European Military Autonomy: What Comes First?

Barry R. Posen

European defence planners, whether they wear a national, NATO or European Union hat, may have breathed a sigh of relief after the June 2025 NATO summit. US President Donald Trump appeared mollified by European commitments to raise defence spending to 3.5% of GDP, and to commit 1.5% of GDP to improve militarily useful infrastructure such as roads, railroads, airports and communications. With the spending faucet opened, national defence ministries could simply get their marching orders from the NATO Defence Planning Process bureaucracy, spread their spending across its laundry list of shortfalls and urgent initiatives, and hope that they make it through Trump's presidency without another conflagration. Such a business-as-usual approach would be a mistake, because it would implicitly be premised on significant US participation in any future war. The question, instead, is what European defence planners need to do first to provide themselves with an autonomous capability to deter and defend.

Uncertainty about the US commitment and the magnitude and timing of a prospective direct Russian threat should be the watchword of European security. Europe should be buying as much insurance in the near term as it can get, which requires temporal prioritisation. While doing what one can to preserve the US security blanket may be attractive to many European statespersons, doing what one must, just in case the blanket is pulled, is essential. The American president is capricious; his political movement is

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fluid; the China threat beckons; US financial resources are strained; and no one can predict how and when the Russia–Ukraine war will end. Worst-case assumptions can as easily paralyse as mobilise, but European defence planners should at least start with bad-case assumptions: a US that is less reliable, and a Russia that recovers from its Ukraine exertions earlier and more robustly than its poor wartime performance and slowing economy might suggest.

Here I will consider the conventional capabilities essential to deterrence and defence – mainly, ground forces, air forces and supporting intelligence, as well as the assets that would permit reinforcement and sustained operations.[1] 'Good enough' – not as 'good as the Americans on their best day' – is the standard for the near term. I am agnostic about which European security institution – NATO or the EU – would ultimately command European forces in the event of a challenge. There is no reason in principle why NATO, even if benignly neglected by the United States, should not be the command structure through which Europe employs military force to deter or defend. NATO experience and organisational capacity argue for giving it pride of place in the near term, so long as Europeans focus on capabilities that would allow the Alliance to wage war without much US help. I do not discuss how Europeans can address their nuclear-deterrence problem. Russia has a vast nuclear arsenal, so senior European officials must think through whether and how they can wield the French and British independent nuclear capabilities to deter Russian nuclear threats. If they have no theory about how to do so, then my discussion is moot. As Lawrence Freedman explains, however, with 500 French and British nuclear weapons, Europe need not consider itself helpless and Russia ought not be confident.[2]

The resurgence of Russian power is the motivating problem for European security. One cannot predict Russia's future intentions. Even Russia's future conventional capability is hard to project. Will it preserve and endeavour to equip fully the large but disparate force it has mobilised to fight in Ukraine, or will it return to its pre-war force structure, which would probably be a challenge to rebuild and sustain? Will it reprise its truculent pre-2022 behaviour along all its borders with NATO, or will it assume new risks and costs to roll back NATO's presence? Russia has proven cautious during its invasion of Ukraine and has scrupulously avoided direct military attacks on NATO states. This caution may not last. Should the worst case occur, and Ukrainian resistance collapse, Russia's security border with the Alliance would lengthen, posing additional daily problems for NATO forces. Russia, then, is the potential challenge, but strategists need to avoid premature closure on the if, where, when and how.

The tone of this discussion is ominous because its standpoint is deterrence and defence. Defence planning for Europe is about how to avoid the vast tragedy of general war. Thus, European statespersons should accompany their military preparations with a careful consideration of how diplomacy might also help manage the emergent competition with Russia and keep it within bounds.

A mass of manoeuvre

To deter future Russian moves, and defend against them if they occur, European planners should be guided by an old concept, the 'mass of manoeuvre': traditionally, a force 'held in reserve … for striking a blow on an exposed flank, or wherever the enemy reveals a weak spot'.[3] This operational concept can be elevated to serve a strategic purpose. Europe needs a force that it can dispatch quickly to a place where it can have maximum effect on Russian decision-making. It must be large enough to give the Russians pause, not only regarding any particular aggressive move, but also about the opportunities such a move might open to NATO. Britain and France committed to this type of programme in the recent Lancaster House 2.0 agreement.[4]

Maintaining such a reserve is essential. When British and French fortunes began to wane in May 1940, Winston Churchill asked General Maurice Gamelin, the French commander, 'where is your mass of manoeuvre?' Gamelin replied that there was none. That response was not quite honest. That mass of manoeuvre had originally been planned, but it had already been committed to a wild goose chase in the Netherlands. This left the entire defence brittle in the centre and vulnerable to catastrophic failure, which indeed occurred when the Germans snuck through the Ardennes Forest and fought their way across the Meuse.[5]

Concentration in Poland

Because of its size, location and transportation connections to the west, Poland is central to both defence and deterrence. It is the place to assemble such a mass of manoeuvre, which would require both a ground and an air component. Though other NATO members are more immediately vulnerable to a Russian threat, Poland is the 'can't lose' linchpin of Europe's eastern defences because it blocks Russia's way west and condemns Russia to the risk of an attrition war with a mobilised Europe that has three times its population and many times its wealth.[6]

Poland is also the potential springboard for repelling Russian challenges in the Baltic states, Belarus and Ukraine. European security experts worry that Russia could turn its attention to any of the Baltic states. The Nordic members of NATO are concerned that Russia may become neuralgic about threats to the Kola Peninsula, where it bases many of its ballistic-missile submarines. European political leaders want to exert influence over the future of Ukraine, and have even gone so far as to consider basing some European units in that country as a deterrent. Finally, there is some apprehension, though not often expressed, that Belarus would make itself an accessory to Russian aggression against the Baltics or even Poland.

Because ground forces are scarce, European planners must make hard choices about how to allocate them to these contingencies. Scattering manoeuvre brigades across Eastern Europe to make political statements would court disaster. By virtue of political geography, Russia could choose to concentrate its forces on one of several possible axes. In the event of attack, scattered NATO forces could be defeated in detail, or worse. Instead, Europeans, whether under a NATO or an EU banner, need to concentrate ground and air forces where they can guard against the worst case, and affect the Russian calculus in any of the key contingencies.

There has been a lively debate about how much force Europeans would need, and what capabilities would be necessary.[7] The 'NATO Readiness Initiative', a proposal led by James Mattis when he was secretary of defense during Trump's first administration, posed a reasonable initial goal. It called for NATO to develop the ability to deploy to Eastern Europe 30 battalions (ten brigades), 30 squadrons, and 30 ships in 30 days. NATO must have based this force objective on an assessment of what planners thought was then needed to deter and defend. Clearly, NATO planners now have more ambitious ultimate force objectives, but this one is reasonable as an initial European effort.[8] It was considered adequate against a Russian force that was smaller than what the Russians field today, but also possessed significantly more equipment than the Russian military possesses now.

It is difficult to estimate the plausible near-term strength of Russian ground forces, including army, airborne and naval infantry units. My assumption is that should the Russia–Ukraine war end, Russia would first endeavour to equip and fully 'people' the 20 divisions plus their support units, and perhaps the 40 independent tank and motor-rifle brigades (excluding miscellaneous wartime mobilised units) that are now attributed to the Russian army in *The Military Balance 2025*.[9] Most of these divisions were built after Russia's annexation of Crimea and infiltration of the Donbas in 2014, and for good reason: the division has for over a century been the most effective way to organise flexible and sustainable combat power for high-intensity war. Because this was done under time pressure, these divisions were often constructed from pre-existing brigades and regiments. If they are ultimately structured similarly to late Cold War Soviet army divisions, they would require 10,000–12,000 soldiers in each division, and another 8,000–11,000 troops in non-divisional support units, for a total 'division slice' of 19,000–23,000 troops per division.[10]

For ease of calculation, I assume a 20,000-person division slice. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has estimated that there are perhaps 40 more independent manoeuvre brigades in the Russian army today: these are probably lean units, with perhaps 3,000–4,000 people each at full strength.[11] Thus, manoeuvre divisions, independent brigades and combat support and service units would require about 520,000 people in total, not far from the present estimated deployable combat strength of the Russian army.[12] I do not include in this estimate Russian conscripts doing their obligatory one-year term of military service because they are not particularly well trained, and not usually deployed to the war in Ukraine, due both to Russian law, which prohibits their use outside the country, and to the Russian government's interest in avoiding public pushback on its policies. Furthermore, some Russian-army soldiers would likely be needed to do the basic work of 'producing' an armed force, to include establishing and operating training bases for technical services; running officer and non-commissioned-officer schools; administering and training the annual conscript intake; arranging for major maintenance of equipment; and fulfilling other rear-echelon functions. In Western militaries, it would not be unusual for a quarter of total personnel to be consumed by these activities.[13]

Russian divisions and their non-divisional support elements historically have been smaller than their NATO counterparts, and this pattern seems to persist. The division slice of the larger European powers probably averages close to 30,000 troops. Russian divisions also employ the regiment rather than the brigade as their principal tactical subunit, and typically field three or four regiments. Though often considered comparable to brigades, regiments tend to be smaller and less capable. In my judgement, most Western brigades should on the average be considered at least 50% more capable than their Russian brigade or regiment counterparts.[14] Though this is an artificial comparison from a tactical standpoint, the entire Russian army's 70–80 regiments and 40 independent brigades would be roughly comparable in combat power to the 70-odd NATO brigades in the northern and centre regions (see Table 1).

In the event of a challenge to NATO, Russian ground forces would, in addition to performing their offensive tasks, have to deter an opportunistic resumption of combat by Ukraine to recover its lost lands, keep watch on the long border with Finland and insure against possible trouble in the Caucasus. It is unlikely, regardless of Moscow's current friendship with Beijing, that Russia would entirely denude its frontier with China. Against these multiple demands, widely reported Russian equipment losses in the Russia–Ukraine war will weaken Russian combat units in the near term. Although Russian airborne and naval infantry divisions would add to their total, Russian ground forces in an eastern contingency are unlikely to outweigh NATO ground forces in the aftermath of the Russia–Ukraine war. In a subsequent war, however, Russia would try to outnumber NATO forces at the point of attack, which is why Europe needs a large manoeuvre element to counter such a concentration.

Table 1: **NATO/European brigades – northern and centre regions**

Country	Armoured, mechanised or 'light' mechanised	Infantry	TOTAL	Estimated initially available for centre- and northern-region contingency
France	4.5	2	6.5	3
Germany	6.5	2	8.5	4
United Kingdom	3	3	6	3
Subtotal – major military powers	**14**	**7**	**21**	**10**
Czech Republic	2	–	2	2
Denmark	1	–	1	1
Poland	13	1	14	14
Subtotal – centre region	**16**	**1**	**17**	**17**
Belgium	1	–	1	–
Netherlands	2	1	3	2
Subtotal – other western allies	**3**	**1**	**4**	**2**
Canada	3	–	3	1
Finland	2 (+2 battlegroups)	9	12	12
Norway	1	1	2	2
Sweden	3	1	4	3
Subtotal – northern allies	**10**	**11**	**21**	**18**
Estonia	1	1	2	2
Latvia	1	4	5	5
Lithuania	1	1	2	2
Subtotal – Baltic states	**3**	**6**	**9**	**9**
Subtotal – centre and northern regions	**46**	**26**	**72**	**57**
Subtotal – other non-US NATO*	**67**	**21**	**88**	**Unknown**

Source: IISS, *The Military Balance 2025*.
* Includes Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Turkiye.

At ten brigades, the NATO force would conform in size roughly to the 'Tier 1' force that NATO established as its ten-day mobilisation objective in 2022.[15] Europeans should proceed with dispatch to develop this capability for themselves.[16] The ten-brigade force would, in a crisis, reinforce the Polish army, which itself reportedly has 14 brigades, one in the initial stages of formation. Higher-level division and corps headquarters will be necessary to command these forces, but there is no shortage of these in Europe.[17] A reinforced Poland would then become an exceptionally hard target, with forces comparable to those Ukraine mounted to thwart Russia's offensive in early 2022. Between them, the three key military players in Western Europe –

France, Germany and the United Kingdom – field some 21 combat brigades. They alone can handily complete, and if necessary even expand, the initial ground force. Not every brigade will always be fully ready for combat, but it is reasonable to expect that one-third to one-half of them should be initially deployable. While not all such brigades are tank-heavy armoured units, they are all robust by the standards of both sides in the Russia–Ukraine war, which for three years have fought fiercely to a rough stalemate.[18] That said, reports of unreadiness for war in some NATO units, especially German ones, mean that initial spending must go to equipment maintenance, training and full staffing. Selective efforts to 'heavy up' infantry and airborne units would also make sense.[19] Stocks of spare parts and ammunition must be augmented.

European states must also act quickly to complete infrastructure projects, ground-transport expansions and improvements, and port facilities to move their military forces in good time and support them in combat.[20] This would involve strengthening roads, rail bridges and highways to accommodate very heavy military equipment, the selective addition of railroad track and highway lanes to increase throughput capacity, the completion of the shift to the European rail gauge in the Baltic states and Finland, and some preparation of assembly areas in Poland to accommodate a rapid troop build-up. The EU has pursued such initiatives under the auspices of the EU Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.[21] The rate of expenditure still seems modest, however, relative to the urgency of the moment.[22] Because infrastructure investments draw mainly on the construction and transportation industries, and not the presently overstretched defence industry, logistical improvements could plausibly be a rapid path to enhancing Western Europe's ability to project power into Eastern and Northern Europe. If they have not done so already, member states should also enact legislation to facilitate the mobilisation of transportation and construction equipment from the civilian sector, which has abundant military-useful assets, especially heavy-duty, long-haul trucks.[23]

Non-US NATO countries have more than 100 fighter squadrons to draw on to reach the 30-squadron goal (see Table 2).[24] France, Germany and the UK,

Table 2: **Non-US NATO fighter squadrons**

Country	Squadrons (including naval air units)	Estimated available for centre- and northern-region contingency
France	14*	7
Germany	11	11
United Kingdom	9	4
Subtotal – major military powers	**34**	**22**
Czech Republic	2	2
Denmark	2	2
Poland	7	7
Subtotal – centre region	**11**	**11**
Belgium	4	2
Netherlands	3	2
Subtotal – other western allies	**7**	**4**
Canada	4	1
Finland	2	2
Norway	2	2
Sweden	6	6
Subtotal – northern region	**14**	**11**
Bulgaria	1	–
Greece	11	–
Hungary	1	–
Italy	10	3
Portugal	2	–
Romania	2 + 1 light attack	–
Slovakia	1	–
Spain	8	3
Turkiye	9	–
Subtotal – southern region	**46**	**6**
TOTAL	**112**	**54**

Sources: Data on squadrons is taken from IISS, *The Military Balance 2025* and other open sources published since its release. Estimates of squadrons available for contingencies represent the author's own calculations, assuming that some countries will retain squadrons for national air defence or other contingencies, and that front-line countries will use everything they have.
* Includes *Rafale* squadrons committed to the nuclear mission.

with a total of 34 squadrons, could manage that requirement by themselves, but probably would prefer to keep some squadrons in reserve for national air defence and maritime operations. Other NATO members would have to make good the deficit. The Alliance's front-line states in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe have another 21 squadrons. Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain have 25 squadrons to draw on.[25] Not all reinforcing aircraft need to fly from Polish bases. German fighters are probably better off flying from their own airfields, which can host many allied squadrons as well. Some forward-operating bases in Poland have already been constructed.[26] Alliance aircraft are often in Poland for training or surveillance missions.[27] Even so, more airfield improvements there may be necessary.[28]

Though national holdings of air-deliverable munitions are not publicly shared, it is likely that European forces urgently need better-stocked magazines. Britain and France seem to have decided as a matter of priority to acquire more of their most capable long-range missile, the SCALP/*Storm Shadow*, and to improve their production lines.[29] This sophisticated deep-attack munition is for high-value targets and could greatly assist efforts to suppress Russian air defences to limit their effectiveness against Alliance attack aircraft. But these must be augmented with less costly munitions optimised for attacks on ground forces. While there are good European air-launched munitions, such as the French *Hammer*, in relatively low-rate production, thousands of the widely used and relatively inexpensive US Joint Direct Attack Munitions are produced each year. European nations should try to buy 10,000 such munitions as soon as possible, wherever they can get them.[30]

The threat to the Baltic states

The membership of the Baltic states poses a difficult defence problem for NATO. The Baltic states have small populations and concomitantly small armies. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have a long border with Russia and Belarus, roughly 750 kilometres of front, which is as much as NATO troops defended in Germany during the Cold War with 30 active divisions, or 90 brigades. Even if NATO only tried to emulate what appears to be the average front-wide Ukrainian defensive-force density, it would need a brigade every 25 km, or nearly 30 brigades. There is not much distance from these borders to the sea. Populating the front with NATO brigades would leave the entire effort vulnerable to a single major penetration by Russian armour, however unlikely its tactical success may seem in light of recent experience in Ukraine.[31] NATO forces would also be disadvantaged by the narrow land corridor – the 'Suwalki Gap' – that links Poland to the Baltics, running as it does between the Russian forward-force concentration in Kaliningrad and Belarus. Russian artillery on either or both sides would complicate reinforcement and resupply until it were suppressed. Although the Baltic Sea may now be something close to a 'NATO lake', the Russian outpost in Kaliningrad makes it hard to cruise up the coast with reinforcements.[32]

A NATO mass of manoeuvre in Poland would complicate any Russian effort to threaten the Baltics. Though talking 'offence' is politically sensitive, this force would implicitly threaten Kaliningrad or Belarus, or both, in the event of a Russian attack.[33] To have any hope of assisting the Baltic states directly, they probably would have to do so in any case, if only to improve their land, sea and air lines of communication to the embattled Baltics. Russia would also have to worry that any large-scale Russian troop movements into northeastern Belarus could precipitate a NATO countermove into western Belarus, or even a counter-attack on any flank that they exposed. To ensure this effect, the NATO force would need sufficient logistical support to sustain offensive operations.[34]

Sweden's airpower and the defence of the Baltic states

The Baltic states are difficult for NATO to defend directly with ground forces, but NATO air forces, based not only in Western and Eastern Europe, but also in Sweden, can strongly affect any Russian offensive. This is especially the case because rivers, streams, bogs and lakes are plentiful in the Baltic region. Destruction of bridges and highways by local forces and airstrikes from multiple axes can create choke points that would slow the advance of Russian ground forces and render them vulnerable to further air attack.[35] It would be unusual for airstrikes alone to stop a well-supported ground offensive, but in combination with carefully planned and tailored ground operations, they could exact a high price on the Russians in terms of lost forces and lost time. A Russian planner would need to worry that gains in the Baltics would come at the cost of vulnerabilities arising elsewhere.

Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO opens new possibilities for NATO airpower to assist in the defence of the Baltic states, especially Estonia and Latvia, or to help meet any challenge in northern Scandinavia. Sweden would be the key contributor to air operations. Not only does it boast a capable air force, with six squadrons fielding nearly 100 *Gripen* fighter aircraft, but it can offer numerous military and militarily useable civilian airfields to allied reinforcements. US and European fighter squadrons have already trained at some of these bases.[36] During the Cold War, it was not unusual for NATO (mainly, the United States) to pre-position supporting equipment on air-force bases and civilian airfields in Europe that would receive reinforcing fighter aircraft.[37] The Swedish Air Force itself often exploited civilian infrastructure, and was known for its clever preparation and exploitation of selected stretches of highway.

There is no obvious sizing principle for determining how much allied European airpower should be dispatched to Sweden rather than sent elsewhere. Six or eight additional squadrons could rapidly double Sweden's air strength, bringing it to perhaps 150 high-quality front-line aircraft.[38] This would equal half the strength of the Israeli Air Force today, exceed that of the Ukrainian air force on the eve of the 2022 Russian invasion, and nearly equal three US aircraft-carrier air groups. Russian planners could not ignore this combat potential, especially given the even larger air threat Russia would face from allied airpower in Poland and Germany.

The operational-intelligence problem

A lack of intelligence capabilities is often cited as a key reason to doubt Europe's ability to manage large-scale military operations. Intelligence capacity is opaque by design, but Europe is better fixed than many think. European states reportedly field 49 military satellites for intelligence collection and communications, plus many civilian satellites with military utility.[39] The number of intelligence-gathering satellites, in particular, reflects the ability to collect, but not to exploit, intelligence. It is a staple of the intelligence craft that 'all-source intelligence analysis' is central to the intelligence process. Means include not only satellites, but also unpiloted reconnaissance aircraft, fixed and mobile terrestrial signals-intelligence collection antennae, human sources (spies and special-operations forces), and phone and cable taps.

The fusion of operational and tactical intelligence, its interpretation by those conversant with military operations, and the transmission of both information and interpretation to those who can use it before it is overtaken by events, provides a powerful fillip to combat power. Western powers, especially the US, afforded Ukraine such an edge, providing that country's outnumbered military with access to the $100-billion-a-year US intelligence complex by way of a US Army-operated intelligence-fusion centre in Wiesbaden, Germany.[40] The US briefly suspended this connection in March 2025. In case it likewise unplugs its intelligence from existing NATO command structures, the EU must be able to quickly substitute its own capabilities.

Although some fusion of 'strategic' intelligence, to serve high-level policy, apparently occurs within the EU, European states seem not to share their intelligence extensively among themselves.[41] There is little evidence of any ability within the EU to fuse and interpret all-source intelligence in near real time for operational purposes.[42] Two EU institutions, the Intelligence and Situation Centre and the European Union Military Staff Intelligence Directorate, conduct intelligence analysis, but both rely on whatever information member states choose to provide them. They also receive intelligence from the European Union Satellite Centre, which collects and exploits open-source imagery. It is very likely, however, that most information gathered by national intelligence satellites is closely held by the national intelligence agencies that operate them, and that in general intelligence-collection assets owned by European states cannot be exploited for collective operational and tactical purposes in a timely fashion.

If so, Europeans must remedy the problem as quickly as possible. Their model should be the US Tactical Exploitation of National Capabilities (TENCAP) programme. Fifty years ago, the US military, starting with the army, came to understand that huge amounts of intelligence gathered by satellites, either to inform civilian strategic decision-making or to amass information on Russian nuclear forces, was not shared with most US non-nuclear forces. Since then, TENCAP has funded a range of programmes designed to make this information available, as needed, to front-line US forces.[43]

Developing a European version of TENCAP is mainly a political issue: European governments must decide to do it. But it will also likely implicate organisational management: intelligence agencies jealously guard their capabilities and don't like sharing. As a matter of priority, European states must find a way to channel intelligence information to existing NATO or European 'operational intelligence' centres to support combined naval, air and ground operations in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region.[44] The main task is to develop the communications links and data-processing systems that permit intelligence gathered by European national assets to be shared, fused and exploited. Given extant sensitivities, such sharing may be politically impossible in peacetime.

British and Canadian membership in the Five Eyes partnership alongside Australia, New Zealand and the United States will complicate European intelligence-sharing. The UK and Canada cannot generously share what they get from the Americans, which is most of what the partnership yields them. In turn, Europeans will not wish to give away to the Americans intelligence on matters as to which the Americans do not share with them. In the event of a war in which the US simply declines to participate, the UK and Canada would suddenly find themselves myopic, if not entirely blind. Accordingly, the drive to optimise operational intelligence will need to occur inside the EU. For it to be effective in war, though, when the UK and Canada will be expected to participate, European countries will have to practise 'wartime transition', even if in peacetime the two lines of effort remain largely separate. The EU could use Eurocorps – a 'multinational, fully deployable and highly autonomous headquarters' prepared to 'plan and conduct military operations' mainly for the EU and NATO[45] – as the proving ground for required capabilities, and should establish a comparable platform for developing supporting air and naval operations.

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European members of NATO are publicly committed to major increases in defence spending, so the financial resources available to remedy European shortfalls should be plentiful. Production capacity, however, is limited. Furthermore, military personnel in Europe are scarce, and costly to recruit and maintain. Countries may need to undertake arduous political debates about the revival of conscription if they wish significantly to increase the size of their forces. Defence managers, accustomed to tracking at best 2% of national wealth, will now need to monitor expenditures that are nearly twice as high. These constraints argue for careful assessment of what to do first.

Europeans must attempt to extract the maximum amount of combat power they can from the force structure they already have. This does not mean that new investments are unnecessary; it does mean that in the first instance, they need to be tailored to a specific strategic goal. I have proposed 'mass of manoeuvre' as a unifying concept. Extracting the full strategic value of existing force structures and immediate new spending will depend substantially on cooperation at a level that has often eluded European actors. Achieving it requires full acknowledgement of sobering strategic realities.

Military power is insurance against terrible events that we hope will not occur. Europeans face two major strategic factors of uncertain magnitude and disruptiveness: Russia's prospective intentions and capabilities, and the United States' future commitment to wage war alongside its NATO allies. The former could be robust, and the latter limited or non-existent. Europeans need to focus their spending on this uncomfortably plausible double problem.

Notes

1 Trump's truculent rhetoric about Greenland and Canada indicates that he is quite committed to maintaining US control of the Atlantic Ocean, which suggests that the US would likely manage the Russian naval threat to the North Atlantic even if it did disengage from the Alliance. Furthermore, regardless of whether the US were active in the war, the Russians would have to hold back forces to defend against the US Navy because the Russians depend on their own nuclear-missile submarines as their ultimate deterrent against US coercion. Though European navies could suffer from shortages of munitions and sonobuoys, and face some readiness issues, they are well placed to address any Russian maritime threat. A European coalition would significantly outnumber the Russian Navy in both surface combatants and submarines. The Russian Navy also suffers from major geographical disadvantages: it faces choke points in the Baltic, the Atlantic and the Black seas, which benefit those who would seek to bottle it up.

2 The nuclear-deterrence problem is ably addressed by Lawrence Freedman in 'Europe's Nuclear Deterrent: The Here and Now', *Survival*, vol. 67, no. 3, June–July 2025, pp. 7–24, especially pp. 14–21. Freedman reminds us that the two

European powers together possess 500 deliverable nuclear weapons, and that many of these could survive a determined attack designed to eliminate them. These weapons could wreak unprecedented destruction on Russia. Russian planners would have to convince themselves not to worry, a high hill to climb. European first-use threats to deter a Russian conventional attack would be less credible, but the purpose of conventional-force improvements is to avoid depending on first use to deter all contingencies.

3 'Mass of Manoeuvre', *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2000, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/mass-of-manoeuvre_n?tab=meaning_and_use. I first developed this argument in Barry R. Posen, 'How Europe Can Deter Russia', *Foreign Affairs*, 21 April 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/north-america/how-europe-can-deter-russia#.

4 According to the agreement 'the [combined joint force] will facilitate the deployment of a force fully interoperable with NATO and available as the Alliance's Strategic Reserve'. The force would include perhaps 50,000 military army, navy and air-force personnel from both countries. Prime Minister's Office, 'Lancaster House 2.0: Declaration on Modernising UK–French Defence and Security Cooperation', Gov.uk, 10 July 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lancaster-house-20-declaration-on-modernising-uk-french-defence-and-security-cooperation. More generally, the declaration includes plans for intensified Franco-British cooperation in the nuclear, non-nuclear and industrial realms.

5 See Don W. Alexander, 'Repercussions of the Breda Variant', in Nick Smart (ed.), *The Second World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), especially pp. 479–88.

6 See Barry R. Posen, 'Europe Can Defend Itself', *Survival*, vol. 62, no. 6, December 2020–January 2021, pp. 7–34, especially p. 17.

7 See, for example, Douglas Barrie et al., 'Forum: Can Europe Defend Itself?', *Survival,* vol. 63, no. 1, February–March 2021, pp. 17–49.

8 It has been reported that NATO force planners believe that the member states need to contribute 35–50 new brigades to the Alliance, in addition to some 80 brigades that are already committed. These reports attribute this information to unnamed official sources. No public analytic support for these numbers has been provided, nor has there been official confirmation. Given that non-US member states already field nearly 150 brigades, it is difficult to know what to make of these reports or figures. See Ellie Cook, 'NATO Proposes Huge 50% Increase in Number of Troops: Report', *Newsweek*, 29 May 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/nato-proposes-huge-50-increase-number-troops-report-2078433; and Sabine Siebold, 'NATO Will Need 35–50 Extra Brigades Under New Defence Plans', Reuters, 8 July 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-will-need-35-50-extra-brigades-under-new-defence-plans-source-says-2024-07-08/.

9 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance*

2025 (Abingdon: Routledge for the IISS, 2025). See also Mason Clark and Karolina Hird, *Russian Regular Ground Forces Order of Battle* (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2023), for an effort to build an estimate of Russian force structure from Russian sources. As of 2023, the authors reported 13 divisions, not all of them fully structured, and 22 independent brigades or regiments in the Russian army. To expand their army to the size reported in *The Military Balance 2025* in less than two years while suffering incessant casualties in Ukraine, the Russians would have had to have cut a few corners.

10 'Division slice' is the term of art for a division plus the non-divisional combat support and combat-service support elements that augment its combat power and sustainability. For the Soviet Cold War slice, see the peacetime and mobilised strength estimates of division and support-unit personnel levels in CIA Directorate of Intelligence, 'Readiness of Soviet Forces in Central Europe: Implications for a Rapid Transition to War', September 1987, declassified 18 July 2012, CIA Reading Room, pp. 18–20, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1987-09-01.pdf. For differences between Soviet and NATO division slices, see Steven Canby, *The Alliance and Europe: Part IV, Military Doctrine and Technology*, *Adelphi* 109 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1974/75), pp. 34–41.

11 IISS, *The Military Balance 2025*, pp. 181–2. See also Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, 'The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of Russian Ground Forces', Foreign Military Studies Office, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2016, p. 32, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/hot%20spots/documents/russia/2017-07-the-russian-way-of-war-grau-bartles.pdf. It seems plausible that these brigades would generally have little ability to operate independently. Their tactical role is likely to augment divisions in the field, or to replace units in combat that may have suffered very high attrition, which seems to be common given Russian tactical practices.

12 For a thorough review of official Russian claims of Russia's total military personnel, see Yury Fedorov, 'Russian Military Manpower After Two and a Half Years of War in Ukraine', IFRI Studies no. 48, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), November 2024, pp. 10–21, https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/russian-military-manpower-after-two-and-half-years-war-ukraine. Fedorov suggests that, by the end of 2024, the Russian army had about 500,000 contract soldiers and would have a hard time increasing its strength without a major mobilisation of civilians who had previously served. This mobilisation has not occurred.

13 In the active US Army, the figure is about 30%. See Congressional Budget Office, 'The U.S. Military's Force Structure: A Primer, 2021 Update', May 2021, p. 20, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2021-05/57088-Force-Structure-Primer.pdf. The IISS in *The Military Balance 2025*, p. 180, estimates the number of personnel

overall in the Russian Armed Forces who might be fulfilling some of these tasks, but does not break these numbers down by service.

14 This is a rough judgement based on a larger division slice, qualitatively superior equipment and better training.

15 See NATO, 'New NATO Force Model', https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf.

16 European members of NATO have the forces to achieve this goal: they collectively field nearly 100 fighter squadrons (including ground-attack and multi-role units), 100 major warships and 150 brigades.

17 Candidate corps headquarters are the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, commanded by the UK; France's Rapid Reaction Corps; the German–Netherlands Corps; and the somewhat under-structured Eurocorps headquarters in Strasbourg.

18 I take it as a given that Western armies have observed the value of drones of various types and have programmes under way both to acquire their own and to defend against those of others. Even at the tactical level, European soldiers, sailors and air-force personnel should be asking the same question that I am asking here: what problems should we fix first, and what fixes are 'good enough' for now?

19 Light, motorised or airborne infantry brigades would benefit from the addition of a combined-arms mechanised battalion in many contingencies. This can be accomplished more quickly than building whole new mechanised brigades. Each battalion would contain two infantry companies (30 infantry fighting vehicles), two tank companies (30 tanks), and supporting heavy mortars and mobile air-defence weapons. Planners would still retain the special attributes of rapid deployment for forested, urban and ex-urban, and swampy terrain provided by infantry units. They would have the option of heavying them up if needed, but could otherwise use the extra mechanised battalions to augment the combat power of existing mechanised brigades.

20 See European Commission, 'Commissioners Tzitzikostas and Kubilius to Discuss Necessary Investments in EU Military Mobility and Infrastructure', 1 July 2025, https://transport.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/commissioners-tzitzikostas-and-kubilius-discuss-necessary-investments-eu-military-mobility-and-2025-07-01_en.

21 See High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Action Plan on Military Mobility 2.0', European Commission, 10 November 2022, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c3d3067c-6d9a-4f95-9a69-4dd99c340188_en?filename=Action%20plan%20on%20military%20mobility%202.0.pdf.

22 The EU has committed about €1.7 billion to military-infrastructure projects, which is meant to be matched by equal spending by the member countries. See European Commission, 'Support to the EU

Military Mobility Action Plan', January 2024, https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9348283c-1a54-4c66-9428-195439b084ca_en?filename=MilMob%20factsheet%202023-web.pdf. By comparison, across Europe more than €200bn per year is invested in transportation infrastructure. See Mordor Intelligence, 'Europe Transportation Infrastructure Construction Market Size and Share Analysis – Growth Trends and Forecasts (2025–2030)', https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/europe-transportation-infrastructure-construction-market. For details on priority improvements needed for the rail system in Germany, see Jannik Hartmann, 'Military Mobility', DGAP Policy Brief 10, German Council on Foreign Relations, 19 June 2024, https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/military-mobility.

23 Nearly six million trucks are in circulation in the EU. ACEA, 'Fact Sheet: Trucks', 5 February 2025, https://www.acea.auto/fact/fact-sheet-trucks/. See also Eurostat, 'Road Freight Transport by Vehicle Characteristics', 8 October 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Road_freight_transport_by_vehicle_characteristics#Highlights.

24 Although *The Military Balance 2025*, from which the data for this article was drawn, defines a 'fighter' as an aircraft with primarily an air-to-air combat role, in this article the term also applies to tactical combat aircraft with multi-role and ground-attack functions.

25 Although the deployment of southern ground forces to Central Europe may be slow and inefficient, the same cannot be said of airpower. Italy and Spain have fighter squadrons to contribute.

26 See Kyle Cope, 'Łask AB Runway Reopens, Increases US, Polish Military Abilities in Region', US Air Force, 25 September 2019, https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1970868/ask-ab-runway-reopens-increases-us-polish-military-abilities-in-region/.

27 US and European member-state aircraft are often reported to be operating from Malbork and Lask, both Polish Air Force bases. See, for example, George Allison, 'RAF and Swedish Air Force Begin NATO Air Policing in Poland', *UK Defence Journal*, 7 April 2025, https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/raf-and-swedish-air-force-begin-nato-air-policing-in-poland/; Rebecca Rommen, 'NATO Is Deploying Dutch and Norwegian F-35s Over Poland in Major Boost to Air Defenses', *Business Insider*, 11 July 2025, https://www.businessinsider.com/nato-deploying-dutch-norway-f35-poland-air-defense-ukraine-russia-2025-7; and Andrew Stephens, 'Oklahoma ANG F-16s Deploy to Polish Air Base for Aviation Detachment Rotation', US Air Force, 16 July 2024, https://www.usafe.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3840125/oklahoma-ang-f-16s-deploy-to-polish-air-base-for-aviation-detachment-rotation/.

28 See 'Poland to Adapt All Civilian Airports for Dual-military Use', *Kyiv Independent*, 26 February 2025, https://kyivindependent.com/poland-to-adapt-all-civilian-airports-for-dual-military-use/. My most recent effort to ascertain the current

state of Polish military airfields failed to discover much. The commercial satellite companies or Google itself have been prevailed upon to blur the imagery. This is not uncommon in regions of military interest.

29 See 'Lancaster House 2.0', item 3, paragraph c.

30 It is unclear how NATO decides how many munitions to advise countries to stock. If we assume that ten of the 20 Russian army divisions are available for an offensive, and that each one has as many as 500 combat vehicles, this implies a 5,000-vehicle target set. Assuming only half the weapons fired destroy a combat vehicle, 10,000 munitions would be needed to cover the targets. This is artificial because many of these vehicles would encounter ground-based weapons systems that might destroy them, and less than 100% destruction will usually render a unit combat-ineffective. An initial 10,000-munition goal therefore seems a reasonable, conservative standard. On the French Safran system, see Safran, 'AASM HAMMER™ – Highly Agile Modular Munition Extended Range', https://www.safran-group.com/products-services/aasm-hammer-tm-highly-agile-modular-munition-extended-range. On the US Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM), see US Navy, 'Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM)', https://www.navy.mil/Resources/Fact-Files/Display-FactFiles/Article/2166820/joint-direct-attack-munition-jdam/. By all accounts, hundreds of thousands of JDAMs have been produced. The current total production rate is unclear, but rates have been as high as 45,000 per year. See US Department of Defense, 'Selected Acquisition Report: Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM)', 17 April 2019, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/Selected_Acquisition_Reports/FY_2018_SARS/19-F-1098_DOC_46_JDAM_SAR_Dec_2018.pdf. This year, the current version of the JDAM can be bought for under $100,000. See US Department of Defense, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, 'Program Acquisition Costs by Weapon System', July 2025, part 5, p. 2, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2026/FY2026_Weapons.pdf.

31 Both the French misadventure in Breda, Netherlands, in 1940, and the German Army Group North's retreat to Courland, Latvia, in 1944, argue against such a deployment. See Alexander, 'Repercussions of the Breda Variant'; and John Erickson, *The Road to Berlin: Stalin's War with Germany* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), pp. 411–22. A north–south deployment of most European manoeuvre brigades along the Baltic border would hold the risk of a penetration through Latvia and/or Lithuania, which would isolate NATO forces to the north.

32 See Robert Dalsjö, Christofer Berglund and Michael Jonsson, *Bursting the Bubble – Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications*, FOI-R-4651-SE, Swedish Defence Research Agency, March 2019, for a comprehensive

overview of Russian anti-access/area-denial capabilities in Kaliningrad and a range of countermeasures that might be employed against them.

33 General Christopher Donahue, the commander of the US Army in Europe, observed of Kaliningrad that NATO has the capability to 'take that down from the ground in a timeframe that is unheard of and faster than we have ever been able to do'. Quoted in 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/.

34 Close readers of my 2021 debate with several other analysts in these pages (Barrie et al., 'Forum: Can Europe Defend Itself?') may recall that to deter a Russian attack on Europe, I focused on a standard of defensive adequacy for European forces sufficient to defend Poland and buy time for a much wealthier and more populous Europe to mobilise, and at the same time to squeeze Russian trade. That remains my baseline standard for deterrence of a major Russian attack. Russia must convince itself that it can avoid a war of attrition with Europe. My interlocutors chose a standard based on Europe's ability to mount an immediate, high-confidence, large-scale counter-offensive. To deal with new uncertainties about Russian intentions and to support new European ambitions to influence the future of Ukraine, I propose a middle ground here: the ability to threaten important Russian values, or exposed Russian forces, if Russia were to threaten limited attacks designed to pick off hard-to-defend Alliance members or partners. This would also imply a contingent ability to assist Ukraine militarily, should such a decision be taken in the future.

35 Some preparations are already under way. See Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, 'Lithuania Unveils Plans for Multilayer Border Defense Line', *Defense News*, 14 August 2025, https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/08/15/lithuania-unveils-plans-for-multi-layer-border-defense-line/.

36 See Thomas Newdick, 'French Rafale Fighters Project Power Forward to Sweden', War Zone, 23 April 2025, https://www.twz.com/air/french-rafale-fighters-project-power-forward-to-sweden. For the names and locations of important Swedish airfields see LFV, 'Locations', https://www.lfv.se/en/about-us/this-is-lfv/locations.

37 See Donald Lewis et al., 'A Perspective on the USAFE Collocated Operating Base System', RAND Note, N-2366-AF, July 1986.

38 For heuristic purposes, assume that half of these aircraft were committed to attack sorties, while the other half were committed to air defence or the suppression of Russian surface-to-air missile batteries. If each aircraft carried four munitions and could fly two sorties per day, the total force could attack 600 discrete aim points per day, or nearly 4,000 in a week. Assuming there are sufficient precision-guided munitions to support this effort, these strikes alone, even if half of them missed, would severely complicate

life for a Russian ground-force commander. Targets could range from bridges, road culverts and dams to Russian combat and support vehicles.

39 See Rudy Ruitenberg, 'Mind the Gaps: Europe's To-do List for Defense Without the US', *Defense News*, 25 February 2025, https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/02/25/mind-the-gaps-europes-to-do-list-for-defense-without-the-us/.

40 See Adam Entous, 'The Secret History of America's Involvement in the Ukraine War', *New York Times*, 29 March 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/29/world/europe/us-ukraine-military-war-wiesbaden.html.

41 See Laurence Nunez-Belda, 'How Intelligence Supports EU Security', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 16 May 2022, https://ip-quarterly.com/en/how-intelligence-supports-eu-security; and Pia Philippa Seyfried, 'A European Intelligence Service? Potentials and Limits of Intelligence Cooperation at EU Level', Security Policy Working Paper No. 20/2017, Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2017, https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/working_paper_2017_20.pdf.

42 The principal 'space-faring' European militaries do have some capacity to do this for themselves, with information collected mainly from their national assets, or in the case of the UK, US assets.

43 See Brandon Pollachek and Jurelle J. Mendoza, 'Army TENCAP Celebrates 50 Years of Delivering Intelligence', US Army, 12 May 2023, https://peoiews.army.mil/2023/05/12/army-tencap-celebrates-50-years-of-delivering-intelligence/.

44 NATO recognises the value of intelligence fusion, and the value of its rapid dissemination to the tactical level. It also acknowledges the obstacles to doing so: 'The objective of NATO's Joint ISR is to champion the concept of Allies' "responsibility to share" relevant information over the concept of only sharing information on a "need to know" basis.' NATO, 'Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance', 19 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_111830.htm.

45 Eurocorps, 'A Force for the EU and NATO', https://www.eurocorps.org/about-us/a-force-for-the-eu-nato/.