourth- and fifth-generation fighters, to name a few. Specific numbers and greater detail have been explored in-depth elsewhere, but an analysis by Bruegel has already found that in the type of scenario assumed at the start of this section, European states would need to independently generate 50 brigades on land. Beyond this, using the US Army III and V Corps as a baseline, forces conducting just one of the tasks above (reinforcing the Baltics), would need 1,400 tanks, 2,000 infantry fighting vehicles, 700 artillery pieces (155mm self-propelled and multiple-launch rocket systems), with 1 million 155mm shells (based on only 90 days of combat).[85] The Bruegel analysis does not even consider the air and maritime domains at length, nor strategic enablers like communications, space systems, logistics, medical, air- and sea-lift, or fuel. This comes back to dependency on the US In air defence, space-based ISR, air- and sea-lift, missiles, F-35s, and in the underpinning software across these areas' dependency is not only deep but also entrenched. According to Bruegel and the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, the challenge is not so much the breadth of the dependency, but this depth. The urgency felt after 2022 accelerated this, with off-the-shelf American solutions such as F-35s and missiles being more immediately ready than developing European solutions.[86] A calculated risk needs to be made about the trade-offs between continuing American dependency and the urgency to meet the Russian challenge. Weaning off of the US defence industrial base and towards creating a European one is a necessary process that will take years to complete.

A European deterrence by denial pillar needs to be complemented with a deterrence by punishment pillar based on deep precision strike (DPS) capabilities and ultimately backed up by French and British nuclear weapons. These systems are currently being procured across

84 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/15/leaders-statement-on-ukraine/.

85 Alexandr Burilkov and Guntram B. Wolff, *Defending Europe without the US: First Estimates of What Is Needed* (Bruegel, 2025), 4–5, https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/defending-europe-without-us-first-estimates-what-needed.

86 Alexandr Burilkov et al., *Fit for war by 2030? European rearmament efforts vis-a-vis Russia* (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2025), 61–63, https://www.kielinstitut.de/de/publikationen/fit-for-war-by-2030-european-rearmament-efforts-vis-a-vis-russia-18194/.

Europe but largely without attention to how they fit within an overall European strategy. Put by Fabian Hoffmann, these systems are, and could play the role of, conventional counterforce systems targeting Russia's nuclear sites.[87] This is a result of the combination of their range (500+ kilometres) and warhead size (generally ≥450 kilogrammes), making them capable of striking deep into Russian territory and hit reinforced targets such as command bunkers or siloes. Both Poland and Finland have spoken of their DPS development in conventional counterforce terms.[88]

Targeting Russia's nuclear deterrent, conventionally or otherwise, is fraught with escalatory risk, however. Moscow has been watching the various DPS programmes closely. Russia's 2024 update to state policy on nuclear deterrence added an additional "condition for the transition to the employment of nuclear weapons," that being the "receipt of reliable data on the massive launch (take-off) for air and space attack means (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic, and other aerial vehicles)."[89] This update is clearly both a reflection of Russia's long-standing assessment of aerospace inferiority to NATO,[90] as well as a result of decades of internal Soviet and Russian military-strategic thinking that has stressed the strategic role of precision strike capabilities as a major threat to the Russian Federation.[91] It is also arguably a warning to NATO states that the actual use of DPS capabilities against nuclear command and control infrastructures could earn a nuclear attack in response. Conventional counterforce will never be enough to threaten the survivability of Russia's nuclear triad. Setting asides issues of targeting and effectiveness, DPS can do nothing against SSBNs while at sea.

Rather than a broader, deterrence by punishment "counter-population" strategy, this would be an effort to target Russia's latent warfighting capacity in key areas.

The clearest contribution of DPS to a deterrent posture would therefore be one rooted in deterrence by punishment with at least an implicit link between DPS use against a nuclear target and the threat of escalation by the UK or French nuclear forces. Rather than targeting nuclear sites, deterrence by punishment logic works through the expansion of target sets to "staging areas, airports, radar installations, maritime ports, and logistical nodes, and possibly also an attacker's critical economic and military infrastructure further away from the front-lines."[92] Rather than a broader, deterrence by punishment "counter-population" strategy, this would be an effort to target Russia's latent warfighting capacity in key areas, such as "engaging infrastructure nodes deep inside enemy territory or by attacking facilities relevant to defence-industrial production, such as manufacturing facilities for military equipment."[93] Being able to do so at scale, and with accurate enough intelligence to avoid mass civilian damage, is a capability no state currently reliably possesses but would inflict real punishment.

87 Fabian Hoffmann, 'Denial Won't Do: Europe Needs a Punishment-Based Conventional Counterstrike Strategy', *War on the Rocks*, 8 September 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/09/denial-wont-do-europe-needs-a-punishment-based-conventional-counterstrike-strategy/.

88 Ellison, 'The Role of Conventional Counterforce in NATO Strategy: Historical Precedents and Present Opportunities'.

89 'Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence', The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 19 November 2024, 5, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/.

90 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, 'Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021): 3–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070.

91 Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), 46–49.

92 Lotje Boswinkel, 'Europe, Deterrence, and Long-Range Strike', *War on the Rocks*, 20 March 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/europe-deterrence-and-long-range-strike/.

93 Fabian R. Hoffmann, 'The Strategic-Level Effects of Long-Range Strike Weapons: A Framework for Analysis', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47, nos 6–7 (2024): 974–75.

Such a posture would then be what Schelling called the "threat that leaves something to chance," in that it communicates to Russia that Europe can cause significant military destruction deep inside Russia, leaving a degree of uncertainty whether the UK or France may or may not escalate, and even they cannot be altogether sure if they would.[94] It would essentially add a conventional rung in the escalation ladder, similar to France's "warning shot". Put by Bowen, this would be a difficult needle to thread in practice, as it requires restraint on behalf of the deterrer, very clear and unambiguous communication, and a simultaneously credible and communicated nuclear posture.[95] It could, however, constitute a real conventional capability to bolster deterrence by punishment below the nuclear threshold.

Another role for DPS is in conventional support to nuclear operations (or CSNO, formerly known as supporting nuclear operations with conventional air tactics, or SNOWCAT). Given the maintenance of France's air-delivered nuclear weapons and the deployment of American B61-12 to RAF Lakenheath in the UK, the air leg of the European based deterrents can get the most value from DPS. The suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD) is an especially vital CSNO mission. Particularly given the role of the "warning shot" strike in French nuclear thinking, supporting SEAD missions from other European DPS systems, delivered from all domains, would likely have real deterrent value.

The concluding argument of this section is that in the scenario of a strongly reduced American presence in Europe and a reconstituted Russian military threat, European governments' ideal posture is primarily based on a conventional deterrence by denial strategy complemented with a deterrence by punishment capability rooted in deep precision strike and loosely coupled to the UK and French deterrents. This allows for an enhanced posture that can hedge against US retrenchment, without tempting escalation prior to or during a crisis. Further, by relegating nuclear questions to issues of strategy and doctrine discussions with London and Paris, it relieves escalatory pressures that any discussions of a Polish or German nuclear weapons programme, even if only latent, would cause.

94 Thomas Schelling, *The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance*, HD-A1631-1 (RAND Corporation, 1959), 2, https://www.rand.org/pubs/historical_documents/HDA1631-1.html.

95 Tyler Bowen, 'Threading the Needle: The Logic of Conventional Coercion in Nuclear Crises', *Texas National Security Review* 9, no. 1 (2025): 28–51.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. A Shield and Spear Posture

Defence planning hinges at its core on fundamental political decisions. As highlighted throughout this study, establishing a more independent European posture requires an explicit political move away from American dependency. This type of shift away from a reliance on the US and towards greater independence in defending Europe from Russia would not be easy, neither politically, financially, nor technically. It is effectively impossible to demonstrate in advance that this major shift would achieve or do more than what has been successful in the past. But continuing reliance on a US security guarantee at the expense of Europe's own capabilities is simply not an option in today's strategic landscape.

Defence planning hinges at its core on fundamental political decisions.

Any denial that the US is turning away from Europe is analytically unsubstantiated and politically fraught. Whether in the form of the Obama-Biden era pivot to the Pacific or Trump's America First Western hemispherism, times have changed. The latest US National Security Strategy has marked a sea change in Washington's relationship to Europe. It is simply no longer the reliable security guarantor it once was. More than that, the new Trump administration appears actively hostile towards the European project and has made its aim to interfere in Europe's affairs explicit.[96] Europe must do more for its own security. Developing a regionally specialised, conventional deterrence by denial strategy complemented with a deterrence by punishment strategy rooted in conventional deep precision strike capabilities and coordinated with the UK and French nuclear deterrents is, we argue, the best option.

Existing efforts to reinforce Europe's defence through both NATO and the EU have been a start, but additional efforts and investments will be needed. The strategy discussed in this study will require defence planners to move away from the capability-centric focus, which benefits from an American backstop, to one that also encompasses capacity and personnel. For forces that have faced personnel shortages for years but have been able to make up for it by cannibalising units to ensure deployability, this will require not only resources but a change in institutional culture. The current emphasis on readiness is arguably insufficient, and a move towards preparedness as an organising principle is needed. While readiness emphasises the availability of units for deployability at a given moment, preparedness is about creating a strong foundation that can allow for surge capacity and sustainability of a longer campaign. This would require a wider reform effort amongst many European forces.

In the land domain, ensuring a strong defence of the Central Region and Isolating Kaliningrad, would require Europeans to independently provide the full New NATO Force Model, which stipulates up to 500,000 troops at the 180-day mark (roughly 11 Corps formations).[97] If taken in aggregate, the European Union members plus other NATO states such as Canada, Türkiye,

96 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', 25–27.

97 John R. Deni, *The New NATO Force Model: Ready for Launch?*, no. 4, War Series (NATO Defense College, 2024), https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1937.

and Norway can on paper approximately generate these 11 Corps , based on existing EU and NATO multinational Corps structures.[98] This requires, however, a well-stocked reserve, support units of different variants (e.g., logistics, medical, electronic warfare), and likely a strong second layer of conscripted forces in the event of more prolonged combat. Again, as mentioned in the chapter above, this puts renewed emphasis on the future of Ukraine in Europe. The lowest ends of the possible post-war situation for Ukraine still show Kyiv possessing a large, combat-experienced force which, if aligned with its European neighbours in any format, would present significant risks to Moscow.[99]

At sea, European forces are arguably already well positioned to achieve the core objectives, including denial of the North Sea and Black Sea and securing the Mediterranean. Not only are the most vital waterways almost entirely within national territories, but the Russian Navy is also less capable than its land counterparts and has been heavily degraded by the Ukrainians.[100] Further, the ongoing war has demonstrated how vulnerable both surface and undersea vessels are when at port, particularly in the European theatre with close in waterways.[101]

Across the North Sea, Black Sea, and Mediterranean, it is possible to derive some force requirements. In the Atlantic, at least one aircraft carrier, roughly 10–20 anti-submarine warfare frigates, 10–20 submarines (SSNs) for hunting Russian submarines, 6–9 maritime patrol aircraft squadrons, and persistent multi-layered sensor networks across the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap would be needed to offset reductions from the US Second Fleet.[102] In the Black Sea, where the Montreux Convention limits international naval presence even in wartime, approximately 4 additional air-defence frigates in addition to the Turkish, Romanian, and Bulgarian naval forces may be needed.[103] Finally, securing Mediterranean and sea-lines of communication would be well within the existing mission sets and requirements of the Italian, Spanish, and Greek navies combined, to a rough order of 12-15 anti-submarine and missile defence frigates, 3 aircraft carriers, 10-20 attack submarines, 7 maritime patrol aircraft squadrons, and 10 mine counter-measure vessels.[104] By far the most taxing effort at sea for Europe would be patrolling the Atlantic in a scenario of reduced US presence.

In the air, the challenge for Europeans is less the Russian Air Force, and more the dependency on the US for fifth-generation aircraft, namely the F-35. This is not to say there is a "kill-switch" inside the software of the craft (though proving it either way is near impossible), but rather that those forces which have imported it are reliant on US controlled industry and supply chains, which will compete with European needs and could be subject to restrictions should relations

98 *The Military Balance 2025*, vol. 125.

99 Kamp et al., *Deterring Russia from Military Aggression Against Europe's NATO Allies | DGAP*.

100 David Kirichenko, 'Ukraine's Strategy for Winning the Battle of the Black Sea', Center for Maritime Strategy, 2 November 2023, https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/ukraines-strategy-for-winning-the-battle-of-the-black-sea/.

101 Kaushal, 'Ukraine's Uncrewed Raid on Sevastopol and the Future of War at Sea'.

102 James Hackett and Ben Schreer, eds, *Progress and Shortfalls in Europe's Defence: An Assessment: Introduction* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/progress-and-shortfalls-in-europes-defence-an-assessment/introduction/; Nick Childs, *Gauging the Gap: The Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom Gap – A Strategic Assessment* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022), https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2022/05/gauging-the-gap-the-greenland-iceland-united-kingdom-gap-a-strategic-assessment/.

103 Benjamin Jensen and Mark Montgomery, 'How to Secure the Black Sea During a Russia-Ukrainian Ceasefire', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 31 March 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-secure-black-sea-during-russia-ukrainian-ceasefire.

104 Piero Barlucchi, 'Sink or Swim? Revitalising NATO in European Maritime Security', *Centre for Security, Diplomacy, and Strategy*, 21 October 2024, https://csds.vub.be/publication/sink-or-swim-revitalising-nato-in-european-maritime-security/; James Hackett and Ben Schreer, *Progress and Shortfalls in Europe's Defence*.

with Washington continue to deteriorate.[105] From a force requirement perspective, being capability agnostic, the air task in the Central Region would require roughly 6 fighter wings and one each of a strategic airlift wing, an air-to-air refuelling wing, one Air-Ground operations wing, and one combat support wing in addition to existing national air forces. This would be to backfill shortages caused by withdrawals of the US Third Air Force.[106]

In terms of protecting populations from air, missile, and drone attacks centres, much work is to be done. Layered missile defence at the exoatmospheric, long, medium, and short range requires not only more platforms, but large stocks of interceptor missiles for every system. There is also a strong dependency on the US in these systems, particularly on the longer-range Patriot and Terminal High-Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) systems. Even within the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) a centralised European project, Patriot and THAAD play major roles. For continent wide defence, European states would likely need to field around 60 SAMP/T systems to wean off of the Patriot dependency, as well as invest in joint and multinational IT infrastructure to ensure layered defences are effectively coordinated and responsive. At the lowest level of defence, protection against drones of different classes requires large amounts of short-range air defence, handheld counter-UAS systems, and electronic warfare measures.[107]

Table 3. First-order analysis of necessary independent capabilities across core tasks[108]

Task	General Requirements	
Ensuring a strong defence of the Central Region	• 11 Corps of land forces, each with: – Enabling logistics – 1,400 tanks, – 2,000 infantry fighting vehicles, – 700 artillery pieces (155mm self-propelled and multiple-launch rocket systems), – 1 million 155mm shells in stock	• In addition to existing national air forces, an additional: – 5 fighter wings – Multiple airborne early-warning and control wings – 1 strategic airlift wing – 1 air-to-air refuelling wing – 1 Air-Ground operations wing – 1 combat support wing
Isolating Kaliningrad	• Approximately 4 Divisions of land forces (most likely predominantly Polish and German) • Approximately 12 frigates for blockade tasks • Approximately 1 fighter air wing	
Denying the North Sea	• ~1 aircraft carrier • ~10–20 anti-submarine warfare frigates, • ~10–20 submarines (SSNs) for hunting Russian submarines • ~6–9 maritime patrol aircraft squadrons forward-based, • Persistent multi-layered sensor networks across the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap	
Denying the Black Sea	• ~4 additional air-defence frigates in addition to the Turkish, Romanian, and Bulgarian naval forces, in line with Montreux Convention limits	
IAMD protection of civilians	• Air- and missile-defence IT architecture, such as Leonardo's planned multi-domain "Michelangelo Security Dome" • ~60 Patriot or SAMP/T systems • ~100+ IRIS-T/NASAMS/Sky Sabre systems • ~6-12 Arrow-3 or Terminal High-Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) systems	
Securing the Mediterranean	• ~12-15 anti-submarine and missile defence frigates • ~3 aircraft carriers • ~10-20 attack submarines • ~7 maritime patrol aircraft squadrons • ~10 Mine counter-measure vessels	

105 Juan Mejino-Lopez and Guntram B. Wolff, *Europe's Dependence on US Foreign Military Sales and What to Do about It* (Bruegel, 2025), 10–12, https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/europes-dependence-us-foreign-military-sales-and-what-do-about-it.

106 *The Military Balance 2025*, vol. 125.

107 Joseph Wehmeyer, 'NATO's Air Defense Dilemma', *War on the Rocks*, 25 September 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/09/natos-air-defense-dilemma/.

108 Based on our analysis of the data and arguments presented in the sources referenced in 108-118.

Finally, on the nuclear front, the ideal and most realistic options are CSNO capabilities (fighter escort, ASW) and DPS in support of those same missions, as well as to pursue high-value conventional targets on and far behind the battlefield. Conventional counterforce is both technically difficult to achieve even for the US and risks rapid nuclear escalation in the event of a crisis, an area which Russia has greater capacity. Targeting the Russian nuclear infrastructure so directly and so widely creates the worst case, "use it or lose it" scenario for Russia, almost certainly leading to countervalue nuclear retaliation.[109]

Here we therefore argue for a deterrence by punishment complement to the denial Shield. This is not a "counter-population" strategy but would be an effort to target Russia's latent warfighting capacity in key areas, such as critical war supporting infrastructure like military production sites, airfields, and logistics chains. Being able to do so at scale, with accurate enough intelligence to avoid mass civilian damage, requires a significant investment.

A perpetually fragile nuclear balance of terror is not a sound basis for security.

Such a posture would then be what Schelling called the "threat that leaves something to chance," in that it communicates to Russia that Europe can cause significant military destruction deep inside Russia, leaving a degree of uncertainty whether the UK or France may or may not escalate, and even they cannot be altogether sure if they would. Here European capabilities exist but lack in number. To have sufficient capabilities not only for battlefield use, but also to successfully target deeper war supporting industry including critical infrastructure and conventional military targets such as airfields, requires not only an array of missiles and drones, but also significant intelligence capabilities from space to signals collection assets. As Ukraine has discovered in its relatively limited campaigns against the Russian oil industry, having up-to-date intelligence, sufficient capabilities, and being able to follow up strikes with accurate assessments is very taxing over sustained periods. When using the Anglo-French *Storm Shadow* missile for instance, Russian forces have been able to intercept roughly 50% of incoming salvoes.[110]

As for the French and UK deterrents, the existing minimum sufficiency doctrine is likely to continue and does not necessarily merit revision. Concerns that a minimum deterrent is somehow less credible to Moscow are arguably overblown, as the same problems exist to an even greater extent in the case of U.S and extended deterrence. The challenge for London and Paris will have to become more comfortable in talking with their non-nuclear allies about nationally sensitive programmes and plans, and the challenge for the allies will be to make their desires for reassurance explicit and tangible.

Despite all of this, it must be emphasised that relying on stable deterrence between Russia and European states is not in itself viable in the long- or even medium-term. A perpetually fragile nuclear balance of terror is not a sound basis for security. Nuclear accidents, inadvertent escalation, and security spirals are all more than possible.[111] Deterrence cannot last forever. Indeed, during the Cold War nuclear use was often prevented less by the caution the

109 *CSIS Project on Nuclear Issues Live Debate: US Nuclear Targeting with James Acton and Frank Miller*, directed by Heather Williams (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024), https://www.csis.org/analysis/poni-live-debate-us-nuclear-targeting.

110 Jack Watling et al., *Disrupting Russian Air Defence Production: Reclaiming the Sky* (Royal United Services Institute, 2025), 14–15, https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org.

111 Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton University Press, 1995), https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691021010/the-limits-of-safety.

weapons inspire, but by blind luck and refusal of local commanders to assume the worst.[112] An active effort to reduce nuclear risks with Moscow, build confidence and transparency, and ultimately abide by NPT commitments to disarmament will be needed. Learning and building the diplomatic willingness to engage with Moscow in the coming years will be a steep, but necessary, curve.

Politically, achieving a stable and durable European deterrence architecture led by Europeans is perhaps a generational project, one that requires a difficult triangulation between Washington, Moscow, Kyiv, Brussels, and other capitals of key European powers. It requires asking hard questions about conventional-nuclear force balances and the relationship of this to existing foreign policy priorities surrounding non-proliferation. It requires a shift in thinking from readiness to preparedness, a sea-change for forces that have been optimised for 30 years for expeditionary operations. This study has offered an outline for such a durable deterrence architecture, though raises additional questions for further research, including granularity on likely needed military capabilities, institutional reforms, and implications for arms control efforts, which are to be examined further in future research.

4.2. From Concepts to Capabilities

Beyond recommending a regionally focused, capability-specialised approach that leans on a mixture of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment, succinctly summarised as a shield and spear posture, we offer several specific recommendations at the political, military-strategic, and defence industrial levels. They include recommendations both at the broader European level and specifically for the Netherlands.

The political level

1. **Negotiate and conclude an EU-Ukraine Defence Association Agreement.** After hostilities have paused between Russia and Ukraine, the EU should negotiate and sign a specific treaty between the Union and Kyiv in which it is stated that Article 42.7 is extended to Ukraine prior to its full EU membership as part of a guarantee of stability in the accession period. This would build from the existing commitments of the June 2024 "Joint security commitments between the European Union and Ukraine". This would by necessity have to account for the provisions of any settlement between Moscow and Kyiv.

2. **Conclude Anglo-Dutch and French-Dutch security treaties and establish a new Nuclear Consultative Secretariat.** The Netherlands should negotiate and sign separate, bilateral security treaties with the UK and France, in the same way they have done with each other and with Germany and Poland. It should contain similar language on nuclear consultations with London and Paris. These treaties, as well as Lancaster House, Trinity House, Aachen, and Nancy should form the basis for a new Nuclear Consultation Group (or, the Northwood Group) of willing European countries. This should then have a permanent Secretariat, perhaps based at the UK Permanent Joint Headquarters in Northwood, to facilitate regular exchanges between London, Paris, and their continental partners on

[112] Dmitry Dima Adamsky, 'The 1983 Nuclear Crisis – Lessons for Deterrence Theory and Practice', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2013): 4–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.732015; Scott D. Sagan, 'The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons', *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994): 66–107, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539178.

nuclear strategy and doctrine, and where national conventional support to nuclear operations (CSNO) and deep precision strike (DPS) may contribute. The group should also carefully monitor and assess Russian reactions to CSNO and DPS plans and advise on the impact of this planning on the viability of future arms control efforts.

3. **Develop a Northwood Group Common Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Agreement.** Alongside coordination on deterrence, the Northwood Group should consider a public agreement on arms control, inspired in part by the logic of the NATO Dual-Track decision of the 1970s-1980s. Consisting of two parts, it would 1) recommit the UK and France to their NPT Pillar II commitments to gradually disarm and commit 2) the other members to never develop, test, produce, manufacture, or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons.

4. **Merge the European Defence Agency and the Directorate-General Defence Industry and Space and create a new High Representative position.** EU member states should consider the merging of the roles of the European Defence Agency and the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space into a single European Defence Service, with the aim of cohering the various rearmament efforts at the EU-level, and to create a new Defence specific High-Representative position akin to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) as the head of the merged Agency.

The military-strategic level

5. **Plan for the possibility of 'de-Americanising' the NATO Command Structure.** Were the US to give up the role of SACEUR within NATO, or otherwise withdrawal important elements from the NATO Command Structure, European states should be prepared to take over these positions. In line with the regional focus discussed above, several are perhaps readily identifiable. SHAPE could be led by the traditionally British Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR), though having a non-EU SACEUR may be politically challenging. The Italian Navy Chief of Staff could take over Joint Force Command (JFC) Naples, and the Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy could take on a dual-hat role with JFC Norfolk. A more political matter would be the commands of NATO's Land and Air commands, headquartered in Türkiye and Germany respectively. Were the service heads of the respective host countries to take over a dual-hatted role, this would spark political problems in Greece and likely Poland. In all cases, rotations may be necessary.

6. **Shift from 'readiness' to 'preparedness'.** An emphasis on readiness has marked the post-2014 adaptation of European forces, with a focus on being able to fill NATO requirements in the Baltics while also possessing a modicum of rapid deployment capability. While both are still necessary tasks, they are insufficient with a return to heavily attritional warfare. All national forces should be brought to full preparedness without cannibalising from other force elements. This requires investment not only in capability shortfall areas, but more into personnel, strong reserve forces, and sustainment.

7. **Develop 'Europe-only' Steadfast Defender and Noon equivalents.** With a reduced US role, major demonstrative exercises could wither. NATO's Steadfast Defender and Noon exercises are key set-piece exercises in alliance strategy towards Russia. European forces should use greater levels of preparedness to conduct European exercises at the same scale as Steadfast Defender and Noon, without any US presence.

8. **Bring Direct Precision Strike discussions into the NATO Nuclear Planning Group.** Information sharing on national DPS developments, especially broad intentions related to targeting, should be shared within the NPG, and certainly within the consultative group described in the previous recommendation. Those states whose DPS concepts explicitly aim to pursue conventional counterforce against Russian nuclear targets should share this aim as a matter of priority.

9. **Develop a European-level National Reserve Forces Committee (NRFC) and align its policies with the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD).** Modelled on NATO's NRFC (National Reserve Forces Committee), the European Union should institute a similar body under the EU Military Committee and task it to study and encourage the wider development of Member States' reserve forces. This work should align with the phases of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), which itself could include a more detailed section on personnel.

10. **Shift from renewal to reform.** The Netherlands should consider a force wide reform of the military for the new era. The focus on renewal should be substituted by one of transformation. This requires much greater emphasis on numbers both in terms of enlisted personnel including reserves and systems and in terms of readiness. A new baseline for preparedness needs to be drawn in which more than one brigade, air squadron, and frigate is fully prepared at one time. Further, their preparedness should not cannibalise the rest of the joint forces. The role of the Operational Headquarters should be fortified. There should be a significant expansion of the *Korps Nationale Reserve* (National Reserve Corps) to ensure that all three services can not only operate but also recover from losses in attritional warfare.

11. **Formulate ARES guidelines to steer R&D and procurement.** The leadership at the Ministry of Defence must facilitate military transformation in recognition of the fact that the extremely limited number of exquisite and extremely expensive systems employed by the different armed services constitutes a core vulnerability in an era of mass precision. High level guidelines should be formulated that delineate a distribution between attritable, replaceable and exquisite systems (ARES). This to be established ARES-ratio should guide R&D and procurement in order to ensure that our armed services will be able to survive on the modern battlefield and sustain their effort beyond the first days of a war.

The defence-industrial level

12. **Double down on decreasing European dependency in key capability areas.** European governments and the EU should meet the targets that have been set out in the European Defence Industrial Strategy and the Defence Readiness 2030, and the fiscal leeway created by SAFE, to strengthen strategic autonomy. These include total intra-EU procurement exceeding 55% of overall procurement by 2030 (from 22% now), collaborative procurement of 40%, and targeted investment in key capability areas. Specific capability areas to target are (1) C4ISR through the creation of a European Space Shield, expanding both Europe's military and civilian space capabilities, and airborne early warning and battle management aircraft; (2) IAMD by bolstering the European Air Shield Initiative and the European Drone Defence Initiative; (3) DPS through expansion of the European Long-range Strike Approach (ELSA) Programme (see below) and renewed impetus for a multi-national programme (rather than a collection of national programmes); and (4) Strategic Airlift by following up on the European System for Outsized Cargo Airlift (ESOCA) project, moving on from the drawing table to the development stage.

13. **Develop national defence-industrial transition contingency plans.** Were relations with the US to further rupture, and support for mission critical capabilities and support functions were to be cut abruptly, national industries would have to step in quickly. Software may become a critical vulnerability as updates fail to occur and backbone systems lose their support. Civil-military coordination would become especially vital in this contingency, with surges needed in areas such as space assets, secure communications, and platform maintenance.

14. **Follow up the EU Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) with an EU Ammunition Stockpile Maintenance Fund.** Stockpiling anything runs counter to usual market logic, as well-revealed by the urgent medical shortages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has extended to the military domain as well, as European forces discovered in Libya and have seen in Ukraine. The European Union should follow up its ASAP Act to support ammunition production with an act to subsidise ammunition stockpile maintenance, with the aim of incentivising industry not only to produce but also maintain stocks over long periods of time with life-cycle care and refresh as needed.

15. **Renew and expand the European Long-Range Strike Approach group to Ukraine.** As of writing, France, Germany, Italy, Poland United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands have joined the European Long-Range Strike Programme (ELSA) to jointly improve procurement and development of DPS. This group should be expanded to include Ukraine, and national efforts should be harmonised to ensure friction is reduced with the projects agreed as part of the ELSA.

16. **Prioritise submarine-launched cruise missile development (SLCM) over land-attack cruise missile (LACM) development in building DPS.** While LACM are becoming staples of future thinking on land forces, SLCMs should perhaps take pride of place in DPS thinking. Returning to the Dual-Track logic, they are arguably more concerning in that they can more easily hide and stealthily approach Russian targets while at the same time they offer an opportunity for future talks with Russia over these precise systems. Given they are more likely to be perceived in a counterforce role than LACMs due to being submarine-launched, Moscow may be more eager to negotiate reductions in the future. Having such assets on patrol would effectively be the "threat that leaves something to chance" sitting in between LACM and nuclear use.

The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

HCSS
Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA The Hague

Follow us on social media:
@hcssnl

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies
Email: info@hcss.nl
Website: www.hcss.nl