LSE Ideas

The Russian Threat to European Security

How should NATO respond as the global order changes?

A DISCUSSION PAPER BY THE
LSE DEFENCE & SECURITY COMMISSION

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Foreword

The serious threats and risks to our security that we and our NATO allies face from Russia have been exacerbated by the conflict with Iran and the related turmoil in energy markets.

These multiplying challenges cannot be addressed by new strategies and increased defence expenditure alone. The citizens of each country need to understand what is at stake as well as the measures and investments necessary to keep them safe.

As I have previously said, this calls for a 'national conversation' on defence and security. I am delighted that the LSE Commission on Defence and Security is making this timely and substantial contribution.

George Robertson

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT GCMG
Former NATO Secretary General and UK Defence Secretary

LSE IDEAS

LSE IDEAS is the LSE's foreign policy think-tank. Drawing on its rich network of visiting scholars and affiliates, LSE IDEAS has convened a Commission to examine the causes and consequences of the growing security challenges that face Europe and the UK today. This discussion paper is the initial output of their deliberations in London in December 2025 and January 2026. It is intended to form the basis of wider outreach, across the UK and beyond.

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Mini-biographies are at Annex.

Disclaimer: This discussion paper represents the collective work of the contributors. Individual members of the Commission may not necessarily agree with every argument or conclusion included within it, but they support the general assessment of the security situation. The views expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the institutions to which they are affiliated.

Overview

It has become a truism that the European security environment is changing because of a combination of growing Russian aggression and partial US retrenchment. Russia's objectives, if achieved, would be incompatible with our security, our democratic way of life and our prosperity. The threat is not just a military one, as Russia is pursuing a campaign of hybrid activities, including cognitive warfare, against European states to weaken their will to resist Russia's agenda.

The opening months of 2026 have dramatically underlined these challenges. Russia escalated its attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine while stalling on a potential peace deal. President Trump briefly threatened to seize Greenland by force from another NATO country – a step, which if carried out, could have spelt the end of NATO. More broadly, the US National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy published in late 2025 and early 2026 respectively, the seizure of Nicolas Maduro (and accompanying US messaging), and US rhetoric and threats indicated that the Trump administration was increasingly adopting a Western 'hemispheric' approach to its international security, seeing Russia as primarily a European problem. The US's attack (with Israel) on Iran raised yet further questions about US priorities – and posed new challenges to its Allies (not least the UK).

NATO and its member states need to respond quickly to this rapidly evolving situation as we are already entering a period of enhanced risk. The response cannot be only in the military domain. In today's conditions, successful deterrence of attack requires greater resilience of critical national infrastructure and of society itself. Building that resilience in turn depends on nurturing a broad consensus about what we face and what we seek to protect.

Unfortunately, this imperative is not changed by the prospect of a Russia-Ukraine ceasefire. Whatever the hope and hyperbole this has attracted, it is worth remembering that President Putin has violated virtually every arms control, non-aggression and ceasefire international agreement that Russia has signed.

So, it is more important than ever that there is an informed understanding of our security environment. That needs to encompass both what is happening now, such as Russia's continuing and intensifying hybrid confrontation with European states, and what could happen in the near future. It also needs to be clear-eyed about the motives of the main actors and the concerns and constraints affecting our allies and partners. On that basis, practical proposals can be developed to improve our security through defence investment or adjustments to multinational decision-making structures and processes.

This paper aims to contribute to that understanding by providing a high-level synthesis – derived from years of study and direct experience – of the political, diplomatic, economic and military factors at work.

Beginning with Russia's geopolitical objectives and its hybrid strategy which has been unfolding for over a decade, it addresses Russia's motivations and options for its

increasingly strident approach, fuelled by a war economy. It addresses the evolving perceptions and priorities of the Trump administration – and those of the UK's allies and partners in Europe. It then outlines the steps necessary to enhance the deterrence of military threats and a greater 'Europeanisation' of NATO as the US administration makes ever clearer its expectation that European member states make a bigger contribution to the security of their own continent.

Specifically, it finds that the current situation demands that we need to:

- Be clear-eyed about the Russian threat and the changing relationship between the US and Europe.

- Enhance society's resilience to withstand the bumps and shocks.

- Fix the gaps in NATO's military capabilities and posture within the next few years, not the 2035 horizon favoured by some governments.

- Move towards a 'more Europeanised' NATO with more leadership from its main European members.

George Robertson, the lead author of the UK's recent Strategic Defence Review (and former NATO Secretary General), has called for a national conversation on security and defence to ensure that the wider public is fully aware of the threats and risks they face as well as the steps to mitigate them, which are already requiring some hard choices in public expenditure. The contributors to this paper support that call – and hope that it both catalyses and informs wider discussion. To that end, on the back of this discussion paper, LSE IDEAS actively seeks inputs from our academic and other partners, within the UK and elsewhere, for a more comprehensive analysis to be published later this year.

Russia's Objectives

Putin's strategy in Europe

Russia's core objectives have not changed and will not do so for as long as President Putin is in power, which almost certainly means while he is alive and capable of exercising power. These objectives were set out in Putin's public pronouncements going back (at least) to his 2007 Munich Security Forum speech and in the 2021 draft treaties put forward by the Kremlin:

- Russia achieves control over Ukraine and the 'near abroad', ensuring compliant regimes with foreign and defence policies determined by the Kremlin.

- Roll back of NATO to 1997 dispositions.

- Sharply curtailed US commitments to European security; no meaningful constraints on Russia's security arrangements. This is what 'indivisibility of security' means to the Kremlin.

- No accession of Ukraine to NATO or the European Union (EU). Although the Kremlin professes to be comfortable with EU accession, it is not: this is fundamentally incompatible with Russia's wish to be at the heart of a Moscow-dominated economic and political zone (the Eurasian Economic Union). The trigger for Russian intervention in 2013-14 was the prospect of Ukraine signing an Association Agreement with the EU; a NATO Membership Action Plan was not on the table.

These core objectives are rooted in Russian state thinking since the 1990s.

Origins and drivers of Russian geopolitical strategy

After the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991, President Yeltsin, seeking to reduce the costs of maintaining a massive empire, let the former Soviet Republics partly go their own way. Under the concept of the 'Commonwealth of Independent States' they could determine their internal politics and economy provided they deferred to Moscow with respect to their international diplomacy, economic relations and military alignment. As Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1996-1998, Yevgeny Primakov offered the following principles (the so-called Primakov doctrine) for Russian foreign policy: (i) Russia should strive toward a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers that can counterbalance US unilateral power; (ii) Russia should insist on its primacy in the post-Soviet space and lead integration in that region; and (iii) Russia should oppose NATO expansion.

As it became increasingly apparent in the late 1990s that the former Republics wanted to become more integrated within the EU and NATO, Yeltsin ordered the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Vladimir Putin, to deal with them. In 1999, as Secretary of

Russia's Security Council, Putin identified NATO as a security threat, even though the military capabilities of the newly freed East European states and former Republics had declined by 60% and NATO was not conducting hostile exercises on the territories of these countries.

It is worth noting that, as President, Putin for a while attempted to maintain a relationship with the West including with Germany (energy), UK (finance and oil) and the USA (the 'war on terror'). And, while Yeltsin had been happy to work with the US in the 1990s, many of his actions at home prepared the way for the authoritarian turn under Putin.

Initially, Russia enforced its control over former Soviet territories with troops present in Transdniestria, Belarus, the Caucasus and various south-eastern 'stans'. In 1994, it launched a brutal military campaign against Sunnis in Chechnya who wanted independence. In 2004, it used salami tactics in South Ossetia to undermine the Georgian government, before seizing territory from Georgia four years later when it sought to forge closer links with the EU and NATO.

In 2004 Russia interfered in the Ukrainian Presidential elections – including voter intimidation, blatant fraud, installation of proxy politicians and the poisoning of the pro-Western presidential candidate.

The fundamental issue was not (and is not now) about a Western military threat to Russia or the 'tragedy of great power politics' in an Eastern European vacuum. Fundamentally, NATO enlargement was not a military threat but a perceived political threat to Russia. In promoting national self-determination and offering membership in a voluntary collective security association, NATO unintentionally threatened the dream of re-establishing the Russian Empire.

Military strategy

With respect to the military dimension, 1999 was the main turning point, with a new Russian leadership bringing back military planning and preparation for direct conflict with the West. As Secretary of the Security Council, Putin initiated several significant military actions:

- Buoyed by a resurgent Russian nationalism, he quickly gained military credibility by changing both Russia's political and military tactics in the second Chechen War (1999-2009).

- In 1999, the Russian General Staff introduced a new approach to theatre nuclear war, with the innovative concept of 'escalate to deescalate' (as Western commentators have described it). Rather than mirror NATO's traditional approach of 'graduated response', Russia focused on designing nuclear strike options to sap the political will of the opponent to resist.

- Putin's first anti-NATO exercise was ZAPAD 1999, with several formations deployed westward into Belarus, gaming out an intervention into the Baltic republics and creation of a direct link to Kaliningrad.

Starting in 2013, the Russian General Staff explored the rapidly evolving technologies and tactics of 'new generation warfare' that served as the conceptual foundation of an emerging Russian strategy, subsequently popularised as the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' – this covered the spectrum of coercion from low end 'hybrid' actions to conventional multi-Army offensives to nuclear first-use. Russia tested this cross-domain strategy in its 2013 ZAPAD exercise, using cyber-attacks, media disinformation, assassinations etc to manipulate adversaries' perceptions, decision making and behaviour by intimidating and sowing discord among them.

Development of a strategic alliance with China

As tensions with the West increased following Russia's seizure of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas, President Putin stepped up efforts to win support from China. The underlying assumption was that a combination of two revisionist powers with ambitions in Europe and Asia could split American assets.

In 2017, Presidents Putin and Xi announced their creation of a 'strategic alliance', the significance of which was either downplayed or went largely un-noticed in the West. In early February 2022, three weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Presidents Putin and Xi announced a 'no-limits partnership' between the two countries. And one year later they signed a joint declaration, the wording of which showed that there were still tensions between the two over Ukraine and other issues. In early 2026, two points stand out about China's attitude towards Russia – while firmly opposing the use of nuclear weapons, it does not want Russia to lose in Ukraine.

Outlook

The Russian trajectory that accelerated with new leadership in the Kremlin in 1999 and became manifest in 2014 with the application of 'new generation warfare' in Crimea and the Donbas, now continues with the full-scale war on Ukraine – sustained by a war economy and support from other revisionist powers. President Putin sought to start a war where the operational battleground was Ukraine, but the strategic objective was weakening the West.

Faced with this, the weakest links for NATO are the Trump administration and public opinion in a number of European countries. Russian cognitive warfare and hybrid activities will work vigorously so that key actors and the media frame the war and its possible outcomes in ways that suit Russia's goals. The aim is to create political momentum for a cessation of hostilities on terms highly prejudicial to Ukraine and, if possible, to wider European security too. Putin is not interested in a 'land for peace' deal unless the 'peace' is on his terms.

During 2026, there is a risk that Putin may increasingly rely on the Trump administration to do his work for him in breaking NATO. We should expect interventions to help this process along, such as launching challenges to the security of eastern allies that fall short of the Article 5 threshold, but which undermine mutual confidence within the alliance.

However, Russia faces two major challenges itself which are linked:

- **The succession**. Putin is 73 years old. He has been in power for 25 years. As Putin advances in years, the risks of a disorderly transition – a 'death of Stalin' moment – are mounting. The generation below the old men will be left with a legacy of a different sort: a broken economy, a militarised foreign policy, a demographic crisis, an uncomfortable degree of dependence on China. These dilemmas are unlikely to lead to serious open intra-elite conflict while Putin is in control and the war is on balance going in a direction favourable to Russia. But elite stability could come under extreme pressure if Putin were to die unexpectedly or to become incapacitated.

- **The economy**. The combination of sanctions and the war economy are biting. This is not likely to change Putin's war aims. Nor will the regime face existential challenges from the public: the regime can generate enough resources and, if necessary, enough repression to keep a lid on societal discontent. But over time, the pressures of a war economy will greatly complicate decision making.

The next two sections assess the two key foundations of Russian power.

Russian Military Capability

With the crash of the Soviet economy and end of the Cold War, the Russian military declined from a troop strength of more than 5 million to less than 1 million. The ground forces were reduced with 28 Armies and over 220 Divisions demobilised. Unable to finance a large force structure, the Yeltsin 'reforms' of the Russian military were focused on creating the Combined Arms Brigade (CAB) as a basic unit, with the firepower and logistic support to be self-contained in low-intensity conflicts.

This was generally in line with the approach of many armies, including much of NATO and even China. However, the Russian CABs were heavier in armour and firepower, but significantly lighter in infantry. The traditional Soviet and Russian approach of having Divisions, Corps, Armies and Fronts, was viewed as both wasteful in resources and not necessary for the types of security contingencies Russia was likely to face.

As president, Putin reversed the downward spiral. Between 2000 and 2020 Russia doubled the number of Armies in the ground forces (from 6 to 12) and began conducting major exercises for a war with NATO (the ZAPAD exercises in 1999 and 2009).

After 2014, Division and Corps level formations were partially reintroduced as an intermediary level of command and support for the manoeuvre Brigades. The remaining lacuna in higher-level and rear-echelon support and logistics were the result of insufficient active manpower. This potential weakness was dismissed on the grounds that any conventional campaign would either be won quickly or transformed by early resort to tactical and theatre nuclear weapons. Neither has transpired in Russia's war on Ukraine.

Conversely, the war in Ukraine has seen an exponential advance in drone technology. While suffering heavy casualties from Ukrainian systems, Russia is now employing tens of thousands of unmanned miniature-bombers per month against Ukraine in deep strikes against rear area logistics, energy infrastructure and terror bombing of civilian populations.

Category	Approx. Pre-War Inventory	Estimated Losses	Estimated Remaining Inventory (2026)
Tanks	~8,000–10,000 (active + reserve)	~11,600	~3,000–4,000
Armoured Vehicles (AFVs/APCs)	~18,000–20,000	~23,900	~8,000–12,000
Artillery Systems (towed + SP)	~15,000–17,000	~36,500 (incl. MLRS)	~7,000–12,000
MLRS	~3,000+	~1,600	~2,000–2,500
Air Defence Systems	~1,500–2,000	~1,200	~800–1,000
Fighter / Combat Aircraft	~1,500–2,000	~430	~1,000–1,500
Helicopters	~1,000+	~347	~600–800
Surface Naval Vessels	~300+ total warships	~28	~260–280

Note on table: The 'Estimated remaining inventory' figures include continuing wartime production

Also noteworthy are Russia's remaining inventories. While the older systems are manned with less trained and motivated troops, they have the capability to continue the current conflict. If hostilities ceased for several years, Russia could reconstitute combined-arms formations, repair and replace equipment losses, as well as train a new generation of cadres based on their 'lessons learned'. The bottom line is that Russian conventional forces still have the potential of continuing to offer Putin the military backup for a coercive influence campaign against European countries.

The nuclear turn-around is even more striking. In 1991, the US and Russia agreed on mutual unilateral reductions in tactical nuclear weapons. The Americans reduced their warheads allocated to NATO from a mid-1970s high of 7,000 weapons down to several hundred B-61 air-delivered gravity nuclear bombs assigned to less than 70 NATO aircraft deployed on five bases. Over the last 30 years, the B-61 has been modernised with variable yield (to minimize collateral damage), but the primary focus has been more on increasing safety and surety than military effectiveness.

Russia also dramatically cut its inventory of non-strategic nuclear warheads, from a Cold War high of over 20,000 down to approximately 5,000. Nonetheless, the ground forces have retained nuclear capable self-propelled artillery (152mm howitzers, 203mm guns, 240mm heavy mortars with range up to 70km); tactical surface-to-surface missiles (SS-21 Tochka and SS-26 Iskander with range up to 400km). They also have nuclear capable

surface-to-air (SAM) air defence systems that can be used in surface-to-surface modes (the SA-10, S-300, and the latest S-400 with range up to 230km).

The Russian Navy has retained its tactical nuclear assets for anti-submarine warfare and torpedoes and added the long-range Kalibur and new P-800 cruise missile, which have both an anti-ship and ground attack ability with ranges between 2,400-3,000km. Russia's Air Force has focused on fighters (Mig-29, Mig-30SM), strike aircraft (Su-24/Su-34), bombers (Tu-95/Tu-122), stand-off bombs and cruise missiles (including the Kh-22, Kh-47 Kinzhal, Kh-55/555, Kh-59, and Kh-101). The latest system to be fielded is the Oreshnik hyper-velocity Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle (MIRV)'ed missile with a range of 5,500 km (essentially the replacement for the SS-22 Theatre system that was banned under the INF Treaty).

All these delivery systems are dual-capable, and all have been used conventionally against Ukraine since 2022, including over 6,000 Iskander, Kalibur and Kinzhal missiles as well as two strikes by the Oreshnik.

Russia has forward deployed the nuclear capable Iskander SSM and S-300/400 SAMs to Kaliningrad and, in the autumn of 2025, the Oreshnik to Belarus – from where it can target the air bases hosting NATO's nuclear deterrent in under seven minutes flight time.

Overall, in terms of theatre systems, there is a gross asymmetry in numbers, diversity of systems and modernisation between Russia and NATO which has underpinned Russia's efforts at coercing Ukraine and NATO states with nuclear threats – albeit with mixed results so far.

Outlook

Over the past two decades, Russia has produced lots of military equipment and some important capabilities – including a new drone production capability – and it has done so under increasing economic constraints. It has also produced some high-end systems, such as the Kinzhal. But the war in Ukraine has shown that these can be countered. Shipbuilding remains problematic and submarines have broken down. If we get our own defences right, we should be able to cope.

It is also worth bearing in mind that it is not only what Russia has produced that makes it dangerous, but also its *diminishing* capabilities relative to the West and high tolerance for risk. Russia's insecurity about its great power status has historically been an important spur for its aggression in Europe. It is no longer interested in arms control, nuclear and conventional, and leaning more into strategic systems and deterrence. We need to respond.

The Russian Economy

After four years of the war on Ukraine, there are few indications that Putin is prepared to sue for peace. His core narrative – and apparently his own belief – is that he is winning. His insistence that any settlement must address what he describes as the 'root causes' of the conflict effectively makes negotiation impossible.

Putin has committed himself to a course of action in which failure is not an option, and his credibility is at stake. At the same time, he faces intensifying domestic pressures. Politically he must navigate between, on the one hand, the ultra-nationalists – who argue for escalation of the war effort and the mobilisation of conscripts which that entails – and, on the other side, a sense that a growing number of Russians would prefer the conflict to end if a settlement could be reached on acceptable terms.

Yet it is in the economy that Putin faces growing strain based on a combination of sharpening dilemmas that will, over time, impose their own constraints on his freedom of action and leave their mark on the country – even if events on the battlefield dramatically shift in his favour. Short of a Ukrainian collapse or geopolitical developments that hand Moscow major advantages, self-imposed economic pressures that have structural characteristics are becoming a significant obstacle for the Kremlin.

Challenges to revenue generation

Russia's economic outlook has weakened over the last 12 months. Budget revenues have fallen while expenditure has increased. Although the Kremlin can keep funding the war, doing so will constrain wider spending. Social expenditure, transfers to the regions, and capital projects are all at risk. Its oft-cited economic resilience is now open to question save a major policy shift.

Russia's strategically important sectors look weaker. Before the US/Israel attack on Iran, oil prices were consistently lower, and Russia's oil exports remain heavily dependent on a physically vulnerable shadow fleet facing sanctions and interdiction pressure. Oil price hikes are advantageous to Russia, but it cannot raise production significantly. Natural gas exports, once the heart of Russia's economic relationship with Europe, have been sharply diminished, and Russia does not have the physical infrastructure to pipe it elsewhere at the previous level. Metals and mining, while still significant, cannot compensate for the shortfall. The rapid rise in the gold price has increased the (unrealised) value of Russia's reserves, but it cannot directly offset the deficit.

The strain on revenue generation poses new challenges to Russia's once-admired fiscal discipline, especially for the regions. A key point of pressure arises from military commitments: the sign-up bonuses for soldiers and the payments made to the next of kin of those killed fall not on Moscow but on regional budgets. These obligations place heavy burdens on local authorities, with the cumulative effect that bills are increasingly going unpaid across the wider economy.

Putin cannot easily squeeze more from the system he has created. Economic reform is impossible because it would undermine the stability of the kleptocracy he has built around his friends, family and former colleagues. The technocratic elite is capable but focused on finding the resources required to implement government policy rather than expanding the country's productive base.

Russia's most important industrial sectors are dominated by state-linked companies that accumulate the best assets and limit competition (including from prospective foreign investors). These dominant firms are generally run by men close to Putin, most of whom are his contemporaries. It follows that their fortunes and survival depend on him, but he is also more reliant on them too. Overall, the economic system now looks more precarious, yet the regime depends on its stability.

Challenges on the international market

The defining feature of Russia's international trade is now its dependence on China. This is unpopular domestically and has both practical and strategic limits. On a practical level, the government will need to introduce more protections for domestic industry in the face of more competitive Chinese imports. The government has already banned imports of Chinese lorries following pressure from uncompetitive domestic producers, and other sectors like steel are concerned. In strategic and high-tech sectors, Moscow will surely resist ceding all its remaining advantages to Beijing so as to preserve some credible claim to great-power status.

The war has shown that Russia offers little the world wants to buy beyond commodities. Its status and reputation as a major defence exporter have been severely damaged by its battlefield failures in Ukraine. In the few remaining areas where it retains a competitive international position, such as nuclear energy, its preparedness to hold the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant at risk have marked it as an irresponsible player.

Moscow's effort to establish an alternative to SWIFT that other countries are willing to use have fallen short and Russia has been forced to become the world's most significant illicit trader. Sanctions enforcement has created a whack-a-mole dynamic, pushing companies into increasingly ad hoc trading schemes. Beginning with the legalisation of 'parallel' imports, the state now explicitly endorses barter, and the government is actively promoting 'alternative payment' schemes that leverage cryptocurrencies, gold and netting to enable the procurement of essential goods overseas.

Internal pathologies

Like the Soviet Union, Russia has formally geared its science and technology base towards the achievement of state objectives, and most notably 'technological sovereignty' – i.e., reducing dependence on foreign technologies. Russia can still generate world-class technologies (such as hypersonic missiles) with the concentration of resources, but world-class innovation takes places in a small number of institutes and companies that depend on state funding. Russia's long-running brain drain accelerated in 2022 and demographic trends – including a declining birth rate and falling immigration – leave worsening labour market gaps without accounting for over one million dead or wounded men fighting in Ukraine.

In the real economy, private businesses get by without reliable property rights, while corporate raiding and corruption are widespread. Russia's offer to prospective post-war investors is thus decidedly poor. Recent failures within several strategically important verticals – including the breakdown of a naval submarine in the Mediterranean, damage to its crewed space launch facilities, and loss of bomber aircraft to Ukrainian drone strikes – indicate a culture of negligence even in ringfenced industries, and a struggle to sustain world-class performance.

Outlook

The simplicity of the Russia's state-led model enables the Kremlin to channel resources to the war effort, and this makes Russia dangerous. But the economy is under increasing pressure that put Putin's strategic ambitions in Ukraine at risk over time. Russia remains heavily dependent on certain export categories but draws on a shrinking pool of buyers. The long-term relevance of fossil fuels will diminish, but Russia still has Dutch disease. Its technology sector is far from world-class, private business remains suppressed, and relations with key partners – China, India, and others – have built-in constraints. Foreign investment in Russia was risky even before the war; once the war ends, investors will confront a market dominated by entrenched incumbents, weak institutions, and no rule of law. The Russian economy is not about to collapse, but neither is it growing or strong.

Russia's Near-Term Strategy

The war on Ukraine

Given Russia's failure to make big advances on the battlefield, it is now aiming to undermine the Ukrainian public's will to fight, through systematic destruction of civil infrastructure. This is not just about causing inconvenience as, in winter temperatures, loss of power and heating is life threatening. So far Ukrainian morale seems to be holding up, but stoicism may not be infinite. Missteps by the Government of Ukraine, amplified by Russian propaganda and its international proxies, may also erode Ukrainian public support.

Russia can also do more damage to Ukraine's economy by hitting Odesa and nearby ports. It has already cut Ukraine's grain exports by about a quarter in the last months of 2025. This increases the amount of external finance Ukraine is likely to need. The Kremlin may also seek to increase pressure on Ukraine and its supporters from the so-called Global South, through pressure on grain prices.

Beyond Ukraine – Russia's Hybrid Strategy and high tolerance of risk

Russia's 'hybrid' activities against European states have been monitored since early 2014. They were initially aimed mainly at Ukraine, with the seizure of Crimea and the intervention in the Donbas.

From the outset, they encompassed disinformation, cyber-attacks, sabotage, subversion, use of proxy or unbadged forces – sometimes synchronised with military activities such as the massing of troops on borders, nuclear exercises, etc. As noted previously, the usual Russian term for this approach is 'new generation warfare'.

The motivations behind individual hybrid activities are various and do not always appear to be part of a single coherent strategy. They include:

- Influencing political outcomes both in former Communist states and Western Europe (e.g., the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016).
- Vengeance and the intimidation of political opponents (e.g., Salisbury 2018)
- Disruption of support to Ukraine (arson in UK, etc).
- Intimidation of individuals to influence outcomes (e.g., targeting of Euroclear officials).
- Deterrence messaging.

Some activities (e.g., surveillance of sub-sea infrastructure) may be contingency planning for conventional war with NATO.

After levelling off in 2020/21, Russian hybrid activities across Europe escalated after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Physical attacks (sabotage, etc) rose

sharply from 2023 to 2024. The most frequent targets were facilities linked to European states' support for Ukraine (e.g., equipment stores and transit routes). The purpose of the attacks was presumably to disrupt and intimidate, while being carefully calibrated to remain below a threshold that might provoke forceful retaliation. Late 2025 saw a further escalation in the form of drone activities in European airspace, leading to airport closures and flight disruption.

From the experience of the past few years, Russia may have learned the lesson that European states' tolerance of – and thus the upper threshold for – hybrid activities is higher than it thought; while many states continue to take preventive measures (including punishing perpetrators if caught), the collective appetite for imposing costs on Russia is limited.

As Russia's war on Ukraine continues, Russia is likely to intensify its hybrid activities to further disrupt supplies to Ukraine as well as foment public disquiet and dissent about providing such support. We should expect an increase in 'kinetic' hybrid attacks – sabotage of railways and energy infrastructure, drones over airports, anchors dragged over cables, weaponised migration, and perhaps even small ambiguous incursions into the Baltic states. We should also expect an increase in information operations, seeking to persuade Europeans that Ukraine is bound to lose and therefore should stop resisting; Russia is also likely to exploit its links to the populist right to sow division in Western societies.

This could lead in two directions, not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, Russia will behave with increasing impunity, imposing growing economic costs on European states which they would have to absorb to the detriment of their way of life and social model, with Europe's political culture increasingly resembling that of the Western Balkans, which would be to Russia's benefit. On the other, it could lead to an increasingly dangerous situation if Russian activity unintentionally crossed a line and provoked an unexpectedly sharp response from a European state. A cycle of miscalculation on both sides could ensue, leading to open conflict.

Neither of these scenarios is implausible or attractive. To avoid them, the UK and European states must invest financially and organisationally in better deterrence of hybrid activity. This would start with being more transparent about Russian hybrid threats and educating their publics about them (and the costs they inflict on livelihoods). They should also respond more robustly to Russian activities (e.g., seizing ships suspected of cutting cables) – and provide mutual support so that individual countries are not left standing alone.

Russia's cognitive warfare

One dimension of Russia's hybrid activities that deserves particular attention is what can be described as 'cognitive warfare'. Russia will continue to seek, by any means available, to undermine political consensus and societal cohesion within and between its Western adversaries. It does so through a well-known repertoire of cognitive warfare tools. A

primary purpose of cognitive warfare is to frame the political narrative in ways that serve the Kremlin's purposes.

Russian cognitive warfare techniques are extensively documented and are rooted in Soviet-era propaganda techniques, updated for the internet age. They heavily exploit the reach, velocity, minimal barriers to entry, lack of accountability and polarising algorithms of social media, which the Kremlin mastered long before western governments woke up to the use being made of such techniques. They rely heavily on reflexive control, the manipulating of an adversary's understanding of reality to influence their behaviour.

One successful example is the widespread belief in the West that NATO enlargement is the cause of Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, despite the fact that Ukraine was not about to join NATO, NATO forces were not hosted by Ukraine, and there was clearly no prospect of Ukraine or NATO attacking Russia. Another is the framing of the risks of a widening conflict, such that Ukraine's absolute right to self-defence under the UN Charter should be constrained for otherwise 'you are gambling with World War 3' (to quote President Trump's comment to President Zelenskyy in the Oval Office in February 2025).

The second Trump administration makes an easy target as it is full of conspiracy theorists and now largely devoid of experts on Russia and Ukraine. Russia will do everything it can via Dmitriev's links to Witkoff and Kushner to get Trump to believe that Zelenskyy's obstinacy is blocking a US-Russian economic bonanza, and to encourage Trump to think that he is entitled to a sphere of influence in the Americas with Russia entitled to a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood.

More broadly, Russia uses cognitive warfare techniques to discredit the West in the eyes of the large group of countries that Russia (and China) calls the 'Global Majority' (sometimes, and inaccurately, labelled by Western commentators as the 'Global South'. They present Russia as a leading global voice in challenging the West's neo-imperialism and standing up for state sovereignty, despite the obviously imperialist nature of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In practical terms, what Putin wants is to generate a widespread public belief that we do not have fundamental interests at stake in Ukraine, that the risk of confrontation is too high, and that we will be safer if we give Putin what he wants. This is not the case. Putin's view of Russia's place in the world is fundamentally incompatible with our security. Giving him what he wants will increase the risks to our security, not decrease them.

The reality is that while Putin is still alive there is no prospect of change in Russian policy. The most likely scenario when he leaves office (most likely, when he dies or becomes incapacitated) is that Russia will go through a difficult and probably protracted transitional period in which the risks to our security will continue to be very high. We must plan for a period of 10-20 years in which there is little likelihood of a secure Russian leadership that seeks a less confrontational relationship with the West.

The US Dimension – the Trump Administration's Views

The end of the Cold War in 1989 followed by the collapse of the USSR two years later meant that the traditional US policy of containment as first outlined in 1947 no longer made strategic sense. In the twenty-five years which followed, and under three successive Presidents – Clinton, Bush and Obama – Washington's view of post-communist Russia was that Moscow was simply too weak and too preoccupied by its own post-imperial challenges to pose much of a threat to US interests. Moreover, there were sound reasons for working with Russia, ranging from the economic to combatting international terrorism, and this in spite of growing evidence that Russian policy under Putin was moving in an increasingly authoritarian and anti-Western direction. Indeed, it was to prevent the drift to what he feared was fast becoming a new Cold War that Obama announced a 'fresh restart' to prevent a further deterioration in the relationship.

Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, followed eight years later by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, seemed to bury for ever the idea that Washington could ever find any common ground with Moscow. And although the rhetoric from the White House during the first Trump term sounded far too conciliatory according to many analysts, his policy actions towards Russia turned out to be a good deal more robust. The new Biden administration elected in November 2020 was clearer still where it stood when it came to dealing with Russia, with the President himself casting the relationship as one involving an existential struggle between aggressive dictatorships like Russia and the free world led by the United States and its European allies. As Biden put it: 'Throughout our history we've learned this lesson — when dictators do not pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos'.

Even so, there was a good deal of criticism directed against Biden's policies towards Ukraine. These ranged from his administration's failure to offer Ukraine full membership of the NATO alliance, through to pursuing a policy designed to keep the war going but without supplying Ukraine with what they might have needed to win. There was, however, another line of attack that found a ready audience amongst those close to Donald Trump: that by defining Russia as a threat and supporting Ukraine (however half-heartedly) Washington was only prolonging a war that Ukraine could not hope to win. Moreover, the main strategic result of his policy was to reinforce the strategic partnership between Russia and China which over the long term would further undermine the international position of the United States. Worse still, far from the conflict being confined to Ukraine and Russia alone, the fallout from the war was growing globally more destabilising by the day, not only in Europe where Russia was now engaged in undermining the liberal foundations of the continent, but in other parts of the world where Russia had every interest in further challenging Western positions.

The net result of this rethink was very much in evidence when President Trump had his first meeting with President Zelenskyy in February 2025. Indeed, during their fraught encounter, Trump berated the Ukrainian President not only for being 'disrespectful' to

the United States, but (as previously noted) possibly even being the cause of 'World War Three'. Later the same month, Trump expressed his 'disappointment' with Ukraine's less than enthusiastic reaction to recent peace talks held between Russia and the US in Riyadh (conducted without Ukraine being present). He then added for good measure that Ukraine should never have started the war in the first place and that he, Trump, 'could have made a deal for Ukraine that would have given them almost all of the land, everything, almost all of the land – and no people would have been killed, and no city would have been demolished'. Meanwhile, he insisted that Russia really 'wants to do something.... to stop the savage barbarianism', the implication being that Ukraine did not.

But perhaps the most concrete expression of Trump's significantly different approach was when, in the spring and summer of 2025, he did not seek congressional approval for any new funding for US military assistance to Ukraine. At the same time, he ensured that the US stepped back from leading the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which hitherto had been coordinating military assistance to Ukraine since the onset of the conflict. Meanwhile, he made it abundantly clear that it was now up to the European members of NATO to step up and fund assistance to Ukraine. This, he argued, was 'totally logical' given that Ukraine was geographically part of Europe, and that therefore it was in Europe's interest to shoulder an increasing share of the responsibility for Ukraine.

Two other developments in November 2025 indicated the extent to which the Trump administration was prepared to go to seek a new deal with Russia.

The first was expressed most clearly in the pages of the administration's first National Security Strategy (NSS). Although much was made of the NSS's focus on Latin America, not to mention the various barbs directed against Europe's presumed 'erasure' as a 'civilization', the most revisionist parts of the document were those concerning both China – now talked of primarily as a potential economic partner rather than as a direct challenge to American primacy – and as a corollary (though a long way down the list of priorities) Russia itself. Nothing was said to indicate Russia was aggressive or even that it had invaded Ukraine. Indeed, at one point it was even argued that 'many Europeans' regarded Russia (incorrectly it seemed) as an existential threat. This was not a view shared by the United States, whose 'core interest' was not to isolate Russia, but 'to negotiate an expeditious cessation of hostilities in Ukraine, in order to stabilise European economies, prevent unintended escalation or expansion of the war, and reestablish strategic stability with Russia'. Only then, it seemed, the United States could get on with the more vital work of building a more stable relationship with Russia, which would in turn enable 'the post-hostilities reconstruction of Ukraine' to begin.

If the NSS outlined what the Trump team was seeking to achieve with Russia over the long term, the Trump team's 28-point plan gave expression to how it hoped to end the war in Ukraine in the here and now. Reportedly devised by Trump negotiator Steve Witkoff and Kremlin official Kirill Dmitriev, its main proposals would in the first instance have handed large swathes of Ukrainian territory (even some unconquered) to Russia. This in turn would be accompanied by demands to limit the size of Kyiv's military. Ukrainian elections

would also have be held within 100 days. Sanctions against Russia would then be lifted, while Russia would be invited to re-join the G8 group of nations. Finally, though there would be some security guarantees offered to Ukraine – it was not spelt out what these might be – no NATO troops would be deployed in Ukraine, and Ukraine itself would have to amend its constitution to commit to not joining NATO.

There were of course some in the West prepared to defend the plan. Ukraine was after all being promised some level of security guarantee by the United States. An end to the war in Ukraine would also contribute more generally to global peace and stability. It would certainly come as a relief to many Ukrainians. There might also follow some major economic benefits too. But most importantly of all neither Ukraine by itself, nor its European backers, had an alternative that might bring this now four year long and hugely costly conflict to an end. It would by definition involve concessions by Kyiv. Yet that is how all wars end, including this forever war at the heart of Europe.

But the plan also provoked something of storm amongst critics who, not unreasonably, pointed out that it required a number of concessions from Ukraine but few from Russia. Moreover, according to many analysts, its open-ended language created loopholes that invited broad interpretation and potential manipulation. A Harvard report also noted that the document offered 'no sense of what happened' if talks were to collapse, and 'unresolved' issues introduced 'structural vulnerabilities that Russia could exploit… raising fundamental concerns about the plan's underlying strategic intent and practical viability'.

Finally, the plan (or indeed any possible negotiated peace plan) rested on the dubious assumption that Putin was actually interested in any kind of agreement that did not, in the end, lead to Ukraine's elimination as a sovereign democratic state with its own identity. Nor was this all. As a number of writers with more than a passing acquaintance with Russia have pointed out, Putin's position within Russia now depends in important ways on either continuing a war which by 2026 was sustaining the Russian economy, or more generally of maintaining his own grip on power. The coming of peace would moreover run counter to his oft-stated ambition of maintaining Russia's position as a great power amongst other great powers. As a noted writer on Russian affairs has suggested, Putin thus seems to be trapped in a war that he is unable to win but dares not end, not only because of the consequences it might have at home, but also because it would put paid to his goal of making Russia great again. An influential American writer on strategy argued in a classic study published back in 1971, that at the end of the day, 'every war must end'. And in some ways, Trump is only trying to show, in his own unique fashion, why Fred Iklé was right. Unfortunately, the logic of history suggests that as neither Russia nor Ukraine can win or lose, or is prepared to do what Trump most wants – namely make a deal – this particular war is likely to go on.

The European Dimension – Politics, Economics and Resources

Despite their precarious domestic political situations, Europe's political leaders, the E3 – Prime Minister Starmer, President Macron and Chancellor Merz – have done a better job of supporting and advising Zelenskyy in his negotiations with President Trump than might have been expected.

They did not hold together, however, in insisting on the use of Russian sovereign funds held within the EU and the UK to support Ukraine's financial needs. Macron and then Merz followed Italian Prime Minister Meloni and Belgian PM de Wever in taking the easier route of raising an EU loan, while the UK Government was unwilling to risk using immobilised Russian assets if it was the only European country doing so.

The E3 have been incapable of constraining Trump's impatient pursuit of a peace deal, despite the lack of any indication that Putin wants an end to the fighting. Their role has been to dissuade Trump from coercing Zelenskyy into concessions that would weaken Ukraine's ability to defend itself in future, not to challenge explicitly his sympathy for Putin.

The E3 will continue to be hampered in their efforts to lead the rest of Europe by their domestic political difficulties. Macron, Merz and Starmer all head unpopular governments, and for each of them the primary electoral challenge comes from a right-wing populist party with ties to both Russia and the MAGA movement in the US. As the US National Security Strategy published in November 2025 makes clear, the Trump administration regards such 'patriotic forces' as its ideological soulmates and partners of choice in Europe, rather than the European Union or European governments led by mainstream parties.

Macron, having served two terms, will be unable to run in the April 2027 French presidential election. Recent opinion polls suggest the likely candidate of the far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN), Jordan Bardella, would defeat any likely centre-right, centre-left or far-left opponent in the second round of the election.

Merz does not need to face voters until February 2029 if his coalition can hold together that long. Last autumn, around two-thirds of German voters did not think it would. One thing that should keep it together is the risk that at the next election the far-right AfD will be the largest single party.

With his large parliamentary majority, Starmer could hang on until the summer of 2029. He faces threats on two flanks, however. First, Reform UK has been leading Labour by an increasing margin since the spring of 2025. Second, and closely related, Starmer faces internal rivals in Labour, and if Reform UK do well in local elections in the next two years he is likely to face considerable pressure to step down. A promise to increase defence spending would not be a vote-winner in a leadership contest, no matter how necessary stronger defences might be in the current international environment.

The weakness of the E3 governments will make it harder for them to set a good example when it comes to defence and resilience spending. The national debt of the UK (95% of GDP) and France (116% of GDP) means that they cannot spend more on defence and security without cutting spending elsewhere, unless the two governments can persuade the markets to treat defence spending as a form of necessary investment. Facing their own domestic constraints, the Germans have successfully mobilised significant additional funding for defence through the release of the debt-brake. The UK and France have announced modest increases in defence expenditure, while failing to prioritise defence budgets ahead of welfare spending.

Across Europe as a whole, a number of countries near Russia's borders have decided to risk the wrath of the markets rather than the aggression of Putin. EU member-states will be helped, potentially, by the EU's decision to allow them to spend up to an extra 1.5% of GDP per year on defence, in excess of the usual permitted fiscal deficit of 3%, without being subject to the excessive deficit procedure. This flexibility applies for four years from 2025. By the end of 2025, 16 EU member-states had taken advantage of the new rule. But some of the most indebted countries – including France, Italy and Spain – have chosen not to add to their longer-term fiscal problems.

Poland is already spending 4.5% of GDP on defence; Lithuania is at 4%; and Estonia, Latvia and Norway are all spending a higher percentage of GDP on defence than the US is. Finland plans to be spending more than 3% by 2029. But with a deadline of 2035 for reaching the target of spending 3.5% of GDP on defence and a further 1.5% on more general security and resilience, agreed at the NATO summit in The Hague in 2025, there are still formidable challenges.

Many leaders will be keeping their fingers crossed that by then either the Trump administration will have been replaced by a more emollient US leadership, or the war in Ukraine will be over (whether successfully or not, from Ukraine's perspective), so that Europe can return to 'peacetime' levels of defence and security spending.

There is also a strong likelihood that countries will take advantage of the Summit's vague definition of what the 1.5% security spending should cover: 'to *inter alia* protect our critical infrastructure, defend our networks, ensure our civil preparedness and resilience, unleash innovation, and strengthen our defence industrial base'. Overall, it seems unlikely that Europe will reach the 3.5%/1.5% targets; and if it does, that level of spending is unlikely to be sustainable without major and politically challenging changes to Europe's economic and social model.

Given that the European members of NATO have a combined GDP (on a purchasing power-parity basis) five times that of Russia, however, it should not be necessary for Europe to spend at the NATO-agreed levels to match Russian capabilities, provided that the money is spent efficiently. The problem is that will itself be difficult to achieve. The EU's efforts to encourage rationalisation of the European defence industrial sector and European defence procurement are still at an early stage. Even if governments accept that they should not all pursue national weapons programmes with slightly different specifications, it will be a long time before standardisation can be achieved.

National industrial interests have also blocked closer EU-UK defence industrial co-operation, despite the existence of multinational EU-UK firms like Leonardo and MBDA, as well as UK firms' involvement in programmes such as Poland's construction of frigates. The UK and the Commission, pushed by France, failed to agree terms for the UK to play a leading role in projects under the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) Fund. The EU's demand for an up-front payment that would have amounted to almost 10% of the UK defence budget, with no guarantee of a proportionate benefit for UK firms, showed a disappointing failure of imagination when a coherent defence posture in Europe depends on the EU and the UK working effectively together.

Four questions hang over Europe's performance in the months to come:

- The E3 are not Europe. With the Czechs and the Slovaks moving toward the 'rejectionist' position of the Hungarian government, can the EU stay even its current course collectively, alongside the British?

- Will E3 leaders individually be able to stand up to their own difficult domestic political cross-currents and American bullying to continue sustaining Zelenskyy's will and his financial and military capacity to resist?

- Can E3 leaders set an example to others in Western Europe who hope not to have to live up to the commitments they made at the last NATO summit, with the British and the French compensating with brave words for what is, in reality, their under-investment in defence?

- Will the US National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, both of which point to diminishing US interest in defending Europe against Russia, be followed up with significant reductions in the US's commitment of forces to Europe, on a scale that might introduce greater urgency into European thinking about defence?

These questions will be the subject of intense discussion over the months ahead.

The Changing Character of Warfare

The three key questions are:

- How is the Digital Age transforming how war is fought?
- What are the priorities for military innovation, transformation and investment?
- What changes will there be on NATO's demands on member states?

Whatever the answers to these questions, Europe broadly acknowledges the requirement to restore its defence in the face of an enduring and aggressive Russian threat as well as the certain knowledge of declining US support, in terms of both will and capability. There is a range of views on how serious and urgent this challenge is, with more difficult choices for those countries with stagnant economies and where the prospect of more defence spending is much less popular than demands for more welfare and social protection.

This means that money for defence must be spent well, delivering improved deterrence at a sustainably affordable minimum price. It requires careful choices about the balance of capabilities (people, equipment, training and support) and ensuring they are provided efficiently. The question of capabilities is very significantly affected by how the *Digital Age is transforming how war is fought,* as much as by anything else. This is not a question of merely filling in the holes in depleted conventional inventory. Economically efficient provision will also require European states collaborating and specialising in some areas, occasionally at the expense of long-standing sovereign industrial history.

The character of this technological transformation is quite well understood in conceptual terms and the UK's 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) set great store by this. It must be understood as an enduring process. It can, however, enhance the power of opponents that better grasp how the character of war is changing. Although NATO is very focused on Russia today, there should be no doubt that the military technological benchmark will be set by China as the 21st Century unfolds.

The spending objective must be to sustain deterrence of Russia at the level of 'escalation dominance', grounded in a credible will and ability to fight. This means that Russia must know that it cannot benefit in any way from attacking NATO, whether that is below the threshold of military conflict or by resorting to military force.

NATO faces too much uncertainty and risk if it tries to sustain deterrence through score-draw parity. Addressing this is not fundamentally a question of affordability given the enormous economic disparity between Europe and Russia. Europe can afford to establish escalation dominance with only relatively marginal changes to spending decisions and execution. The real challenge is about leadership, choice and competence – not money.

Deterrence is not only about territorial integrity, nor is it something that affects only the uniformed armed forces of Europe. Deterrence is a battle of will between states, where

the centre of gravity is the civil population's support to resist and to fight. This does include deterring military territorial aggression, but it extends far more widely across how kinetic and non-kinetic force contains and disrupts an opponent in ways that do not entail fighting for ground. Deterrence also means being able to endure and succeed in confrontations that may extend over years, not only to manage short-term events or incidents.

War, and therefore deterrence, is once again a question of applying all the levers of available power to deter and if necessary to fight and win. It requires the integration of armed forces, the public sector and the private sector in well-formed and well-led partnership. There are new vulnerabilities to protect, such as the digital infrastructure that sustains daily life and the direct access to the opinions and morale of most of the civil population afforded by the Internet and their mobile phones.

Deterrence, therefore, requires investment in the resilience of the whole of society, not just military resilience and better ability to mobilise and deploy. Exclusive focus on restoring only the armed forces will fall short of the 'whole of society' requirement. Resources are required for both the military and wider societal and industrial resilience.

Deterrence at the level of escalation dominance means that Russia must know that, were it minded to attack NATO, the consequences for Russia as a state would completely outweigh any putative advantage it may see in attacking. This denotes not only the capability to mount an overwhelming military response, but also – and just as important – all the means that would be applied to Russia's political, economic and social fabric. NATO must understand how escalation dominance will be achieved through the offensive application of all levers of power, not just the military instrument, even if that is carried out through sovereign cooperation rather than Alliance direction.

NATO has a strategy and a plan for the return to achieving deterrence by denial and by escalation dominance. NATO's Deterrence & Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) concept, approved at the 2023 Vilnius Summit, provides the framework for acquiring capability and operating it. Unsurprisingly, it comes with a different, bigger bill than was incurred during the comfortable post-Cold War era. It demands a sustained competitive edge, higher readiness, greater mass, and endurance measured years.

Unquestionably, the US subsidy to European security, and the implementation of the DDA, that has been so generous and pivotal since 1949 will be reduced. The remaining questions are only around scale, pace and timing. This does not mean NATO without the US, because US security will be significantly enhanced by better performing NATO allies, just as European security is significantly enhanced by the US in NATO.

This means that closing the gap to meet the new requirement will be harder for Europe now and very likely also demand moving faster despite fiscal constraints. It also means being clear about what the US will still do for European security and what European members must now do to establish sufficient, complementary autonomy.

The next big question is: *What are the priorities for Military innovation, transformation and investment?* This will certainly include European NATO-wide investment in non-US strategic capabilities. This includes resilient access to commercial space-based Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) satellites and communications; secure high-capacity alliance-wide information systems and communications; integrated air and missile defence, including against ballistic and high velocity systems; very long-range precision conventional weapons; and Alliance-wide commonality in logistic support, movement and medical support arrangements.

Europe will have to decide how to close the gap between strategic nuclear deterrence (likely relying more on the UK and France) and its conventional forces even as they are revitalised. This may require investment in new sub-strategic nuclear weapons, especially high velocity ballistic ones, but it will certainly require investment in conventional precision missiles capable of hitting targets anywhere in Russia and beyond.

NATO's armed forces must now constantly evolve at the speed of innovation, innovation which mostly comes from the private sector, to sustain their operational edge against opponents who will be doing the same. NATO must build on its existing framework – Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA), NATO Innovation Fund (NIF) for encouraging and capturing innovation from the private sector, including private capital as well as industry. This should stimulate and resource competition that draws on enterprises of all sizes, including, but not only, national defence industrial champions, to deliver against NATO's capability targets.

NATO has set out clear capability targets for members which are designed to drive investment. These reflect the demand signal set by the DDA. They also acknowledge how technology is changing capability (capability defined as people, equipment, training and support), but there is more to do to establish a clear conceptual NATO-wide framework for the capability transformation to be executed by Members.

The two principal features of this transformation, in very broad terms, are:

- The centrality of 'digital kill web' architecture, which connects all sensors through a common network to data in secure cloud that is managed by AI tools in support of commanders and staff. Such data supports the best possible understanding of a situation, and the decisions commanders must take to act effectively. The database is connected to a common network of 'effectors' of all types in all domains, kinetic and non-kinetic. Decisions about targeting and manoeuvre are made, disseminated and executed at the greatest possible speed and efficiency.

  This conceptual architecture underpins how warfare has been conducted in Ukraine and in Gaza and its principles are universally applicable. While kill web architectures are unconstrained by range, they will evolve as global constructs. NATO's Maven Smart System is an AI-enabled decision-making, battle management and targeting platform system. It is the foundation of an Alliance-

wide digital kill web and its development must be a fundamental priority for investment.

- The sensor and effector elements of this architecture span all domains (Sea, Land, Air, Space, and Cyber) and are in rapid evolution from the analogue-era forces built around people manning iconic platforms (ships, tanks, aircraft) into *a thoughtfully blended mix of crewed, uncrewed and increasingly autonomous capabilities*. This mix is designed against a 'battlespace' that has become transparent and where the advent of ever greater precision makes conventional platforms highly vulnerable, especially when concentrated. The greatest advantage for European forces lies not in restoring numbers of crewed platforms but in augmenting these with as many uncrewed and autonomous adjuncts as possible. This is the better path to military effectiveness, resilience, mass and endurance.

The transformation process must avoid being seduced into templating from contemporary conflicts with unique characteristics, such as in Ukraine, or by a misplaced search for 'silver bullets'. While an astonishing and profound process, perhaps the greatest combined change for 150 years, it is just the latest evolution of the 'orchestra of war' as it keeps in step with the technology, circumstances and thinking of the Age. There is no end state other than constant change.

The third key question is: *What Changes will there be on NATO's demands on member states?* Some are linked to the reliance on cyber resilience, access to Space and the requirement to contribute to comprehensive integrated air and missile defence. But the specific military role to be played by individual Alliance Members will inevitably be affected by their geography, size and wealth.

It is unnecessary and inefficient for all Member States to replicate the same span of military capabilities at different levels of scale. There must be sensible differentiation. For example, the territorial circumstances of the Baltic states, Poland and Germany dictate an emphasis on denying territorial incursion by air and land. Their armed forces will be built against this primary requirement, better delivered by seizing on the opportunity for transformation.

While the UK remains entirely reliant on the cooperation of its allies in war for its daily existence it is not at the same risk of a land-based territorial incursion from Russia. It is far more vulnerable to cyber, maritime and air attacks at home bringing daily life to a halt without a single boot on the ground from an opponent.

For that reason, the UK's contribution to NATO territorial defence will be in the North Atlantic, across NATO Air and Space capability, and in rapid land reinforcement on 'Continental Europe' at the point of greatest need in support of the 'front line' states. The UK should therefore be expected to be pace-setting in anti-submarine warfare and in the air, and to provide land capability that adds telling capability to complement but not duplicate in-place forces.

NATO planning must establish how such differentiation is to be done and not simply demand the same sort of capability from all members.

NATO – Putting the Right Forces in the Right Places

To date, this has been done through the adoption of SACEUR's Strategic Directive on Peacetime Vigilance and Area of Responsibility Management – including Enhanced Vigilance Activities (EVA) – and the step-by-step implementation of the DDA – a methodology for deterrence by denial of advantage that provides the military concept to achieve the political objective set out in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept. All these plans are open to refinement and will evolve to address two key issues: what forces need to be deployed and where to deter Russia in the near-term? And what are the implications for NATO's force structure and force employment, tasks increasingly shaped by lessons identified in Ukraine?

The DDA will remain NATO's guiding star, providing a solid, overarching, threat-based, Alliance-wide force employment strategy. The DDA has energised and energises the Alliance's peacetime activities, it guides military responses in crisis to deter aggression, and military operations in conflict at the strategic, operational and the tactical levels. This strategy recognises that in order to deter NATO must unambiguously demonstrate the ability to defend, in key geographic focus areas, and across the warfighting domains, and that this requires the integration of mutually reinforcing, robust, multi-domain effects on an operational-strategic scale across the totality of the Alliance Area with the stated intent of defending every inch of Alliance territory. Unsurprisingly, it relies on a significant increase in defence spending to address known capability shortfalls, including war-stocks, while simultaneously seeking to aggressively enhance the lethality of the force with the adoption of new technologies.

NATO would expect forward defensive forces, both manned and unmanned, to hold ground, with these forces connected to Alliance military multi-domain capabilities held at distance to reinforce them in multiple forms, including deep land attack from ships and submarines, long-range precision strike from land-based fires, and air power – for counter-air and air attack – all complemented by the actions of Special Operations Forces operating in depth, Cyber operations, military activities in Space, and reinforcement to deliver more land forces in and over time.

Allies understand that the full implementation of the DDA and the related Family of Plans, framed by SACEUR's Theory of Victory and the philosophy of Mission Command, underpins effective and executable Collective Defence. All Allies also understand that warfighting readiness is the true test for fighting forces, and achieving high readiness will remain an enduring priority for SACEUR given the historic lack of investment by Allies in force preparation has depressed baseline warfighting readiness. This is taking time to address, a problem compounded by the very necessary provision of support to Ukraine.

Force Preparation (a system-level, whole-of-government concept) and Readiness (a tactical-level concept focused on the employability of a force) are two-sides of the same coin. As a priority, Allies need to continue to invest in readiness. This will include the adoption of an effective operational readiness mechanism in front-line states. Ready forces, like a marathon runner, cannot stay at peak fitness all year. Peak form relies on

heavy training stress plus taper; holding race-shape for too long actually reduces operational effectiveness and recovery is more difficult.

We should also remember that the Regional Plans, developed at the Joint Force Command level, are operational-level war-plans, and do not dictate tactical-level execution details. It is for each Ally to decide if the American way of war, hyper-connected with the aim of securing battlefield dominance through all-domain convergence, is anchored in a realistic mechanism of victory (the core causal engine within a theory of victory) for them; or if there is a better Higher Level Operating Concept that meets their needs, is achievable, is fit for our times and yet still docks with the larger NATO all-domain enterprise and logic of the digital kill web.

It is this latter ability to coordinate Joint Fires, and Air Defence, for offensive and defensive actions at a national-level and, if necessary, integrate these into an Alliance Multi-Domain Operations framework that is central to success and remains a force structure and employment priority. It will be tested and validated as work on the European Forward Deterrence Initiative (EFDI) gains momentum in creating a defence in depth by positioning the right forces and capabilities in the right place to establish geographic and domain dominance. The Alliance already has clear defence objectives, but the EFDI will also lead to a prioritisation of effort based on the threat. We will also see changes to traditional force structures reflecting the lessons identified in Ukraine, rapid advances in technology and related Allied efforts to out-think and out-pace the likely Russian threat.

The Alliance still aims to conduct well-coordinated full-spectrum warfare across domains and regions, informed by an enhanced Military Alert System (MAS) and the realities of the modern battlefield such as:

- The fact that the transparent battlefield and the move to ‘affordable precision mass’ (drones) have changed warfare, even making some fundamental doctrine irrelevant.

- The challenge of survivability given pervasive surveillance, and the need for layered counter-drone systems.

- The complexity of establishing air supremacy, given the airspace is now layered and control over one layer does not mean control over another.

- The ability to sense and strike different levels of echelon.

- Enhanced connectivity, with the NATO Command Structure already adopting the Maven Smart System. This promises to accelerate the decision-cycle, using live-data.

- The increase in range of ground-launched precision-guided missiles now allowing the Alliance to take a ground-based approach to Counter Anti-Access/Area Denial (C-A2AD) operations.

- The importance of embedded electronic warfare.

- The increased use of robotics, unmanned defence and counter-attack capabilities.

- The continued need for mass Combat Forces, with troops that are battle-smart: threat aware, creative, disciplined, logistically resilient and ready – psychologically and physically – for modern combat.

- The need to align with the Non-Military Instrument of Power, now increasingly critical in peace, as the Alliance works to counter Russia's hybrid destabilisation campaign against the West. While it remains the primary responsibility of the targeted country to respond against hybrid threats, there is increasing benefit in a coordinated response.

All these points will lead to adjustments in force structures. Yet today, modern platforms and sensors are being fielded faster than the command & control, training, readiness mechanisms and knowledge needed to convert them into effective capabilities. It takes time to build expertise, and workforce depth is currently a rate-limiting constraint for many armed forces, who are struggling to integrate new capabilities, and resource an effective operational readiness mechanism and training plans.

Adapting NATO for a New Age

NATO's governance and structures, civilian as well as military, have always adapted to reflect changes in the Alliance's make up and individual allies' contributions in military capability, defence budget and political commitment. They will continue to do so. We can expect, therefore, allies such as Poland, Germany and the Nordic and Baltic states to seek a more central role in future.

Mark Rutte became NATO Secretary-General in October 2024 and is likely to be in office for many years to come. When the time comes to select his successor, NATO may look in new directions. There has to date been no Secretary-General from an eastern ally, and only one German (Manfred Woerner 1988-94). It is an open question whether there will ever again be a US Deputy Secretary-General.

Allies need to adapt to a world in which the US's commitment to Europe and the security of the Euro-Atlantic area is at best changing and reducing, at worst disappearing, and where the current administration does not share (most) Europeans' perception of the Russian threat. The 2026 US National Defense Strategy sets out an explicitly America First approach, prioritising the US homeland, and states that ending the war on Ukraine is 'Europe's responsibility first and foremost', with a need for greater defence burden-sharing.

NATO's decision in February 2026 to adopt a new distribution of senior officer responsibilities in which European allies will in future play a more prominent role, including heading all three Joint Force Commands, is a significant development. But we must consider the further Europeanisation of NATO, which is not primarily a question of senior appointments, but embraces:

- A clear and coherent strategic vision and politico-military direction, which might come in future from a permutation of the E3 (UK, Germany, France), E4 (E3 plus Poland), or E5 (E4 plus Italy).

- Political and operational mechanisms to enable US-less crisis prevention and response – above all, Europeans stumping up the resources and capability to fill US-shaped capacity gaps identified through the NATO Defence Planning Process. These should prioritise systems and capabilities offering the greatest deterrence and defence benefit to Europe.

Some recent NATO responses to the Russian threat, such as operations Baltic Sentry and Eastern Sentry, have been European led. The UK experience as a framework nation of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), originally straddling NATO and non-NATO members but now comprised entirely of northern European allies, is also instructive. The Europeans are showing that they can organise in a NATO context without the US. But can they act, effectively and at scale?

Europeanisation is not the same as ‘EU-isation’, given the differences in the two organisations’ membership. Several leading European allies (UK, Turkey, Norway) are not EU member states, and some EU members (including Ireland, whose geography matters given Russian threats in the Atlantic) are not in NATO. NATO also includes a significant non-European ally in Canada. The Euro-Canadian community of values and interests is now closer than ever. And, from a modest base, Canada is boosting its defence capabilities in the Arctic and High North.

Nevertheless, the NATO/EU relationship needs attention, including how the mutual assistance obligation in Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union would be delivered in the event of a Russian military assault. Some European allies, such as France, may continue to hanker after solutions outside NATO. But NATO is the best – currently the only credible – way for Europeans to deal with serious military threats.

NATO and the EU should look again at the 2003 ‘Berlin Plus’ arrangements, which provided for the EU to access NATO command structures and assets for crisis management operations. This could be expanded to allow for coalitions of the willing among European countries to access NATO resources in the absence of the US or without consensus amongst Europeans. Although a new European Security Treaty could provide an explicit basis for such arrangements, it may be possible to proceed on a less formal basis. There is an historic reference point in the now defunct Western European Union, whose foundational Treaty of Brussels preceded the creation of NATO.

Another issue, common to both NATO and the EU, is consensus. Not all European countries share the same view of the Russian threat, and some are prone to Russian influence. Similarly, European allies may respond differently to pressures from Washington. NATO’s politico-military structures and processes may need to evolve, for example to allow decisions by less than full consensus if a minority of Allies do not support action, whether that be the US or a European ally. In this context, the flexibility of commitments in the North Atlantic Treaty may be helpful.

The modest military reassurance deployment from some European countries to Greenland in January 2026 suggested that where there is sufficient political will and perceived urgency, ways can be found. It also indicated that coalitions of the like-minded may be more achievable than a unified response. In the case of Greenland, the E3 – led by France – and Nordic countries were at the fore in rallying support for Denmark.

A NATO rebalanced towards greater European direction and capability need not exclude cooperation with like-minded countries in other parts of the world, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea or Australia. NATO already has productive partnerships with many such countries, who might prove willing and able to join a coalition of the willing operations and activities proposed and led by European allies. Such groupings would align with the vision outlined by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at Davos in January 2026 of a variable geometry of different coalitions for different issues, based on common interests and values, with middle powers achieving greater global effect by working together.

If some of the above feels like a continuation of abstract Euro-Atlantic security geometry discussions of the past, events in Ukraine should drive new approaches. The potential terms of a ceasefire or peace deal there, including security assurances or guarantees, will have profound implications for individual allies and for NATO. Whether a member of the alliance or not, Ukraine will be a major actor in European security discussions and military arrangements of the future, and a potent partner.

The UK has a lot at stake in NATO's successful evolution. It is therefore in its interest to be proposing change, including on greater Europeanisation and how intermediate powers can work better together to maximise their impact. Its own military focus should be on developing its role and capabilities as the leading northern Ally. It is in an unrivalled position, given its extra-EU status, permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council and global network, to put forward proposals for new politico-military arrangements for a rebalanced Euro-Atlantic security partnership.

This is urgent. As a follow up to their 2025 National Security Strategy, US officials have set 2027 as a deadline for Europe to provide most of the alliance's conventional defence capabilities and said that the US could withdraw from some NATO planning processes if there is no progress. So, prompt attention is needed, starting, but not ending, with the 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined how the European security environment is changing dramatically because of a combination of growing Russian aggression and partial US retrenchment. Russia's objectives, if achieved, would be incompatible with our security, our democratic way of life and our prosperity. The challenge is not just a contingent military one: Russia is pursuing a campaign of hybrid activities, including cognitive warfare, against European states to weaken their will to resist Russia's agenda.

As we are already entering a period of enhanced risk NATO and its member states need to respond by increasing their defence expenditure and modernising their armed forces. The response cannot be only in the military domain. In today's conditions, successful deterrence and defence against attack requires greater resilience of critical national infrastructure and of society itself.

In these circumstances, the UK needs to build a strong, broad and lasting national consensus around the nature of the threats to our society and around the measures needed to counter them, and over what time scale. A cross-party consensus is essential since our defence planning and resource decisions need to be sustained across more than the current and next Parliaments.

In short, the current situation demands that we need:

- To be clear-eyed about the Russian threat (political and military) as well as the short-term domestic political pressures driving Russian behaviour.

- To understand fully the changing relationship between the US and Europe.

- To develop greater societal resilience to withstand the bumps and shocks.

- To fix the gaps in NATO's military capabilities and posture within the next few years (not the 2035 horizon favoured by some governments): this does not need (and cannot wait for) NATO member states to spend 3.5% of GDP on defence.

- To move towards a 'more Europeanised' NATO with more leadership from its main European members.

Annex

Professor Christopher Alden – Director, LSE IDEAS
Professor Chris Alden is Director of LSE IDEAS, deputy head of the International Relations department the London School of Economics (LSE) and a Research Associate with the South African Institute of International Affairs. He is a prolific author focusing on foreign policy, China-Africa relations and security in the Global South. Professor Alden has held fellowships at Cambridge University, Institute of Social Science, University of Tokyo; Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto; Ecole Normale Superieure (Cachan), Paris; CERI, Paris; and University of Pretoria.

Gordon Barrass – Visiting Professor, LSE IDEAS
Gordon Barrass is a Visiting Professor at LSE IDEAS, where he specialises on strategy, assessments and perceptions. After more than 20 years in the British Diplomatic Service he served as Chief of the Assessments Staff in the Cabinet Office. Barrass then spent nearly a decade helping PwC expand its business in China's rapidly growing financial services sector. He is the author of the ground-breaking book on The Great Cold War (2009), which examined how each side viewed its adversary.

General Sir Richard Barrons – former Commander, Joint Forces Command
General Sir Richard Barrons is a senior consulting fellow with the International Security Programme at Chatham House. From 2013–2016, he served as Commander Joint Forces Command, where he was one of the six 'Chiefs of Staff' leading the UK armed forces. He is co-chair of Universal Defence and Security Solutions, which advises on defence, security and geopolitical challenges. General Barrons was asked by the UK Prime Minister to be one of the leaders of the Strategic Defence Review, published in June 2025.

Sir Philip Barton – former Permanent Secretary, FCDO
Sir Philip Barton was the UK's top diplomat for nearly five years (2020-25), advising four British Prime Ministers and five Foreign Secretaries. He is now a Senior Adviser, providing geopolitical insights and strategic advice for clients at SC Strategy. Earlier in his diplomatic career, he was Director General for Defence and Intelligence in the FCO, leading the UK's international response to the Salisbury chemical weapons attack, and Acting Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee. He also served as Foreign Affairs Private Secretary to Prime Ministers John Major and Tony Blair.

Ian Bond – Centre for European Reform
Ian Bond has been deputy director of the Centre for European Reform since November 2023, which he joined as foreign policy director in 2013. Prior to that, he was a member of the British diplomatic service for 28 years. His last posting, after serving as Ambassador to Latvia, was as political counsellor and joint head of the foreign and

security policy group in the British Embassy, Washington (2007-12), where he focused on US foreign policy towards Europe, the former Soviet Union, Asia and Africa.

Sir Laurie Bristow – former HM Ambassador to Moscow

Sir Laurie Bristow, President of Hughes Hall, Cambridge since 2022, was a British diplomat for 32 years. He served as Ambassador to Azerbaijan, before becoming Deputy Ambassador to Russia, Ambassador to Russia (2016-2020) and Ambassador to Afghanistan when it fell to the Taliban in 2021. Sir Laurie regularly writes and comments on Russia and national and international security issues. He is a Distinguished Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute, and a visiting professor at LSE IDEAS.

Professor Michael Cox – LSE IDEAS

Professor Michael Cox, a Founding Director of LSE IDEAS, was Director of it (2008-2019) and now holds a senior fellowship there. He specializes in foreign policy, transatlantic relations, and the Cold War. As well as his positions at LSE he is Associate Fellow for the US and the Americas Programme at Chatham House, an advisor to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and as Guest Professor at CERIS. He regularly lectures to universities world-wide as well as to government bodies and many private companies.

General Sir James Everard – former DSACEUR

General Sir James Everard is a senior British military leader who was Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (NATO) from 2017-2020. Since then he has remained closely involved with NATO, focusing on enhancing the capabilities of member states to deter Russian aggression. After serving with NATO in Bosnia and as Commander of 20th Armoured Brigade in Iraq, his final two appointments prior to becoming NATO DSACEUR were as Deputy Chief of Defence Staff for Military Strategy and Operation (UK MOD), and Commander UK Field Army.

Ruth Harris – Executive Director for National Security & Data Science, RAND Europe

Ruth Harris specialises in grey zone conflicts and assessment of future threat environments, using scenarios, wargaming, horizon scanning and quantitative assessments. Her military experience includes working with the British Armed forces, UN, ICRC, NATO and Armed Forces from across Europe and the US She was a senior evaluator for security reform in Afghanistan and worked at NATO HQ and SHAPE, supporting Joint Capability decisions.

Peter Jones – Head of Global Strategies, LSE IDEAS

Peter Jones served in the British Diplomatic Service for over thirty years. Before retiring in 2021, he was Chief Operating Officer and Director-General from 2017 to 2020, and prior to that Director for Defence and International Security. Jones served in four UK diplomatic missions overseas: the UK Delegation to the Conventional Arms Control

Negotiations in Vienna, British Embassies in Bonn and Rome, and as British High Commissioner in Accra. Peter was appointed Visiting Senior Fellow and Head of Global Strategies at LSE IDEAS in 2023.

Dr Phillip Karber – President, Potomac Foundation

Dr Phillip Karber is President of The Potomac Foundation and leading expert on the Russian military. Since 2013, he has made 45 trips to Ukraine, spending 199 days at the front and reporting his observations to US and Allied Governments, as well two major reports to NATO on the full Russian invasion in 2022 & 2024. During the Cold War he served as Strategy Advisor to the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the JCS and subsequently taught at the National Defense University as Professor of Strategy.

Dr John Kennedy – Research Leader for Russia & Eurasia, RAND Europe

Dr John Kennedy leads the Regional Studies programme on Russia and Eurasia. His research has included projects for British, European, and US clients. Prior to RAND, he worked as an independent researcher and a senior associate at Eastern Advisory Group. He has also worked at the UK's Department for International Trade, where he held policy and national security roles covering the FSU, Turkey and Iran.

Michael Maclay – Chair, the Club of Three

Michael Maclay is Executive Chairman of the London-based Montrose Associates, which provides strategic intelligence and advice to international corporations and governmental agencies. Earlier he was a diplomat, who served in West Africa, the United Nations in New York and the Foreign Office. Maclay then became a television producer and presenter, and an editor on a number of newspapers. He subsequently served as Special Adviser to the British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd. Following the Dayton Accords, the peace agreement ending the three-and-a-half-year-long Bosnian War, he worked in Sarajevo with Carl Bildt, International High Representative for Bosnia, as his Special Adviser and Chief Spokesman.

Sir Richard Mottram – former Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence

Sir Richard Mottram is a leading expert on defence, security, strategy and planning. He was one of Britain’s top civil servants and was appointed permanent secretary of four UK government departments, including the Ministry of Defence. He was private secretary to defence ministers John Nott and then Michael Heseltine in the early 1980s. After a period in the Cabinet Office, he rejoined MoD as permanent secretary in 1995. His final appointment before his retirement in 2007 was Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee. Sir Richard is Chair of the Advisory Board of LSE IDEAS.

Professor Leslie Vinjamuri – President and CEO, Chicago Council on Global Affairs
Dr Leslie Vinjamuri joined the Council in 2025 from Chatham House where she was Head of the US and the Americas Programme and Dean of the Queen Elizabeth II Academy for Leadership in International Affairs. She is Professor of Practice in International Relations and Diplomacy at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Dr Vinjamuri was also co-Director of the Centre on International Studies and Diplomacy and Professor of International Relations at SOAS. Her research areas include US foreign policy, international order, and the politics of international human rights.

Peter Watkins – former Director General Security Policy, Ministry of Defence
Peter Watkins is a Senior Visiting Fellow at LSE IDEAS. He is also Visiting Professor at King's College London and an Associate Fellow at Chatham House. For over three decades he worked in the UK Ministry of Defence, where he was latterly Director General Security Policy (2014-17), and Director General Strategy & International (2017-18), responsible for strategic policy & planning; the Defence dimension of the UK's cross-government response to Russia; defence relations with NATO, the EU and with key bilateral allies; and defence policy aspects of cyber, space and novel technologies.

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