A European Reassurance Force for Ukraine: Options and Challenges

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Cover

NATO military forces during static display after Exercise Steadfast Dart 2025 at the Smardan Training Area, in Smardan, south-eastern Romania, on February 19, 2025 (Photo by Daniel Mihailescu/AFP via Getty Images)

Executive Summary

The UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron recently announced their willingness to create a 'coalition of the willing' to safeguard a potential ceasefire agreement in Ukraine. A 'reassurance' or 'deterrence' force is a better frame for this discussion than a 'peacekeeping force', given that one of its tasks would be to respond to a potential Russian violation of a ceasefire agreement. Therefore, agreed response options in the event of a significant breach of a ceasefire would bolster the deterrent value of any deployment. Consequently, the force deployed would need to be credible to Moscow and the coalition resolved to act decisively in the event of a breach of the ceasefire.

The composition of such a force remains unclear, though both leaders have said a US 'backstop' is needed. This IISS analysis sets out three options for such a reassurance force and challenges that may be posed to their deployment:

- A small-scale force with a deployed land component of a brigade of about 10,000 troops, supported by a limited air component and naval assets;
- A medium-scale force based on a land component of a large division, with about 25,000 troops supported by larger air and maritime components; and
- A large-scale force centred on a corps-sized land component of between 60,000 and 100,000 troops, supported by substantial air and maritime elements.

A small-scale force, potentially led by France and the UK under the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force construct, could be implemented and sustained most straightforwardly, requiring fewer assets and with fewer troops deployed. Its deterrence effect on Russian forces would mostly be achieved by its very presence since its capability for high-intensity combat operations would be limited.

Medium- and large-scale deployments would increase the reassurance and deterrence effect, but deploying the force would take longer. The divisional-sized force should be able to counter a similarly sized Russian incursion and would be much better placed to protect itself than a single brigade. The large-scale corps-level force – while deploying more slowly – should present a yet more credible military deployment.

However, the longer the European deployment carries on, and the larger the force becomes, the greater the risk that some of Europe's capability gaps and shortages become exposed, particularly if the US does not offer a backstop. A US contribution would be particularly important for enablers – such as ISR and strategic intelligence support – while Europe's other gaps in combat engineering, rocket artillery and suppression of enemy air defences would also become apparent. Moreover, force generation over time could prove a challenge for European countries as troop-contributing states would have to manage multiple troop rotations. Supporting long-term deployments could also cause stress elsewhere, for instance, on countries deploying forces to other missions in Europe.

Such stresses could be eased if a greater number of states took part, such as NATO ally Canada or some of Europe´s Asia-Pacific partners. More participating nations might complicate command and control arrangements and logistics, but their participation would also have political advantages.

In all three options, extra complications would arise should contributing states decide to impose national caveats on their participation, while agreed rules of engagement among all contributing states would also be necessary, as would agreement on acceptable levels of risk.

Europeans could deploy a reassurance force, but without a US backstop, this would become progressively more difficult the larger the force became. At the same time, there is a clear risk that Russia might challenge the force, including by mounting armed attacks – either conventional, sub-threshold, or both.

Introduction

On 2 March, France's President Emmanuel Macron and the United Kingdom´s Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer announced a 'coalition of the willing' to form a military force to safeguard a potential ceasefire agreement in Ukraine. However, little detail exists on the scale, duration or contributing states for such a potential force deployment, although both leaders have insisted that the forces would require a United States 'backstop'. What is clear is that the term 'peacekeeping force', which has been used in the public debate, is ill-suited as a frame. Rather, a 'reassurance' or 'deterrence' force is a better description, given that one of the tasks of such a force would be to respond to a potential Russian violation of a ceasefire agreement, raising the stakes of any European deployment.

Against this background, this paper assesses three options for reassurance and deterrence force structures that European NATO member states could consider: a small reassurance force, a medium-size deployment, and a large-scale force. It will also assess challenges to their implementation.

It is possible that the UK–French-led initiative would be at the lower end of this scale, and as such, it could be the most sustainable over a prolonged period, requiring the fewest assets and personnel. It would also be the most limited in military terms: the deterrent value of a small reassurance force, built around a brigade-size land component, would be based on presence alone rather than a capacity to fight at scale.

In contrast, the two larger force options could provide a greater deterrent value to the reassurance element. The medium force, built around a divisional-scale deployment, would provide the ability to fight against limited but sizeable Russian incursions, while a corps-level component would provide the capacity to resist a Russian attack at scale. Air and maritime components would support ground forces in each of the three constructs.

This paper explores the capacity of European NATO Allies to assemble and sustain the three deployment options over an extended period. It also assesses these Allies' respective capability gaps without a US backstop and identifies areas of particular dependence on US military assets. Drawing on data from the IISS Military Balance+ database, it assumes that the force constructs will need to be deployed for a minimum of three years, with readiness levels at 50%. Although President Macron has said that it is up to Ukraine to invite foreign troops onto its territory, Russia's acquiescence (at least) would likely be important for some European states in any deployment decision.[1] In addition, the paper assumes that any deployment option must take into account the possibility of Russian armed activity and provocations to test the willingness of the coalition to respond. Underpinning the deterrent value of any deployment option would be the Allies' rules of engagement (ROE). If these ROE lack credibility or coherence in the eyes of the Russian government, they could invite greater risk to European forces and their mission. Russia could be tempted to test the coalition by attacking one or more of its forces.

Force Footprint

All three options envisage the deployment of a joint force at least partly in Ukraine and the Black Sea. The objective would be to support Ukraine in deterring further Russian military attacks and to help implement any ceasefire and/or peace agreement. The greatest deterrent effect would be achieved by placing not only ground but also combat air elements within Ukraine. This level of exposure, however, could increase risk, particularly for small- and, to a lesser extent, medium-scale forces, given their limited capacity for self-protection.

The key requirement would be a European combat capability sufficient to at least defend itself. Arguably, the more capable the force the greater the assistance it could provide Ukraine if the latter came under attack from Russian forces, and the greater deterrent it might provide against Russia. The main objectives would be to detect, delay and contribute to defeating any Russian incursions on land, at sea or in the air.

Other tasks for the European force contingents would likely include training Ukrainian troops and reassuring the Ukrainian public.

The paper considers that the three principal options for a European reassurance force in Ukraine are as follows:

- Option 1: *A small-scale force*. It would entail a deployed land component of a brigade of about 10,000 troops, supported by a limited air component and a small number of ships in the Black Sea. The brigade would consist of between three and five battalions, supported by artillery and engineers. It would only be able to counter a very limited Russian land threat to a ceasefire, or small-scale air or maritime incursions.
- Option 2: *A medium-scale force*. It would be based on a land component of a large division, supported by long-range rocket artillery, battlefield and attack helicopters, and organic uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) and combat engineers. This force could require about 25,000 troops, supported by larger air and maritime components. It would be able to respond to more than one Russian attack simultaneously. It would also be more capable of conducting high-intensity operations over longer periods than the small-scale force.
- Option 3: *A large-scale force*. It would be centred on a corps-sized land component of between 60,000 and 100,000 troops. Substantial air and maritime elements would support it. While air and maritime components could deploy relatively quickly and could spearhead land elements, assembling a corps-sized land force would take longer, thus delaying it reaching full effect.

Other options are available, such as a dedicated training-and-advisory-only mission, or an over-the-horizon force. This latter formation could include an air group in countries adjacent to Ukraine and the Black Sea, such as Poland and Romania, but it would lack the perceived credibility – inside and outside Ukraine – of having 'boots on the ground'. Conversely, it could be viewed positively, as it would more clearly minimise both the risk to any deployed ground forces and the risk of a direct confrontation with Russian forces. A force package would include the use of existing air bases, command and control (C2) and logistics facilities in Eastern Europe. The bases on NATO members' soil might confer linkage with Article 5 and its hoped-for deterrent. The force could also include land and maritime quick-reaction elements. Another conception could be a force that comprises differing packages, such as one that is light on land but heavy on air and maritime, depending on the geographical areas of responsibility and missions set for the force. A more distant possibility for European military participation would be to support any force set up in other formats, such as under UN auspices.

The following table illustrates these options, and the relative stress that deployments would place on European states' armed forces. It assesses equipment and force numbers in total, set against a 50% readiness level, and demonstrates how numbers would be depleted should those allies bordering Russia and Belarus decide not to deploy forces into Ukraine.

C2 Requirements

Executing a coherent strategy for any European force in Ukraine would require leadership from a military strategic commander and an operational-level headquarters (HQ). This operational-level HQ would direct the in-theatre joint-task-force commander and HQs commanding the land, sea, air and special-forces components. These could be based at a site in a nearby European country, augmented by staff from contributing states. There would also need to be an HQ to coordinate national logistic efforts.

The 2010 Lancaster House Treaties were the catalyst for increased bilateral French–UK military cooperation, including a series of combined exercises. After the treaties, the two countries developed the concept of the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF).[2] There is an agreed C2 architecture for the formation of a CJEF, including the formation of an operational HQ and a Combined Joint Task Force deployed HQ. It is likely that any Franco-British military planning group would use this existing body of doctrine and experience, including using either the French or UK joint operational-level HQ.

If NATO headquarters cannot be used, the Franco-British CJEF plans would appear to be suitable for C2.

Table 1: **European NATO member states: reassurance-force options and assessed capabilities**

		Capability			Option 1 – small scale		Option 2 – medium scale		Option 3 – large scale	
		Assessed inventory (NATO Europe)	Eastern flank states	Assuming 50% readiness	Estimated force requirement	Assessed deficit	Estimated force requirement	Assessed deficit	Estimated force requirement	Assessed deficit
LAND	Armoured/ mechanised brigade	100	78	39	1	●	3	●	12	●
	Combat-engineer brigade	9	8	4	0.5	●	1	●	4	●
	Long-range-artillery brigade	5	4	2	0.5	●	1	●	4	●●
	Ground-based air-defence brigade	5	4	2	0.5	●	0.5	●	1	●
	Helicopter brigade	7	6	3	0	●	1	●	4	●●
	Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance/Electronic warfare brigade	4	4	2	0.5	●	1	●	2	●
	Information-operations brigade	1	1	0.5	0.5	●	0.5	●	1	●●
	Medical regiment	20	18	9	1	●	2	●	6	●
	Logistics brigade	18	12	6	0.5	●	2	●	2	●
AIR	Fighter, fighter/ ground-attack, and ground-attack aircraft	~2,000	~1,800	~900	36	●	98	●	200	●
	Airborne early-warning and control aircraft	35*	33	16	3	●	6	●	10	●
	Tanker and tanker/ transport aircraft	53*	53	26	6	●	12	●	18	●
	Aircraft for suppression of enemy air defences	35	35	17	0	●	12	●	36	●
	Signals-intelligence aircraft	11	10	5	0	●	3	●	3	●
	Heavy intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance uninhabited aerial vehicle (heavy ISR UAV) and heavy combat ISR UAV (heavy CISR UAV)	100 UAVs*	91 UAVs	45 UAVs	2 orbits (6 UAVs)	●	4 orbits (12 UAVs)	●	6–8 orbits (18–24 UAVs)	●
MARITIME	Aircraft carrier/nuclear-powered aircraft carrier/ short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) aircraft carrier (CVS)**	6	6	3	0	●	1	●	2	●
	Principal surface combatant (destroyer/frigate with surface-to-surface missiles)	131	122	61	2†	●	6†	●	9†	●
	Aviation-capable amphibious assault ship with well dock (LHD)/aviation-capable amphibious assault ship/ landing platform/dock/ landing ship dock***	14	14	7	1†	●	2†	●	2†	●
	Offshore patrol ship	48	47	23	2†	●	2†	●	2†	●
	Mine-countermeasures vessel	139	90	45	12†	●	12†	●	12†	●
	Fleet replenishment oiler with replenishment-at-sea capability	30	28	14	1	●	3	●	4	●
	Conventionally powered attack submarine	55	48	27	1‡	●	2‡	●	2‡	●
	Nuclear-powered attack submarine	10	10	5	0	●	1‡	●	2‡	●

● Capability available ● Stressed ● Total commitment ●● Availability exceeded

*Includes NATO's 14 E-3As AEW&C, 9 A330 MRTT TKR/TPT, and 5 RQ-4D Heavy ISR UAV. **Includes Spanish and new Italian LHD in CVS role. ***Only amphibious vessels from Italy, Netherlands and Spain can enter Black Sea due to tonnage restrictions under the Montreux Convention. †21-day rotation for foreign warships in Black Sea under Montreux Convention multiplies force-generation requirement. ‡In eastern Mediterranean for deterrence, as Montreux Convention prohibits non-Black Sea states from transit.
Note: Stressed = Limited by the Montreux Convention of 1936. See page 9.
Sources: IISS analysis, Military Balance+, milbalplus.iiss.org

Otherwise, European forces would struggle to rapidly set up and deploy the necessary military chain of command. A joint task force HQ (JTFHQ) would also need to be deployed to the region. This could be based on the existing UK and German standing joint HQs. If the operation was deemed to be 'land-centric', an existing corps HQ could be augmented to provide a JTFHQ.

Force Considerations

The land component would be important for the success of the mission. It would need to contain sufficient capability to act as a credible deterrent against Russian attacks. Its posture and laydown would depend on the mission. For example, forces might overtly deploy to Ukrainian cities and key infrastructure to increase deterrence of Russian ceasefire violations, though this would come with increased exposure to any attack. To reduce the risk of escalation, the land component could be deployed to western Ukraine, where it could disperse and conceal units. However, because of Ukraine's geography, a small-scale force would face challenges in providing coverage across the entire front line and would struggle to rapidly concentrate force should this be required. If asked to safeguard an agreed buffer zone, a force in excess of the 60,000-strong NATO corps that did so for a considerably shorter front line in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995-96 would likely be required.

The force estimation in this paper assumes that the majority of land forces would be armoured or mechanised. This is because of their considerable deterrent effect and the potentially high threat posed by Russian forces. The weight of heavy armour such as tanks, modern infantry fighting vehicles and self-propelled guns means that they can be slow to deploy, although some could be flown as cargo in C-17s and A400Ms. The main body of the heavy force for deployment to Ukraine would be moved by rail and, where appropriate, by sea. Roads would be used for the deployment of logistic and soft-skinned vehicles. Heavy armour could be moved by heavy equipment transporters. It is not clear if Europe's armies have sufficient numbers of these assets, so many would probably have to be contracted from the civil sector. US forces have adopted this approach in the past as they deployed from ports to forward assembly areas. Rail and road are already used extensively to move armoured vehicles into Ukraine.

Wheeled armoured vehicles can self-deploy over long range and may have utility as an early entry force, accepting that they are not as well protected as heavy armour. Similarly, light forces could be flown into Ukraine to secure assembly areas, key routes and airfields, pending the arrival of heavy forces.

Sufficient air assets, irrespective of the scale and nature of the deployment, would also be a critical element for any European force contingent. Russia's inability to establish sustained air superiority in Ukraine has demonstrated the enduring importance of being able to control or at least contest the air domain. Force protection would be required at all air bases, while those inside Ukraine would also need to be protected by short- and medium-range ground-based air defence.

Wherever land and air forces of any scale are located in Ukraine, they will require communications, logistics, transport, engineering and medical support. Their lines of communication might be protected by Ukrainian forces. If not, the force would need to significantly increase in size to protect the flow of supplies. In all the force concepts, stresses would arise the longer the force is deployed, as states would then have to manage rotation cycles for personnel and equipment and maintain equipment in-theatre.

The maritime component of any European force would principally support reassurance operations in Ukrainian territorial waters and freedom of navigation for Black Sea merchant shipping. A key element would be a mine countermeasures (MCM) mission to tackle the threat to navigation from sea mines: there would likely be international calls for such a mission, and potentially wider international contributions. For the medium- and large-scale options, there would be increased integrated support for land and air operations, including carrier-centred maritime power.

Russia will likely remain in occupation of Crimea and will seek to rebase much of its Black Sea Fleet there. It could also replace war losses or even reinforce its Black Sea presence from other fleets and thus shift the naval balance there back in its favour, as the Dardanelles would again be open to warship traffic even for Ukraine and Russia.

The Montreux Convention – which since 1936 has regulated transit and navigation of the Turkish straits and the presence in the Black Sea of non-Black Sea navies – would nevertheless be a significant factor in European naval deployments. Potential Black Sea-state contributors Bulgaria, Romania and Turkiye are largely exempt from the Convention's strictures. They would likely form the core of any international MCM mission. But the naval capabilities of Bulgaria and Romania are limited, and they would probably seek maritime reassurance from non-Black Sea states.

Non-Black Sea states can deploy warships in the Black Sea for only 21 days at a time. The Convention also stipulates an upper limit of 45,000 tons (nearly 41,000 tonnes) on the aggregate warship tonnage of non-Black Sea states operating in the sea at any one time, limiting overall force size (which could be further constrained if other nations deploy independently, such as China or India). Most Western under-way-replenishment auxiliaries also exceed the single-ship displacement limit for Turkish-strait transits, so most afloat support would be undertaken from the eastern Mediterranean, complicating naval logistics.

A revival of hostilities could also see the Turkish straits once again closed to all warship transits. But a further possible deployment option for an increased Black Sea naval presence could be to transfer a number of units, such as frigates, to Bulgaria or Romania.

Option 1 – A Small-scale Force

The **land** segment of a small-scale force under Option 1 would consist of the deployed land element of an armoured or mechanised brigade. This element would constitute three to five battalions of tanks and mechanised or armoured infantry, supported by engineers, comprising up to 10,000 troops in total. European states would also possess enough combat-engineering, long-range artillery and ground-based air-defence units, even assuming readiness levels of only 50%. A brigade-sized land force would only be able to counter a single, relatively small Russian incursion. Its force protection would be more dependent on Ukrainian assistance than the larger options.

In Option 1, the **air** segment of an allied force would be unable to overmatch the airpower that Russia could rapidly bring to bear. 'Air policing' and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) roles would likely be the primary mission of the air deployment, which would be hard-pressed to exert control of the skies if any significant Russian action were to occur.

Elements of the air component could be located as far east as possible at suitable Ukrainian airfields, though this would sharpen force-protection and air-defence concerns. A wide dispersion would provide the force with the capacity to provide air policing along much of any agreed ceasefire line using Quick Reaction Alert crew and aircraft. It would, however, also make force concentration more of a challenge were air assets required immediately to respond to any incident far from their deployed location.

Crewed ISR, airborne early-warning (AEW) and air-to-air refuelling aircraft could be stationed in Poland or other neighbouring countries willing to act as host nations. ISR could be further supplemented by medium-altitude long-endurance UAVs, with options to locate two units each able to mount one 24-hour orbit – that is, to have one UAV on station at all times – to cover areas deemed of most interest.

Ground forces would be supported by a limited number of medium- and heavy-lift helicopters, with a small detachment of attack helicopters. All of these units could be deployed within Ukraine.

The **naval** component under this option would provide limited naval presence: a pair of principal surface combatants and a similar number of offshore patrol ships for policing territorial waters and a safe maritime corridor, plus one amphibious assault ship with a quick-response landing force as an added deterrent.

The Black Sea states of Bulgaria, Romania and potentially Turkiye could maintain most of the sustainment of this force, although their individual platform capabilities are limited. However, there could be a persistent additional presence of one modern and capable surface combatant from the larger European navies, as well as the amphibious element. In addition, in the eastern Mediterranean, there would be limited afloat support from one auxiliary plus a conventionally powered submarine for intelligence-gathering and deterrence of any Russian naval harassment of transiting warships.

The potential international MCM force would be essentially the same for all options. It would build on the cooperative force Bulgaria, Romania and Turkiye would have already established, but a significant number of other European states could contribute. Ukraine would also be able to receive the two ex-UK MCM vessels currently in limbo at the UK's Portsmouth naval base. Given the likely prolonged nature of any mine clearance mission, and the likely international demand for mine clearance as a priority, additional contributors could include the likes of Canada, Egypt, Japan, Saudi Arabia and South Korea.

Option 2 – A Medium-scale Force

According to IISS data, European **land** forces would also face no significant shortages in generating forces for a medium-scale mission under Option 2, apart from small UAVs and mobile short-range air defence. This force of about 25,000 troops would comprise a large division of three armoured or mechanised brigades, supported by long-range rocket artillery, battlefield and attack helicopters, organic UAVs and combat engineers. Again, mobility and sustainability would be important considerations for this larger and presumably more dispersed formation. The divisional-sized force should be able to counter a similarly sized Russian incursion. It would be much better placed to protect itself than a single brigade.

European **air** forces have the number of aircraft in service to mount missions for Option 2. This assumes, like the small-scale Option 1, that important enablers would be based out of airfields in Poland or other nearby European states with the required runway lengths and associated support facilities. However, were this deployment to last for 36 months, sustaining a large-scale air component would be very challenging for European forces in the absence of a US contribution, particularly in relation to enablers.

In the **naval** domain, there would be an enhanced Black Sea presence of modern naval combatants from major European navies to provide additional combat power for deterrence and for potential operations as part of an integrated force, with an added amphibious capability. This would be supplemented by the presence of an aircraft carrier with suitable surface and submarine support in the Aegean Sea for enhanced maritime surveillance and strike, as well as to support the larger land and air elements. This European carrier contribution, however, would not fully substitute for a US carrier strike capability, and would begin to stress major European navies in terms of available modern escorts. The potential foreign Black Sea presence would also be pushing the limits of strictures under the Montreux Convention.

Option 3 – A Large-scale Force

In contrast, deploying a large-scale force would be a far more challenging task for European forces. The corps-sized **land** component of between 60,000 and 100,000 troops would take time to assemble and deploy. The force would comprise several armoured or mechanised divisions. These would likely be located across the country, to deal with simultaneous attacks from the north, northeast or east. Alternatively, the corps could be concentrated in central Ukraine. This force would be better protected and have greater combat capability than a single division.

An example is the 1995–96 deployment of the land component of the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) to Bosnia-Herzegovina. This consisted of a corps of heavy forces. States had the best part of a month's notice to start deploying their forces, by road, rail, sea and air. It took 30 days before the force was completely deployed in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It had the further advantage of taking over about three brigades' worth of in-place forces, with about 20,000 troops, from the preceding United Nations mission and their logistic stockpiles. The lead nations were the UK, France and the US, all of which then had bases much closer to Bosnia-Herzegovina than they would do to Ukraine.[3]

Simply assembling the units would take time, though initial elements would be able to deploy with the speed of the small-scale mission. Deployment could be accelerated by using the European elements of NATO's Allied Reaction Force. But given the numbers needed for the estimated force requirement, European states would be unable to provide long-range rocket artillery, helicopter, and ISR and electronic-warfare brigades in sufficient numbers, while combat engineer brigades would likely be stretched to a maximum.

The largest **air** component would provide a credible combat capability to at least match the levels of tactical combat aircraft deployed by Russia during its full-scale invasion. It would be able to mount offensive and defensive counter air missions at scale, and to support ground forces were Russian units to engage these. However, sustaining a large-scale air component over a 36-month period would be very challenging for European forces in the absence of a US contribution. Shortfalls would exist particularly in the areas of ISR, AEW, tanker and heavy-lift aircraft, as well as suppression of enemy air-defence capabilities. In the case of ISR, a question would remain as to whether the US would provide geospatial intelligence were it not to be an active part of the coalition. Bomber and low-observable ISR UAV assets would also be absent from the notional large force construct, as these do not appear in European inventories, while Europe's relative shortage of space-based ISR and Earth observation capabilities, along with its limited intelligence processing and analytical capabilities would also be notable gaps for all force options.

In addition to the previous options, the **naval** component would provide an enhanced carrier presence. This would likely require the commitment of the full inventory of European carriers over time (the French *Charles de Gaulle*, Italy's *Cavour* and the new large-deck amphibious ship (LHD) *Trieste*, and the Spanish LHD *Juan Carlos* I) plus supporting escorts. It would be difficult to sustain at a consistent level as it would rely more on the more limited capabilities of the smaller Italian and Spanish platforms, in addition to those of France and the UK. Escort and afloat support would also be stretched. Even more so than with the medium-scale Option 2, the European force would be unable to replicate the full carrier strike capabilities of the US Navy. Moreover, in neither the medium- nor the large-scale options would European naval forces generally be able to deliver the full naval missile-defence capabilities, command and surveillance infrastructure, or ability for land attack (and therefore additional deterrence) that the US Navy can provide.

Conclusion

Europe could deploy a small-scale deterrence and reassurance force to Ukraine. It could also deploy most of the capabilities required by a medium-scale force, albeit with key weaknesses. These weaknesses would include some air and missile defence, combat engineering, medical support and suppression of enemy air-defence assets. For air forces, the second option would be helped by a larger number of contributors, even if this adds C2 complexity, because it would allow units to be rotated out and some standing commitments to be maintained.

A large-scale force could be generated, given time, but this force would face additional weaknesses, including ammunition and logistic stocks and medical support. But for long-range artillery, demand would, in this case, outstrip available supply. European strategic lift would suffice for the small-scale deployment, but it would be insufficient to allow the medium- and large-scale forces to deploy as a rapid response to any ceasefire deal. Sealift into Odesa could be hired from the civil sector, provided there was not a significant risk in the Western Black Sea. For Europe's air forces, the two larger-scale options would increasingly place standing tasks at risk to meet the greater numbers of aircraft and personnel required. Europe's naval forces would start to experience some stresses under the medium-scale option, but for the large-scale force, they would – like land forces – be stretched, with some assets deployed only at a 'total commitment' level, leaving no available resources for other contingencies, with stresses also evident because of the terms of the Montreux Convention.

In theory, European NATO members should be able to generate forces at the readiness required. Forces they have assigned to NATO could be used for an initial deployment, such as those in the NATO Allied Reaction Force. However, there are acknowledged weaknesses in readiness, and NATO members have under-invested in stocks of ammunition and spare parts. NATO's European forces also do not conduct the necessary national and multinational formation training at the higher tactical and operational levels, particularly in the land domain. A lack of readiness, insufficient logistics stockpiles and inadequate training would create increasing risk for the medium- and particularly the large-scale forces.

The two larger-scale force structure options would be significantly more demanding, and would be constrained if the US armed forces did not contribute in a supporting capacity. Moreover, force options would be significantly reduced should certain European nations decide not to contribute, for instance, the states bordering Russia or Belarus, likely because they require forces for a national deterrent capability, or states in southern Europe with regionally specific policy priorities. In these cases, some assets – particularly land-based capabilities such as armour, ground-based air defence, or helicopter formations – would be significantly reduced. Another effect could be to delay some European armed forces' recapitalisation timelines, if forces slated to begin new equipment training were instead earmarked for deployment. 'Available' forces could also be reduced if those states with units deployed overseas, or deployed with NATO's Forward Land Forces, rule these out of contention. Additional stress would arise should the requirement endure, meaning that troop-contributing states would have to sustain the deployed force through multiple rotations. Over time, force generation could be challenging. Such stresses could be eased were a greater number of states – perhaps including Asia-Pacific partners such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea, or existing NATO ally Canada – to take part. These external forces' familiarity with NATO military procedures would be important in delivering practical benefits to the mission, even if more states might complicate C2 and logistics, but greater participation would also have political advantages.

NATO is greatly dependent on US ISR capabilities, because US national intelligence capabilities significantly exceed those of Europe. For all the above options, the absence of US intelligence and space assets would be keenly felt, and while some European states could

redeploy assets to Europe, this would increase risk elsewhere. In particular, Europe has fewer intelligence, ISR and space-based assets than the US. If the US declined to provide intelligence, European nations would struggle to fill the gap, at least in the short or medium term. In theory, purchases of civilian satellite imagery could fill part of the gap, though this would be expensive and potentially insecure.

In all these options, extra complications would arise should contributing states decide to impose national caveats on their participation in certain missions or at certain locations. Agreed ROE among all contributing states would be necessary, as would a collective agreement on acceptable levels of risk. In all cases, agreed response options in the event of a significant Russian – or indeed Ukrainian – breach of a ceasefire would bolster the deterrent value of any deployment. To have this effect, however, Moscow would need to view these as credible, and any coalition would need to decide how to respond to Russian provocation were this to occur. Demonstrating the combat capabilities of the force by training and exercising in and above Ukraine and the Black Sea would reinforce these messages. Nonetheless, there is a clear risk that Russia might challenge the force, including by mounting armed attacks – either conventional, sub-threshold, or both.

Notes

1 Reuters, 'Not for Russia to decide on peacekeepers in Ukraine, Macron says', 16 March 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/not-russia-decide-peacekeepers-ukraine-macron-says-2025-03-16/

2 UK Prime Minister's Office, 'UK–France Summit 2010 Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation', 2 November 2010, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-france-summit-2010-declaration-on-defence-and-security-co-operation.

3 Ben Barry, *The Road from Sarajevo: British Army Operations in Bosnia, 1995-1996* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2016).

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