How To Defend EUkraine

What are the Military Options

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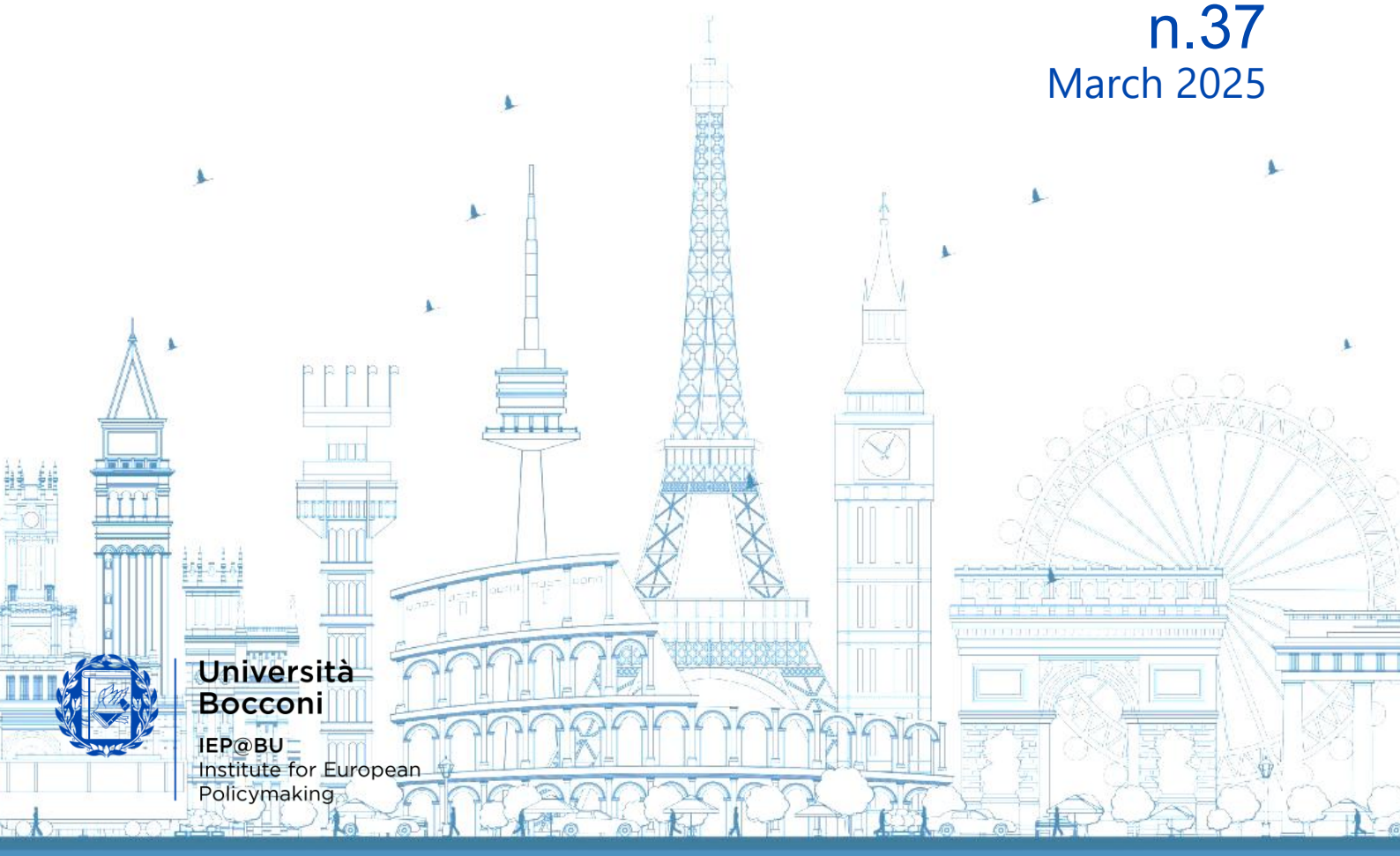

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Executive Summary[1]

Russia's war in Ukraine, now in its third year, has prompted a twin-debate in Europe, on the one hand over the military options to secure a peace and, on the other, over the defense policy alternatives to deter Moscow in the coming years. In both cases, the currently uncertain U.S. commitment to Europe represents a troubling background.[2]

The Trump administration's push to broker a Russia-Ukraine peace deal, coupled with its decision to withhold temporarily military aid and intelligence from Kyiv, complicates Ukraine's campaign and shifts the political and military burden to Europe. The crucial question is what Europe should do?

At the time of writing, negotiations on a, possibly temporary, ceasefire are ongoing. We outline and work around three scenarios: a stable peace emerges after the March 11 truce and is upheld by both parties; an intermediate case where Russia breaches the agreed deal, likely bringing back the use of military force between the two parties; and a worst-case scenario where no deal is reached, but since U.S. support remains absent, as fighting resumes, Europe finds itself in a more perilous situation.

As many numbers and options are surfacing and being discussed in the public debate, we identify nine possible military options for a European intervention, varying by engagement type (e.g., combat vs. non-combat, and so forth) posture (offensive vs. defensive), and scale (small to large).

These options include Special Forces (SF), Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support (NCS), Trip-Wire (TW), Air and Missile Defense (AD), No-Fly Zone (NFZ), Air-to-Ground Campaign (AGC), Peace-Enforcement (PE), Mobile Rapid Reaction Force (MRRF), and Combat-Ready Joint Deployment (CRJD). Considering this wide spectrum of options has two main benefits. On the one hand, it permits us to identify alternatives which are not being discussed. On the other hand, this permits us to consider options which may gain salience should fighting resumes (as in two of our three scenarios).

We then assess the political and military feasibility and sustainability of these options through multiple parameters. Our analysis reveals four key insights.

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[2] This policy brief, "EUse Your Illusion I", addresses the first part of the equation. A companion paper, "EUse Your Illusion II", will explore deterrence alternatives against Russia. As noted in our December 2024 "Before Vegetius" policy brief, these two issues are analytically intertwined, but we discuss them separately both for space reasons and clarity. Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli and Niccolò Petrelli, "Before Vegetius: Crucial Questions for European Defense," *Policy Brief* (Milan: Institute for European Policy-Making, 2024): 23-26.

- Every option involves stark trade-offs. Special Forces deploy quickly but lack strategic impact; Trip-Wire and Combat-Ready Joint Deployment enhance deterrence but risk escalation; No-Fly Zone and Air and Missile Defense are more feasible but invite Russian provocations;

- Some options are simply unfeasible at the moment, either militarily or politically. European countries, without the U.S. support, are highly unlikely to be able to conduct a Combat-Ready Joint Deployment. Others, such as the Trip-Wire, Air-to-Ground Campaign and Special Forces are politically unsustainable as long as active combat still goes on– as they would not find support among the population;

- Options like Air and Missile Defense and Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support are feasible, but they should be assessed at the political level: what is the benefit for European countries to deliver them in-theater rather than continuing either to provide Ukraine with the hardware (AD) or providing this type of support from abroad (NCS);

- Many options are scenario-specific. For instance, a Peace-Enforcement mission can work only after a peace agreement is reached, as the political bargain will define the rules of engagement. Analogously, Special Forces and Air-to-Ground Campaign are coercive options suitable in case either a peace deal is never reached or it is blatantly violated;

- Russia's escalation and provocations play a prominent role in all our options – European countries should seriously develop plans to tackle this issue.

Importantly, we have narrowed our analysis to the military realm for analytical reasons. However, policymakers should consider both the alternative and combined use of other instruments of power, like diplomacy, intelligence, or economic sanctions to achieve their goals. Somewhat related, our analysis is necessarily an approximation: more accurate estimates and predictions require detailed information either about the type of operations or the state of European armed forces that for different reasons are either not available or accessible.

We conclude with three main considerations.

First, Europe currently cannot pursue many of the options discussed – at least without the United States's support.

Strategy is about prioritizing capabilities, but current capabilities' shortfalls dramatically constrain Europe's strategic options. Regardless of the options pursued (or not) in Ukraine, our analysis reveals the need to accelerate military modernization in Europe to address this major weakness.

Second, European countries can afford Peace-Enforcement, Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support and in part Mobile Rapid Reaction Force.

Ideally, Europe would pursue these three options simultaneously both to promote and enforce peace and deter against possible violations. However, this tripartite option is likely unfeasible.

We thus suggest that European countries plan for a Peace Enforcement mission and prepare for either Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support or for Mobile Rapid Reaction Force in order to be prepared for a "what if conflict resumes".

Third, given the likely domestic opposition to many options discussed, European countries should probably try both to pursue a United Nations resolution to legitimize the Peace-Enforcement operation and to bring on-board non-European countries like Australia or Japan, but especially from the so-called Global South: this would further legitimize their operation. Even if unsuccessful, these efforts would confirm before their electorates Russia's intentions.

Europe's military options vis-à-vis Ukraine should be developed along with its deterrence and defense posture. This is the purpose of the companion paper, which will be released soon.

1. Introduction

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, which began in 2022, has reshaped Europe's security landscape and raised a strategic dilemma for European countries.

On the one hand the U.S. seems interested in bringing an end to the war, or at least the hostilities, even on terms that might not respect core European principles. On the other, European countries will likely have to handle the follow-up largely on their own.

European countries for their part have remained up until today ambivalent about direct military involvement, notwithstanding occasional displays of resolve. Calls for a European intervention in Ukraine date back to 2022, when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sought a NATO no-fly zone.[3]

By 2023, reports surfaced of European special forces operating in Ukraine.[4] In 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron 2024 proposed to send ground troops to prevent a Russian success.[5]

Currently however, only a few countries have openly signaled their willingness to deploy troops in Ukraine while most have remained hesitant or even opposed.

Several other European nations, including Poland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic states, appear ready to contribute, though they have yet to make official commitments.

Moreover, European leaders have outlined differing views on the goals and function of a prospective military deployment, with contrasting narratives describing it as "security assurance," "peacekeeping," and "peace enforcement."

Europe must urgently reassess the strategic assumptions and military responsibilities regarding Ukraine, answering key questions: What are the challenges of a military intervention? What are the most likely scenarios for deployment? What operational configurations are available, and which are feasible?

This paper provides a framework for evaluating intervention options in a comprehensive way, outlining risks and opportunities. To structure this assessment, the paper first discusses the challenges of a military deployment, it then develops three scenarios, and finally identifies options for deploying military force.

The challenges posed by a military intervention are significant. European coordination remains elusive, with divergent priorities fragmenting unity – some states favoring defensive support, others

[3] Christoper Michael Faulkner and Andrew Stigler, "Ukraine wants a no-fly zone. What does this mean, and would one make any sense in this war?," *The Conversation*, March 16 2022.

[4] Paul Adams and George Wright, "Ukraine war: Leak shows Western special forces on the ground," *BBC News*, April 12 2023,

[5] Patrick Wintour, "Macron refuses to rule out putting troops on ground in Ukraine in call to galvanise Europe," *The Guardian*, February 27 2024.

offensive operations or post-conflict stability. Burden-sharing concerns persist, with wealthier nations expected to shoulder disproportionate costs, a pattern evident in past NATO missions like Afghanistan.[6]

Domestic opposition, fueled by casualty aversion and economic pressures, further complicates decision-making. Publics and parliaments may resist direct confrontation, especially given Russia's hybrid warfare capabilities, including proxies, cyberattacks, and disinformation.

The risk of escalation looms large, with Russia's nuclear posture complicating deterrence in the absence of guaranteed U.S. backing.[7]

These challenges are heightened by the uncertainty surrounding a potential deployment's circumstances. The U.S. might succeed in brokering an armistice or peace agreement respected by Russia and Ukraine, enabling a European deployment to provide security guarantees to Ukraine – essentially a "peacekeeping" mission.

But what if Russia later violates the agreement, sparking a low-intensity conflict or triggering a return to full-scale combat? European leaders and policymakers would then need to consider shifting to a different type of mission or accepting a humiliating withdrawal, with the risk of undermining deterrence across all Europe – and without a full U.S. commitment to its security.[8]

Building on these challenges and scenarios, the policy brief identifies nine military options using a three-criteria framework: type of engagement (unconventional combat, non-combat, high-intensity combat, surface-to-air combat, air-to-air combat, air-to-ground combat, low-intensity combat); posture (offensive vs. defensive); and scale (small: hundreds–thousands; medium: thousands–tens of thousands; large: tens–hundreds of thousands).

This framework generates a comprehensive spectrum of possibilities, ranging from small-scale Special Forces (SF) operations – focused on sabotage or training – to larger-scale non-combat security assistance and support (NCS) efforts delivering logistics and intelligence.

Other options include Trip-Wire (TW) deployments to deter aggression, Air and Missile Defense (AD) to protect Ukrainian airspace, No-Fly Zones (NFZs) blending offensive and defensive air control, Air-to-Ground Campaigns (AGC) targeting Russian forces, Peace Enforcement (PE) for ceasefire stabilization, Mobile Rapid Reaction Forces (MRRF) for flexible response, and Combat-Ready Joint Deployments (CRJD) for full-scale in-theater conventional deterrent.

This wide spectrum of options has three main reasons. First, many, including politicians and policymakers, are calling for different options which, with our framework, we can provide.

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[6] Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021)

[7] Mason Clark, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," *Military Learning and the Future of War Series* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2020).

[8] Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1-2 (2018): 33-60.

Second, analytically, our approach includes a wide-range of solutions – from minimal to aggressive, from supportive to combat-ready – thus avoiding the exclusion of uncomfortable issues.

Finally, considering this wide spectrum of options, allows us to contemplate what to do should circumstances change, or pursued options fail. Specifically, what options should European countries pursue should peace-enforcement collapse?

The paper then assesses these options against nine parameters: capability (assets availability and readiness), capacity (scale and sustainability), political salience and alliance cohesion (domestic opposition and frictions among allies), escalation and provocation risks (Russian symmetric retaliations and asymmetric responses), cost (financial feasibility), impact (tactical-to-strategic), tempo (deployment speed), scenario feasibility (fitness of the operation) and casualties risk.

Importantly, our assessments, numbers and figures are an approximation as a lot would depend on rules of engagement, political conditions as well as combat and non-combat effectiveness of deployed troops: lack of training on ordnance disposal, medical evacuation or logistics may lead to significant casualties.

Our analysis shows that, currently, some options are simply unfeasible, such as the Combat-Ready Joint Deployment. Others, such as the Trip-Wire, Air-to-Ground Campaign, and Special Forces are politically difficult to sustain due to domestic opposition in many European countries.

Options like Air and Missile Defense and Non-Combat Support are more feasible, but they should be assessed at the political level to identify the benefits of delivering them directly rather than continuing either to provide Ukraine with the hardware (AD) or providing this type of support from abroad (NCS).

Finally, a Peace-Enforcement mission currently seems militarily sustainable and more politically feasible but remains exposed to Russia's hybrid tactics.

We conclude with three main considerations.

1) First, Europe currently cannot pursue many of the options discussed – at least without the United States's support. Strategy is about prioritizing capabilities, but current capabilities shortfalls dramatically constrain Europe's strategic options.

   Regardless of the options pursued (or not) in Ukraine, our analysis reveals the need to accelerate military modernization in Europe.

2) Second, European countries can afford Peace-Enforcement, Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support and in part Mobile Rapid Reaction Force.
   Ideally, Europe would pursue these three options simultaneously both to promote and enforce peace and deter against possible violations.

   However, this tripartite option is likely unfeasible. We thus suggest that European countries plan for a Peace Enforcement mission and prepare for either Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support or for Mobile Rapid Reaction Force in order to be prepared for a "what if conflict resumes".

3) Third, given the likely domestic opposition to many options discussed, European countries should probably try both to pursue a United Nations resolution to legitimize the Peace-

Enforcement operation and to bring on-board non-European countries, preferably from the Global South, in order to further legitimize the operation.
Even if unsuccessful, these efforts would confirm before their electorates Russia's intentions.

2. Challenges and Scenarios for Deploying Military Forces

Drawing from military history and political science, this chapter first illustrates the challenges a European military intervention in Ukraine would face: coordination and collective action, casualty aversion and lack of resolve; hybrid tactics and plausible deniability and finally escalation.

Next, we identify and discuss three scenarios for intervention: a peace deal is reached and upheld by both parties; a peace deal is reached but later breached by Russia, thus forcing European countries to accept a Ukrainian defeat or sustain Kyiv more massively. Finally in case no peace is reached and the U.S. does not resume its military support to Ukraine, Europe has to decide whether and how to intervene.

Challenges of a Military Intervention

War is the continuation of politics with other means. The employment of military power, however, does not always bring about its intended ends.
There are different reasons for this, but four factors stand out as particularly significant: coordination and collective action, resolve, plausible deniability, and escalation control.

Coordination and Collective Action Problems

First, coalition interventions falter on coordination and collective action problems. Divergent goals -- e.g., one nation aiming to prevent defeat, another seeking victory, a third ensuring peace – undermine unity.

NATO's burden-sharing issues amplify this dilemma: some nations underfund defense, relying on others' cash; others lack capabilities; many avoid political costs like casualties, as in Afghanistan, where many national contributions either avoided riskier areas or were so small to risk sensitive deployments.[9]

This free-riding breeds dysfunction – nations may cap contributions or demand outsized command roles, risking moral hazards where decisions burden disproportionately their allies' forces, not their own.[10] Europe's fragmented stance, evident in 2025's varied responses to Trump's push, poses a

[9] Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces: From the Rhine to Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[10] Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Ryan Grauer, "Organizing for performance: coalition effectiveness on the battlefield," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2020): 953-978; Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, "Illusions

major challenge to a unified, clear and cohesive operation.

Resolve and Domestic Constraints

Resolve poses a second hurdle. War demands willingness to endure costs, but Europe's casualty aversion weakens credibility. Imagine a ceasefire with European troops along Ukraine's border; a Russian strike kills hundreds.

A European retaliation risks favoring an escalation, yet inaction invites more attacks. Hesitation, partly driven by domestic backlashes, erodes deterrence further, emboldening Russia, which may turn more aggressive in other parts of the broader Euro-Atlantic area. Europe's military intervention, launched to reduce strategic risks, ends up exacerbating them.[11]

Plausible Deniability and Hybrid Threats

Russia's hybrid tactics – like proxies and disinformation – exploit plausible deniability, a third challenge for a European military deployment.[12]

Since 2014, Moscow has used FSB-coordinated militias for ambushes and assassinations, obscuring involvement while bleeding foes. Deployed European troops could face similar covert strikes complicating attribution amid Russia's legal-diplomatic denials.

Retaliation might escalate tensions or strain Ukraine ties; inaction could sap morale and resolve. This attritional "death by a thousand cuts" risks stymying Europe's response.[13]

Escalation Control and Nuclear Risks

Finally, escalation control looms large. Putin's 2024 nuclear warnings to Macron's troop proposal highlight Russia's advantage.[14]

Europe could manage flexible responses initially, but Russia's escalation dominance could overwhelm. Without U.S. assets, Europe struggles to counter this contingency.[15]

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of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2021): 7–43.

[11] Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[12] Michael Poznansky, "Revisiting plausible deniability," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2020): 511–533.

[13] Costantino Pischedda, Mauro Gilli, and Andrea Gilli, "Weapons of the Weak: Technological Change, Guerrilla Firepower, and Counterinsurgency Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (forthcoming).

[14] Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "World nuclear forces," *SIPRI Yearbook 2024: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024): 271-367.

[15] Héloïse Fayet, Andrew Futter, Ulrich Kühn, Łukasz Kulesa, Paul van Hooft and Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Forum: European Nuclear Deterrence and Donald Trump," Survival, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2025): 123–142.

Scenarios for intervention

Despite the risks related to a possible military intervention, military power is often used for coercive threats or direct employment.

We have considered three different scenarios in which European countries would have to seriously consider a military intervention: after a peace agreement, to secure it; after a peace deal is breached; if a cease-fire is not reached and the U.S. is no longer willing to support Ukraine.

Guaranteeing the Peace

In the first scenario, the U.S. manages to broker a peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia. Any peace, however, faces a commitment problem: preventing either side, especially Russia in this case, from rearming and restarting hostilities.[16]

In such a scenario, European countries could decide to deploy troops to preserve the agreement, mostly from Russia, although they would also need to prevent individual actors on the Ukrainian side from exploiting the European presence to raise tension.[17]

Deterring and defending Ukraine

In the intermediate scenario, negotiations result in a peace deal, but Russia violates it after a relatively short period. European countries are then faced with a dilemma.

If they do not intervene, Russia may achieve a strategic victory. If they intervene, however, they may end up in a war with Russia, potentially without the support of the United States (especially in terms of nuclear deterrence).[18]

War outcomes hinge on factors such as resources, strategy, and resolve. However, history demonstrates that numerical superiority has often been decisive.[19] A numerically strong contingent would hence be likely necessary.[20]

Historical parallels include NATO's 2011 Libya mission, which prevented Gaddafi's forces from crushing rebel resistance.[21]

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[16] Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2006):169-203; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1995):379-414.

[17] Alan J. Kuperman, "The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Balkans," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2008): 49- 80.

[18] Timothy Garton Ash, "What if Russia wins in Ukraine? We can already see the shadows of a dark 2025," *ECFR Commentary*, January 2 2025.

[19] Trevor Dupuy, *Numbers, Prediction, and War: Using History to Evaluate Combat Factors and Predict the Outcome of Battles* (New York: Bobs Merrill, 1979); Chistopher A. Lawrence, *War by Numbers: Understanding Conventional* (Sterling, VA: Potomac Books, 2017).

[20] Yang-Ming Chang, Joel Potter and Shane Sanders, "War and peace: Third-party intervention in conflict Author links open overlay panel," *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (December 2007): 954-74.

[21] Christopher S. Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Replacing the United States

In the worst-case scenario, after peace negotiations fail, full-scale combat continues, and the U.S. opts to discontinue military support to Kyiv.

As in the previous scenario, European countries either accept Ukraine's collapse or intervene in support of Kyiv.

Historical parallels, such as NATO's 1999 Kosovo air campaign, illustrate this: Allied forces overwhelmed the Serbian military to impose a favorable settlement for Kosovo.[22]

3. Options for Europe

The scenarios outlined in the previous chapter highlight the uncertain strategic realities surrounding Ukraine. This uncertainty, in turn, underscores the critical importance of understanding the available and feasible operational configurations of a military intervention.

Specifically, as European countries are currently discussing a Peace-Enforcement mission (scenario 1), the previous chapter highlights that they may end up facing either a situation where the peace agreement collapses (scenario 2) or is never reached (scenario 3), and thus the military and political situation will be much more complicated. Given these premises, this chapter first outlines a broad-spectrum of possible options for military intervention, then describes them, and finally discusses the metrics for their assessment.

Identification of Options

The previous section has highlighted how European countries could soon find themselves in the situation where a military intervention in Ukraine is somewhat necessary. In this section, we consider the possible options.

Our rationale is three-fold. First, as many solutions emerge and are discussed at the political level, it is useful to have a broader perspective and include other solutions. Second, and related, experience has shown that no scenario should be ruled out. Four years ago a Russian invasion of Ukraine looked highly unlikely, but it did happen.

Finally, given that our scenarios lead to relatively different possible outcomes, multiple options need to be identified and considered.

Drawing from the historical record, we rely on three criteria to map the spectrum of possible military

[22] Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, "Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000): 5-38.

options: Engagement, Posture, and Scale.

- Engagement categorizes the type of military involvement: unconventional combat (e.g., sabotage), non-combat (e.g., support), high-intensity combat (e.g., frontline fighting), surface-to-air combat (e.g., missile defense), air-to-air combat (e.g., air superiority), air-to-ground combat (e.g., strikes), or low-intensity combat (e.g., peacekeeping).
- Posture distinguishes offensive actions, aimed at attacking or degrading Russian capabilities, from defensive ones, protecting Ukraine or deterring aggression.
- Scale differentiates interventions by size: small (hundreds to thousands of troops or assets), medium (thousands to tens of thousands), or large (tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands).

From these parameters, we derive nine options covering a spectrum of possibilities – from small, unconventional combat to large, high-intensity efforts – and reflecting a variety of configurations in terms of aims, capabilities, and tactics, providing a comprehensive set for consideration, without any prejudice against feasibility or merit. We assess them in the next section.

Description of Options

In this section, we discuss 9 distinct options for a military intervention. Each option is categorized by engagement type, posture, and scale, and supported by an historical precedent as point of reference.

Special Forces (SF): Unconventional Combat, Offensive, Small. Elite units (hundreds to thousands) conducting training as well as sabotage, intelligence gathering, or targeting Russian assets behind enemy lines. Precedent: British SAS in North Africa (1941–1943), where hundreds raided Axis airfields covertly.[23]

Non-Combat Support (NCS): Non-Combat, Offensive-Defensive, Large. A force of 10,000–40,000 providing logistics, training, and intelligence (e.g., C4ISR) to Ukrainian armed forces, de facto representing an expansion of current operation NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU). Precedent: U.S. MACV in Vietnam (1962–1973), with 16,000–50,000 advisors supporting South Vietnam.[24]

Trip-Wire (TW): High-Intensity Combat, Deterrence-Defensive, Medium. A contingent of 15,000–25,000 troops along Ukraine's frontline deterring aggression, signaling a broader response if attacked, like NATO's Baltic enhanced Forward Presence (eFP).[25] Precedent: Anglo-American

[23] Andrew L Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Irregular Warfare* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013): Ben Macintyre, *SAS: Rogue Heroes – The Authorized Wartime History* (New York, NY: Crown, 2016).

[24] Robert M. Gillespie, *Black Ops, Vietnam: The Operational History of MACVSOG* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011).

[25] Alexander Lanoszka, Christian Leuprecht and Alexander Moens, "Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017-2020," *NDC Research Paper*, No. 14 (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2020).

forces in West Berlin (1945–1989), 10,000–15,000 deterring Soviet provocations and *fait accompli*.[26]

Air and Missile Defense (AD): Surface-to-Air Combat, Defensive, Small. Units (hundreds to thousands) operating systems (e.g., SAMP/T) to shield Ukraine's airspace from missiles and drones, using minimal personnel. Precedent: NATO Support to Türkiye (2012–), hundreds defending Turkey from the dynamics of the Syrian civil war.

No-Fly Zone (NFZ): Air-to-Air Combat, Offensive/Defensive, Medium. A force of 100–200 aircraft (~1,000–2,000 personnel) Enforcement air superiority, denying Russian operations while protecting Ukraine. Precedent: Operation Northern Watch in Iraq (1997–2003), with 1,200 effectives enforcing a no-fly zone.[27]

Air-to-Ground Campaign (AGC): Air-to-Ground Combat, Offensive, Medium. Hundreds of aircraft (~2,000–5,000 personnel) striking Russian ground targets, supporting Ukrainian offensives. Precedent: Operation Rolling Thunder in Vietnam (1965–1968), with 3,000–5,000 effectives attacking North Vietnam.[28]

Peace-Enforcement (PE): Low-Intensity Combat, Defensive, Medium. A force of 30,000–60,000 stabilizing a ceasefire, enforcing terms and deterring violations, akin to UN peacekeeping. Precedent: UNIFIL in Lebanon (1978–present), with 10,000–15,000 maintaining peace.[29]

Mobile Rapid Reaction Force (MRRF): High-Intensity Combat, Offensive/Defensive, Medium. A flexible force of 20,000–40,000 responding rapidly, deterring aggression and striking as needed. Precedent: French Foreign Legion in Mali (Operation Serval, 2013), ~4,000–10,000 shifting between offense and defense.[30]

Combat-Ready Joint Deployment (CRJD): High-Intensity Combat, Deterrence-Offensive-Defensive, Large. A force of 200,000+ troops, with air, space and cyber support, engaging Russian forces along Ukraine's 2,000–3,000 km frontline. Precedent: NATO in West Germany (1950s–1980s), where 300,000–500,000 troops were ready for Soviet conflict.[31]

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[26] Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

[27] Alexander Benard, "Lessons from Iraq and Bosnia on the Theory and Practice of No-fly Zones," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2004): 454-78; Stephen Wrage and Scott Cooper, *No Fly Zones and International Security Politics and Strategy* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[28] Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996): 174-210.

[29] Vincenzo Bove and Andrea Ruggieri, "Peacekeeping Effectiveness and Blue Helmets' Distance from Locals," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 63, No. 7 (2019): 1630-1655.

[30] Michael Shurkin, *France's War in Mali Lessons for an Expeditionary Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014).

[31] Barry R. Posen, "Measuring the European Conventional Balance: Coping with Complexity in Threat Assessment," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter, 1984/85); 47-88; Joshua M. Epstein, "Dynamic Analysis and the Conventional Balance in Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Spring, 1988); 154-165; John J. Mearsheimer, "Assessing the Conventional Balance: The 3:1 Rule and Its Critics," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Spring, 1989): 54-89.

Table 1: Options for European military intervention in Ukraine

Option	Engagement	Posture	Scale	Description
Special Forces (SF)	Unconventional Combat	Offensive	Small	Units (hundreds–thousands) sabotage Russian targets.
Non-Combat Support (NCS)	Non-Combat	Defensive	Medium-large	Aid (10,000–40,000) supports Ukraine.
Trip-Wire (TW)	High-Intensity Combat	Defensive	Medium	Troops (15,000–25,000) deter aggression.
Air and Missile Defense (AD)	Surface-to-Air Combat	Defensive	Small	Troops (0.5-2,000) for several platforms shield Ukraine's skies.
No-Fly Zone (NFZ)	Air-to-Air Combat	Off/Def	Medium	Air control (1,000–2,000) denies/protects.
Air-to-Ground Campaign (AGC)	Air-to-Ground Combat	Offensive	Medium	Strikes (2,000–5,000) hit Russian forces.
Peace-Enforcing (PE)	Low-Intensity Combat	Defensive	Medium	Troops (30,000–60,000) stabilize the ceasefire.
Mobile Rapid Reaction Force (MRRF)	High-Intensity Combat	Off/Def	Medium-large	Units (20,000–40,000) deter/respond.
Combat-Ready Joint Deployment (CRJD)	High-Intensity Combat	Offensive	Large	Force (200,000+) fights Russia directly.

Parameters and methodology for Assessing Europe's different military options in Ukraine

In the previous section, we have outlined the options for possible military interventions in Ukraine. In this section, we identify 9 parameters for evaluating them.

Capability. Do European countries possess the capabilities necessary to fulfil the intended mission? All countries have armed forces, but not all countries possess all the capabilities for any type of mission or contingency.

This refers to the breadth: the type of platforms, the supporting assets, the skilled manpower and so forth. We rely on existing analysis and figures, as well as on interviews with high-ranking military officers, to identify what is available and what is not.[32]

Capacity. Do European countries possess the necessary capabilities in sufficient numbers for this mission? Possessing an asset is not enough.

Quantity has a quality on its own, in military affairs.[33] Capacity refers to depth: the assets, the

[32] For a more systematic approach, see Douglas Barrie, Ben Barry, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, Henry Boyd, Nick Childs, Bastian Giegerich, "Defending Europe: Scenario-based Capability Requirements for Nato's European Membership," *Research Papers* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019).

[33] Trevor N. Dupuy, *Understanding War: History and Theory of Combat* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 1992): 6.

munitions, skilled manpower, spare parts, specialized tools, and deployable infrastructure for sustainment, maintenance and repair at the speed of combat.[34]

As the old Finnish saying goes: "Each Finnish soldier is worth ten Russian soldiers, but what happens when the eleventh Russian shows up?"[35]

Europe has currently around 1.5m active military personnel. However, NATO New Force Model requires 100,000 troops deployable in 10 days, 200,000 in 10-30 days and 500,000 in 30-180 days. Of these, the first 300,000 would have to come mostly Europe. Assuming this means 150,000 forces, with which the 1:1:1 rotation for deployment, rest and recuperation and training, turn into 500,000. Since European countries have also other NATO and EU commitments, let alone their own national duties, the space for additional operations is constrained.[36]

Political salience and alliance cohesion. Does the option run the risk of facing strong domestic opposition or trigger major resistance among some allies? The two issues are clearly related, if some countries are going to face strong domestic resistance they may push back against some options.

Each country has different sensibilities. However, some issues are going to be more salient than others. For political salience we just consider whether head of states and governments of European countries may eschew an option because of domestic pressure.[37]

As a result, domestic opposition to some options in some countries may undermine alliance cohesion, thus either shrinking the size of the coalition or forcing it to opt for other solutions.

In this context, adversarial information operations may play a crucial role.

Escalation and provocation Risks. Does the option risk triggering either an escalation or inviting Russian provocations? Strategy is dialectic as enemies and adversaries adapt and react to the other's actions, measures, and strategies. Russia will most likely react to any European involvement, even if specified in an agreement for a cease-fire, armistice, peace settlement, through escalation or provocation.

Escalation refers to the risk that Russia threatens the use of nuclear weapons, to raise the strategic salience of the confrontation and complicate strategic and operational decision-making, as well as to coerce Europe into withdrawing or scaling down mission aims.[38]

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[34] For a recent discussion of capacity, see James Hackett and Ben Schreer (eds.), *Building Defence Capacity in Europe: An Assessment* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024).

[35] Michael Beckley, "Economic Development and Military Effectiveness," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2010): 43-79.

[36] John R. Deni, "The new NATO Force Model: ready for launch?," *NDC Outlook*, No. 4 (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2024).

[37] James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (1994): 577-592; Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2007): 821-40.

[38] Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis

Provocation concerns the risks that Russia employs asymmetric tactics to impose costs on European countries, forcing them to abandon the mission.[39]

Importantly, in between escalation and provocation, Russia will still have plenty of room for disruption, disinformation or cost-imposition.

Economic Cost. Can European countries afford the mission? We provide a tentative estimation of the costs of the possible mission, primarily relying on public data on recent military operations about the cost per troop per year, the expenditure for logistics and munitions.

Our estimates are necessarily approximations. However, they help understand the potential economic burden of each option

Troops. How many units are necessary? In order to derive the number of troops and assets, we have looked at recent historical examples and scaled the numbers in light of current circumstances.

The final numbers are necessarily approximations.

Impact. What is the expected impact of the mission? The various options for the deployment of military force to Ukraine produce varying levels of effects and serve different rationales for the intervention.

We therefore assess the options' impact along three layers, tactical, operational, and strategic, for the effects produced, and identify the military rationale they serve best.

Tempo. How quickly can the operation be organized? We consider whether options can be activated in very short (days to weeks), short (weeks to few months) or long times (several months).

Casualty risks. How many casualties do European countries risk suffering? Public opinions in European countries have different levels of tolerance to casualties in combat, and so do political parties; this affects governments' decisions and support for the military intervention.

We provide rough evaluations on the expected levels of casualties associated with each of the prospective options for deployment.

Scenario-suitability. Is this mission suitable for any scenario, like both if the conflict continues and the conflict comes to an abrupt halt, or would they work only in the former or in the latter case?

A methodological few considerations are warranted. We used past conflicts and military operations to estimate troops numbers and cost, increasing the margins to account for the different context and

Outcomes," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2013): 141-171.

[39] Pieter Balcaen, Cind Du Bois and Caroline Buts, "A Game-theoretic Analysis of Hybrid Threats," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2022): 26-41.

type of mission.

Our assessments are thus approximations. For precise predictions, one would need to know the political conditions of every mission, the rules of engagements and other factors which cannot be estimated ex-ante or publicly known.

4. Assessment of Options

This chapter evaluates the options advanced in light of the parameters discussed, both in Chapter 3.

Special Forces (SF)

Special forces are elite units conducting unconventional missions – kinetic (sabotage, high-value targets) and non-kinetic (training and assistance, advice, expertise, intelligence, disinformation).[40]

According to media reports, around 100 NATO Allies' special operation officers are present in Ukraine, likely to gather intelligence and provide non-combat support to local forces.[41] European countries could decide, however, to further augment their special forces footprint in order to sustain the Ukrainian war effort, like the U.S. did Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.[42]

If we take these past cases as a proxy, European countries would have to deploy several hundreds to a few thousand special forces in Ukraine.

Capability- and capacity-wise, European countries currently possess special forces units to launch and sustain such a mission: Italy, France, Germany and the UK each have thousands of special forces, while Czech Republic, Poland, Spain, and the Netherlands add hundreds.[43]

In terms of political salience and alliance cohesion, covert special operations deployments are,

[40] William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1996).

[41] Harry Davies and Manisha Ganguly, "Up to 50 UK special forces present in Ukraine this year, US leak suggests," *The Guardian*, April 11 2023; Cristian Segura, "NATO personnel already in Ukraine for arms control, intelligence operations and military training," *El Paìs*, March 18 2024.

[42] Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andrade, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000); Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995). For a discussion of more recent events, see Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* (New York, NY: Martin's Griffin, 2016).

[43] Hackett and Schreer, *Building Defence Capacity in Europe.*

however, likely going to represent a very sensitive issue for many countries.

Although the covert nature of special forces is intended to ensure a low domestic salience, in many countries concerns about leaks or capture may work as a strong deterrent against this type of intervention.[44]

It is not hard to imagine a European special force officer being captured and some Russia-related units threatening to kill him unless his or her country withdraws from Ukraine.[45]

This, in turn, may affect the cohesion of an alliance, lest a very small number of like-minded and motivated countries participate in this type of mission.

Escalation and provocation risks are very low unless detected, but it is unlikely that such a mission could remain covert for long.

Escalation and provocation risks are hence potentially very high, especially because Russia would read the covert nature of the operation as a lack of European resolve.

The economic cost of such an operation is likely modest. We can speculate that each officer costs from €100,000 to €1,000,000 per year. With a deployed force spanning in the several hundred, the total cost would be in the range of €100-500m.

The impact of such a mission would, however, be limited at the tactical level.[46] Special operation forces however could decisively contribute to improved effectiveness of Ukrainian forces as well as to "strategic attrition" of Russian forces through the accomplishment of particularly daring or complex operations – for instance against high value moral and material assets, but only in conjunction with substantial conventional operations.[47]

In other words, they can help sustain the war effort, but can hardly be decisive in and of themselves. This brings to the suitability of this mission only for an ongoing conflict, especially if European countries want either to prevent a Ukrainian collapse or tilt the balance in its favor in case of a protracted conflict.

In terms of tempo, a special operations mission could be very rapid while the risk of casualties is high, although the total number is probably low.

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[44] Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[45] Seth Loertscher and Daniel Milton, "Prisoners and Politics: Western Hostage Taking by Militant Groups," *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2018): 1-23.

[46] In Iraq and Afghanistan the cost of the U.S. Special Forces deployment amounted €50-100.000 per officer, for a total of €50-100 million per year, including the cost of operations. See Cordesman, *The Lesson of Afghanistan*.

[47] James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy from World War Two to the War on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Trip-Wire (TW)

A trip-wire force is a small-to-medium sized, high-intensity combat presence which tries simultaneously to minimize deployment footprint and cost, preserve deterrence and reduce escalation risks.[48]

The political nature of such a force (an attack against it is an attack against all the countries involved) signals a broader potential retaliation, as it happened in the Cold War for West Berlin.

A trip-wire in Ukraine would not represent a major challenge for European countries. Using NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltics and Poland as a model, some 15-to-25,000 troops would be needed.[49]

Capability-wise, this is a force that European countries could deploy, although only a few years ago, some NATO countries lacked the capabilities to participate in NATO eFP missions.[50]

Capacity-wise, the challenge is different: for each troop deployed, one is in training and one is in rest and recuperation. This means that a 25,000-strong deployment requires a 75,000-strong force. A 50,000-strong deployment requires 150,000 troops and so forth.

Considering that European countries already deploy troops in the Baltics and Poland, as well as in the more recently created eFP in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, a trip-wire in Ukraine would likely end up stretching current limits, especially in light of NATO New Force Model, thus potentially forcing the withdrawal from other commitments.[51]

A trip-wire has also likely a high domestic political salience, due to casualty fears and domestic opposition to overt deployments. This, in turn, could affect the cohesion of the underlying alliance. Escalation and provocation risks are high, as Russia could raise nuclear threats and intentionally strike such a force to test NATO solidarity, especially if the U.S. is not involved.[52]

A trip-wire would have an indirect impact on the battlefield, largely dependent on its deterrent effects,

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[48] Dan Reiter and Paul Poast, "The Truth About Tripwires: Why Small Force Deployments Do Not Deter Aggression," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer 2021): 33–53.

[49] NATO eFP in the Baltics and Poland covers a 1,850 km-long border (Estonia and Latvia with Russia as well as of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland with Belarus) and currently sees some 12,000-16,000 troops deployed. The border between Ukraine, Belarus and Russia is around 3,000km. If we use the same force-to-space ratio of the NATO eFP, a trip-wire in Ukraine would require 15-to-25,000 troops. For additional discussion, see Lanoszka, Leuprecht and Moens, "Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017-2020.

[50] Michael Shurkin, *The Abilities of the British, French, and German Armies to Generate and Sustain Armored Brigades in the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017); Anthony H. Cordesman, *NATO "Burden Sharing": The Need for Strategy and Force Plans, Not Meaningless Percentage Goals* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018); Ben Barry, Henry Boyd, Bastian Giegerich, Michael Gjerstad, James Hackett, Yohann Michel, Ben Schreer and Michael Tong, "The Future of NATO's European Land Forces: Plans, Challenges, Prospects," *Research Paper* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003).

[51] Deni, "The new NATO Force Model".

[52] Russia could use asymmetric attacks against this contingent to undermine its political support. The major risk is a humiliating withdrawal after Russia's asymmetric attacks or direct nuclear threats: this would shatter European deterrence credibility

which in turn depend on the presence of a defensive force ready to intervene.

A trip-wire force could cost up to €10bn per year. While affordable, it would still represent a significant cost. A TW would require weeks-to-months to be prepared, organized and deployed.

A combined arms commitment would need to be viable, supported with significant air and missile defense in loco, munition stocks and capabilities normally allocated from higher echelons (C4ISR, counter-battery artillery, rocket radar, electronic warfare, engineering for defense and obstacle breaching, advanced forward medical support). Additionally, a coherent higher command structure would be necessary.[53] While casualty risks are low, casualties would be high if deterrence fails. A trip-wire would be suitable only for ceasefire/peace agreement contexts.

Non-Combat Security Assistant and Support (NCS)

Non-combat security assistant and support provides the "tail" necessary for the combat "teeth".[54] Such tail entails C4ISR, collective, individual, leader and staff training and advice, repair and maintenance, logistics and specialist expertise beyond sustainment (i.e., accountability and oversight, communications, intelligence, financial and budgetary planning and programming as well as strategic and operational planning).

Using prominent examples of non-combat support like Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan, with 16-50,000 and 17,000 effectives respectively, a similar mission in Ukraine would likely require some 10-40,000 people.[55]

Importantly, European countries are already fulfilling this mission with NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine's 700-strong command in Wiesbaden, Germany (NSATU).[56]

The first question is whether European countries possess the necessary C4ISR capabilities.

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[53] For non-combat deployments like NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), the costs are €60–80,000 per troop per year. However, in Ukraine, the challenges would be more significant, as the operation would be out-of-area and in a high-security environment. For instance, even basic supplies would probably have to go through systematic examination to assess sabotage or poisoning. This could raise the costs significantly. Assuming a €500,000 cost per person per year, a 20,000-strong force would cost €10bn.

See Keith Hartley, *The Economics of Arms* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2007); Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23* (London: Crown, 2023).

[54] John J. McGrath, "The Other End of the Spear: The Tooth-to-Tail Ratio (T3R) in Modern Military Operations," *The Long War Series Occasional Paper,* No. 23 (Fort Leavenworth, KA: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007).

[55] Ukraine and Afghanistan have territories of similar size. Afghanistan had 300,000 individuals in its armed forces. Roughly, at its peak, NATO non-combat support mission had 1 troop for 20 Afghan forces. Ukraine has around 600,000 in its armed forces. Using the same rations, this would require a force between 20,000 to 40,000 troops. There are good reasons to think that the Ukrainian armed forces need a different type of support, and thus a lower force could be deployed.

[56] Sabine Siebold, "NATO will not be intimidated by Russia's threats, Rutte says at Ukraine mission HQ," *Reuters*, October 14, 2024.

We know that European countries had to leave Afghanistan as they could not sustain the operation without the U.S. We know that European countries lack many of the C4ISR capabilities of the U.S. And we know that most European countries possess very little C4ISR capabilities.[57]

Thus, likely, a Europe-only NCS mission would not be able to support Ukrainian's armed forces as the United States would do, although they would still be able to conduct a non-combat support mission, as the Afghanistan case demonstrates.[58]

Capacity-wise, 10-to-40,000 troops are sustainable for European countries. However, bearing in mind deployment, training and rest and recuperation cycles, the higher-end option entails a 120,000-strong force: a significant commitment.

In terms of political salience and alliance cohesion, a NCS deployment would be less salient for domestic politics, although still raise some opposition, which disinformation campaigns may try to exacerbate and maximize.

For this type of mission, any alliance should find cohesion easier than for other options. However, the risk of escalation is quite significant, as Russia would likely resort to nuclear threats to coerce European countries into aborting their plans.

It follows that also the risk of provocations is quite high. Russia would likely use different asymmetric tactics, such as proxy attacks, including snipers, drones, mortars and improvised explosive devices to wear down the European mission.

Additionally, the non-combat nature of the mission may be perceived by Russia as a sign of a lack of resolve, thus emboldening more aggressive actions.

The cost of such a mission would mimic the trip-wire: €5-20bn.[59] Its impact would mostly be medium at the tactical and operational level.[60]

Finally, such a mission would require a few weeks to months to be organized, planned and deployed. A broader consideration concerns whether such NCS should be deployed in Ukraine or not. By

[57] Gordon B. "Skip" Davis Jr, "The future of NATO C4ISR: Assessment and recommendations after Madrid," Report (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2023); Andrea Gilli, "NATO C4ISR and future challenges," Paper presented at the Hague Center for Strategic Studies's March 10 2025 *Fit for the future? Towards a digitally-capable NATO alliance for the 21st century* conference, Brussels.

[58] Ilias Palikaronas Jean Atzori, Filipe Vieira, Katie Mauldin, Jacqueline Eaton, Jodie Lazell, Luigi Fiora, Paulo Dias, Manuel Torres and Vytautas Mickevicius, *Train, Advise, and Assist Lessons from Resolute Support Mission: Background to the Resolute Support Mission* (Lisbon: Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre, 2022).

[59] NATO Resolute Support Mission has costed approximately €1.2bn per year for 17,000 deployed troops, or €60,000–90,000 per troop per year. This leads to €0.6-0.9bn to €2.4-3.6bn for 10 to 40,000 troops. See Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, DC: Sigar, October 30 2014). However, the higher threat environment to which European countries would be subjected in Ukraine would likely raise the total cost. We can approximate €500,000 per person per year, or €10bn for a 20,000-strong deployment.

[60] Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald and Ryan Baker, "Small footprint, small payoff: The military effectiveness of security force assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1-2 (2018): 89-142.

deploying to Ukraine, European countries could signal resolve as well as increase effectiveness.

However, this would come at the cost of higher escalation risks. Otherwise, the current command in Germany could just be expanded: with the risk, however, that Russia reads this choice as a lack of resolve, and then increases its provocations.

Air and Missile Defense (AD)

Air and Missile Defense counters air threats over a specific territory. Capability-wise, AD employs systems like Franco-Italian SAMP/T or the U.S.

Patriot, which European countries produce or operate. An AD mission to Ukraine would require a few hundreds to thousand individuals, based on past experiences such as NATO Support to Türkiye.

However, an Air and Missile Defense requires a multi-layered, integrated airspace situation awareness and command and control tools for fusing the air picture, real-time targeting and allocation, and fire engagement.

Additionally, technical expertise to integrate non-NATO standard systems into the network and to assist the integration of NATO munitions in non-NATO platforms is necessary.

The extent to which European countries possess these capabilities is difficult to assess, but gaps and shortfalls are likely present.[61]

Capacity-wise, AD is demanding because it requires the possession and the capacity to manufacture both surface-to-air systems and the related munitions.

European countries have few air defense systems and limited manufacturing capacity which cannot be increased easily or quickly, although they are significantly increasing the munitions output.[62]

In terms of political salience and coalition cohesion, AD is not a controversial mission. However, a fundamental political-strategic question is whether European countries should conduct this mission, i.e. deploy troops and assets in theater, or whether it would not be more convenient to just supply the hardware to Ukraine.[63]

An air and missile defense would not be exposed to high escalation risks, however it is vulnerable to provocations. In particular, Russia could significantly increase the frequency or size of the

[61] Alessandro Marrone and Karolina Muti (eds.), "Europe's Missile Defence and Italy: Capabilities and Cooperation," *IAI Documents*, No. 21 (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2021).

[62] Sidharth Kaushal, Archer Macy and Ali Stickings, "The Future of NATO's Air and Missile Defence," *Occasional Paper* (London: RUSI, 2021); Hackett and Ben Schreer (eds.), *Building Defence Capacity in Europe.*

[63] Glenn A. Kent, *A Framework for Defense Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019)

barrages of missiles and drones to saturate European air and missile defenses.

The goal would be two-fold, humiliating European countries or depleting their munitions stocks, with broader implications for deterrence and defense in the Euro-Atlantic area.[64]

For assessing the cost of this mission, we need to look at past data. In the past 3 years, Ukraine has been provided with advanced Western air and missile defense systems. In the September 2022–September 2024 period, Ukraine suffered 11,466 Russian missile and drone strikes and its air and missile defense intercepted almost 85% of them.[65] Currently, the cost of Ukrainian air and missile defense is about €13-to22bn per year.[66]

Assuming the U.S. and European support in terms of air and missile defense is similar, should European countries replace the U.S., it would be €3.5 to 7bn per year.

Likely, the figure is higher when considering that only the interception of Iranian missiles and drones against Israel in April 2024 costed €1bn.

However, European countries could either decide to increase the interception rate, trying to bring it closer to 100% or may have to increase the support to compensate for the increase in the frequency and size of Russian attacks. Russia faces challenges in producing drones and missiles. However, the costs of a European AD mission could sensibly raise to €20-40bn per year.[67]

This leads to broader considerations about this mission. In particular, since Ukraine already conducts Air and Missile Defense, it would be necessary to clarify the added value of a European mission: enabling Ukrainian troops to move to other missions, signal resolve through in-theater presence, making Ukrainian and European air operations safer?

On the other hand, the success of such a mission depends on munitions production capacity, which in Europe is limited. An AD mission could take a few weeks to be organized, but it could be deployed

[64] Mark Gunzinger and Bryan Clark, *Winning the Salvo Competition: Rebalancing America's Air and Missile Defense* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016).

[65] Elizabeth Hoffman, Jaehyun Han, and Shivani Vakharia, *The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Assistance to Ukraine: A Deep Dive into the Data* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023); Yasi Atalan, *Russian Firepower Strike Tracker: Analyzing Missile Attacks in Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024).

[66] In 2023, Ukraine's military budget was around €65bn, with some 10-to-20% devoted to Air and missile defense, or around €7-15bn. To this expenditure, one needs to add allies' and partners' military aid: a great share thereof consisting of air and missile defense systems. In the 2022-24 period, total Ukraine's expenditure on this area is thus about €20-to-40bn while foreign aid is €15-25 bn, for a total of €35-65bn, or some €13-22bn per year. We can identify different contingencies. European countries take over the bulk of the foreign aid, also cover Ukraine's costs, and finally increase in size either to increase further interception rates or to compensate for additional Russian attacks.

[67] Yasir Atalan, *Russian Firepower Strike Tracker.* For a broader discussion, see Jaganath Sankaran and Steve Fetter, "Defending the United States: Revisiting National Missile Defense against North Korea," *International Security*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Winter 2021/22): 51–86; Antonio Calcara, Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli and Ivan Zaccagnini, "Will the Drone Always Get Through? Offensive Myths and Defensive Realities," *Security Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (2022): 791-825

both if fighting continues and if a ceasefire is reached.[68]

Importantly, defense planners could aim to establish the AD either over the entire country or just focus on major cities and infrastructures, such as ports and airports, energy and production plants and obviously military bases and facilities. The latter would be cheaper and less demanding. An AD could be organized under any scenario.

No-Fly Zone (NFZ)

No-Fly Zone enforces air superiority over a certain territory primarily through air-to-air. As discussed, Ukraine called NATO to provide a No-Fly Zone at the beginning of the war and the issue has recently re-emerged after several Members of Parliaments as well as former officers have suggested that Europe supplies it to Ukraine.[69]

Using past examples such as Northern Watch in Iraq between 1992 and 2003, Bosnia in 1996 and Libya in 2011, we can derive that a NFZ would require a few thousand individuals and several dozen up to a few hundred fighters. In terms of capability, European countries possess some of the most advanced air forces in the world with both 4th and 5th generation combat aircraft like the Rafale or the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter/Lightning II.[70]

However, they still lack key enablers to conduct such operation, primarily air-to-air refuel tankers while Aerial Early Warning and Control aircraft (AWACS) would likely have to be provided by NATO as at the national level, only few countries possess this type of capabilities (which would hence not be available in other contingencies).[71] Same considerations apply to the C2 element: in Libya, the NFZ was organized by NATO Combat Air Operation Center in Poggio Renatico, Italy (now moved to Torrejòn, Spain). Unless NATO is involved, it would be difficult for European countries to organize such an operation. The problem for Europe is, however, not much the capability but the capacity: current force structures cannot sustain wide and long-term efforts.

Obviously, in order to address this issue, European countries could decide to protect only a part of Ukraine's airspace, to enable its armed forces to focus more massively on ground combat operations.[72]

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[68] In 2012, when NATO's "Support to Türkiye" was launched, in a matter of few weeks Air and Missile Defense systems arrived and became operational. updates and U.S. Army reports (e.g., DVIDS, 2013).

[69] Sabbagh, "European-led Ukraine air protection plan could halt Russian missile attacks," The Guardian, March 6 2025. The proposal *Price of Freedom. Sky Shield: A Practical Security Guarantee for Ukraine* can be consulted at:

[70] Justin Bronk, "Regenerating Warfighting Credibility for European NATO Air Forces," *RUSI Whitehall Report* (London: RUSI, 2023).

[71] Colin Wall and John Christianson, "Europe's Missing Piece: The Case for Air Domain Enablers," *CSIS Briefs* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023).

[72] Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli and Niccolò Petrelli, "Before Vegetius: Crucial Questions for European Defense," *Policy Brief*

In terms of political salience and alliance cohesion, a NFZ would raise lower challenges than other missions, although we can expect domestic resistance to such a solution in some countries. This, in turn, could undermine the cohesion of the coalition.

Escalation risks seem to be significant as well as those related to provocations: Russia could not only threaten the use of nuclear weapons but would also have all the incentives to shoot down a European plane to test the resolve and the reaction of the coalition.

In the end, Russia has been provoking European countries' air policing mission in the Baltics since its inception, two decades ago.

The economic cost of a No-Fly Zone is also important: €10-15bn.[73] The impact is in contrast more uncertain and limited at the tactical and operational level: a NFZ would deny Russian forces the use of their airpower. However, this has, *de facto*, already occurred.

Thus, the mission would either serve other political purposes or be of limited utility until Russia employs more airpower: which an NFZ would actually discourage.[74] A No-Fly Zone would require a few weeks up to a few months to be launched.

The risk of casualties depends on enemy reactions: in Bosnia, Kosovo and Libya, NATO did not basically suffer any casualties. The number, in any case, would be low even if Russia strikes back, both because of the superiority of European airpower and for the likely halt of operations.

Finally, a No-Fly Zone would be more suitable after the end of the major fighting.

A key issue concerns whether this mission would be authorized to strike ground targets, in case of land violations, or not, thus de facto making it closer to an Air-to-Ground Campaign.

Air-to-Ground Campaign (AGC)

An air-to-ground campaign would consist in a military operation aimed at bringing significant and rapid battlefield results, for achieving strategic effects, like quick negotiations for a truce or even a peace agreement from an improved military position, like it happened with the 1991 Desert Storm in

(Milan: Institute for European Policy-Making, 2024).

[73] 1992-2003 Operation Northern Watch in Iraq entailed 1,200 personnel and around 50 aircraft: it has costed, adjusted for inflation, €1-2bn per year. 2011 NATO Operation Unified Protector in Libya entailed 200 aircraft: it has costed €3-5bn for its 7-month campaign. See Kaplan, *NATO Divided, NATO United*: 45-67; Jeremiah Gertler, "Operation Odyssey Dawn (Libya): Background and Issues for Congress," *CRS Report for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011). In Ukraine, such a mission, assuming there is no escalation or provocation, would probably have to conduct many more sorties, but use a lower number of munitions. We could expect to could 2 to 3 times what Odyssey Dawn has costed.

[74] Jaganath Sankaran, "The failures of Russian Aerospace Forces in the Russia–Ukraine war and the future of air power," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 6-7 (2024): 860-887; Dag Henriksen and Justin Bronk (eds.), *The Air War in Ukraine: The First Year of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2025).

Iraq. [75]

The key advantage of an AGC concerns the employment of military power without the deployment of land troops. On the one hand, the risks of casualties would be significantly lower. On the other, the intended effects both in terms of timing and depth are expected to be more significant.

Using U.S. military operations Rolling Thunder and Linebacker in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s and NATO Allied Force against Serbia in 1999, we can derive the need to deploy several dozen up to hundreds of fighter bombers.[76]

Accurate estimates would ultimately depend on the number of possible targets, enemy Air and Missile Defenses as well as its capacity to regenerate forces.

Three considerations are in order. First, air force structures have shrunk over the past decades, thanks to the development of precision-guided munitions and modern battle-networks: thus European countries could likely meet the necessary numbers.[77]

Second, additionally, Russia's Air and Missile Defense systems have repeatedly shown to perform worse than expected. Thus, in theory, with a force of a moderate size, European countries could aim to achieve significant effects.

Third, European countries, however, have limited suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD), electronic warfare (EW), intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), air-to-air refuel capabilities as well as combat search and rescue (CSAR): this could hamper their battlefield effectiveness and/or lead to higher casualties.[78]

Moreover, only a small fraction of European air forces are trained for conducting air-to-ground strikes in high-intensity, segregated environments.[79] Thus, it is possible European countries may not even possess the entire spectrum of capabilities to launch the operation.

Capacity-wise, European countries could not sustain such an operation for a long time. Europe currently possesses around 500 jet fighters (i.e., we can speculate around 150-180 are operational

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[75] Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey: Summary Report* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 1993).

[76] Phil Haun, *Tactical Air Power and the Vietnam War: Explaining Effectiveness in Modern Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo A Strategic and Operational Assessment* (Santa Monica, Ca: RAND Corporation, 2001).

[77] Barry D. Watts, *The Evolution of Precision Strike* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2013); John Stillion and Bryan Clark, *What it Takes to Win: Succeeding in 21st Century Battle Network Competitions* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2015).

[78] Justin Bronk, *The Future of NATO Airpower: How are Future Capability Plans Within the Alliance Diverging and How can Interoperability be Maintained?* (Avon: Routledge, 2020); Justin Bronk, "The Case for Greater Mission Specialisation by NATO's European Air Forces," *Occasional Paper* (London: RUSI, 2025).

[79] Justin Bronk, "Regenerating Warfighting Credibility for European NATO Air Forces," *Occasional Paper* (London: RUSI, 2023); Justin Bronk, "The Case for Greater Mission Specialization by NATO's European Air Forces," *Occasional Paper* (London: RUSI, 2025).

at any time), only a small fraction of their pilots are trained for this type of contingencies[80] and their stocks of air-to-ground munitions are relatively low: according to the RAND Corporation, France, the biggest military power in Europe, before the war could conduct a high-intensity operation for just 9 days.[81] Since then, European countries have increased their production and stocks but a significant amount of munitions has gone to Ukraine.[82]

Political salience is very high for different reasons. On the one hand, in many countries there would be significant opposition to the use of force as happened in 1999 for Kosovo, 2003 for Iraq and 2011 for Libya.

On the other, for Russia to achieve a political victory, it would just be necessary to protract the conflict, avoid engagements and eventually use other instruments, such as oil and refugees (as Milosevic, Saddam and Qaddafi did) to undermine the collective European effort and thus avoid losing.[83]

Escalation and provocation risks are very high as Russia would have an incentive to strike back, at the fighting force, at other European targets conventionally or with asymmetric tactics. Additionally, we know from multiple sources that Russia is particularly fearsul of Western air campaigns.[84]

The cost of an AGC would be significant, around €10bn per year, and the costs would likely increase over time as some accident or enemy fire may lead to the loss of expensive aircraft like the Rafale or the F-35.[85]

The impact would be high at the tactical, operational and strategic level. Such an operation would require months and would be suitable mostly in case the conflict continues or resumes.

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[80] Bronk, “Regenerating Warfighting Credibility for European NATO Air Forces”; Bronk, “The Case for Greater Mission Specialization by NATO’s European Air Forces”.

[81] Stephanie Pezard, Michael Shurkin and David A. Ochmanek, *A Strong Ally Stretched Thin An Overview of France's Defense Capabilities from a Burden Sharing Perspective* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).

[82] Fabian Hoffman*, “Europe’s Missile Conundrum,” War on the Rocks,* July 25 2023.

[83] Barry R. Posen, “The War for Kosovo: Serbia’s Political-Military Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring, 2000): 39-84.

[84] James Dobbins, Raphael S. Cohen, Nathan Chandler, Bryan Frederick, Edward Geist, Paul DeLuca, Forrest E. Morgan, Howard J. Shatz and Brent Williams, *Extending Russia Competing from Advantageous Ground* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).

[85] Adjusted for inflation, Operations Rolling Thunder in Vietnam and NATO Allied Force in Kosovo would cost €5-10bn and €4-8bn, respectively. Since then, weapons are more precise, but aircraft are more expensive, both in procurement and maintenance. We just took the higher bound. Western countries cruise missiles such as the German-Swedish Taurus, Anglo-Italian-French Scalp EG/Storm Shadow or U.S. Tomahawk or JASSM cost $1-to-3m each. 1000 targets would cost €1-to-3bn. This would assume that all missiles strike with precision and thus they are not intercepted, jammed or subjected to failure. Adding the cost of fuel, maintenance, repair as well as other operational issues make €10bn a realistic estimate.

Peace-Enforcement (PE)

A PE mission aims to stabilize a truce or ceasefire and eventually contribute to preserving a peace agreement. Building on the experience of recent peace-keeping and peace-Enforcement operations, the size of the mission fundamentally depends on the underlying political conditions.[86]

If the case United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is used as a model, a 30-to-60 troops per km over the current 1,000 km-long frontline lead to 30-to-60,000 troops in Ukraine.[87] To put in perspective, NATO Kosovo Force (Kfor) currently deployed 4,686 individuals.[88]

In terms of capability, European countries do possess forces for a low-intensity environment.[89]

In terms of capacity, however, the situation is more uncertain both because the underlying conditions in theater may vary dramatically and because a 60,000-strong force would require roughly a 180,000 commitment for the 1:1:1 rotation. This would be demanding for Europe: such a force would represent 13% of European Union countries' 1.3m active force.[90]

A peace-Enforcement mission is probably the option raising lower domestic challenges in most European countries and probably the one generating the highest cohesion among a potential coalition – although it still generates controversy.[91]

Escalation risks are medium-low, but provocation risks are high – Russia's proxies could strike the international mission with snipers, mortars or drones, blaming "fringe" elements in order to test resolve or undermine the political support for the entire operation.[92]

The cost of a Peace-Enforcement operation depends on the conditions on the ground. If we use UNIFIL and NATO Kfor as models, the mission would cost between €2–6bn per year.[93] However, if

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[86] Vincenzo Bove, Chiara Ruffa and Andrea Ruggeri, *Composing Peace: Mission Composition in UN Peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[87] Vincenzo Bove and Andrea Ruggeri, "Kinds of Blue: Diversity in UN Peacekeeping Missions and Civilian Protection," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2016): 681–700; Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil Wars," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2014): 875–891.

[88] See NATO Joint Force Command Naples's webpage: https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/about-us/welcome-to-kfor/contributing-nations

[89] SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2024: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[90] Vincenzo Bove and Leandro Elia, "Supplying Peace: Participation in and Troop Contribution to Peacekeeping Missions," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 6 (2011): 699–714.

[91] Andrea Ruggieri, Theodora-Ismene and Han Dorussen, "Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (2017): 163–185.

[92] Hanne Fjelde, Lisa Hultman and Desirée, "Protection Through Presence: UN Peacekeeping and the Costs of Targeting Civilians." *International Organization*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (2019): 103–131.

[93] UNIFIL in Lebanon with 10,000–15,000 troops cost around €500m per year. A peace-enforcing mission in Ukraine would be 3-to-4 times as be at least €2bn. Since significant reconstruction and ordnance disposal would be necessary, it is safe to assume a higher price tag. Consider that the cost of de-mining Ukraine will be between €30 and €40bn. See United Nations General Assembly, *Budget for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon for the period from 1 July 2023 to 30*

one assumes just a more complicated environment, the price tag could grow 2-to-4 times.

The effectiveness of a PE significantly depends on the mandate. The difference between IFOR/SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo vis-à-vis UNIFIL is telling.[94] A PE could be organized, planned and deployed in weeks to months, depending on its size.

However, it would be suitable only after a cease-fire or a truce. The risk of casualties is low. Two important considerations for Europe concerns Russia's acceptance of such force and the participation of non-European countries, such as China, India, Egypt, Nigeria or Brazil. Russia's acceptance would lower the risks of provocations.

The participation of non-European countries could help gain Russia's acceptance but, on the other hand, could undermine the mission's effectiveness or impact, as many United Nations operations have seen in the past.

Mobile Rapid Reaction Force (MRRF)

A Mobile Rapid Reaction Force (MRRF) would represent a flexible solution to deploy a medium-sized, high-intensity force capable of intervening across Ukraine's territory, serving as both a deterrent and defensive barrier against Russian aggression.

Capability-wise, European countries possess most of the land and air power mix required – long-range artillery, close air support, interdiction strikes, armor, and infantry to meet its requirements. However, theater-level assets are partly or significantly missing: C4ISR, targeting and fires integration, integrated air and missile systems, theater sustainment and medical support.[95]

Capacity-wise, a MRRF poses additional challenges. Its size would depend on many factors, including the political ambitions of European countries, the situation on the battlefield and the military planning considerations, including the mix between land and air power: a larger airpower role would reduce the land power component and vice-versa, making the entire operation smaller or bigger, respectively, in terms of total troops.

In Mali, French Foreign Legion's Operation Serval in Mali spanned from 4,000 to 10,000 troops. Scaled for Ukraine's 1,000–3,000 km frontline (10–20 troops/km), this would lead to a 10-to-30,000 strong-force.

Likely, however, a MRRF in Ukraine would have to be bigger, likely in the 20,000-40,000 range.

June 2024 (New York, NY: United Nations, 2023); Bove, Ruffa and Ruggeri, *Composing Peace*; World Bank, Ukraine, European Union and UN, *Ukraine Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3) February 2022 – December 2023, 2024* (Washington, DC: World Bank, Ukraine, European Union and UN, 2023).

[94] Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil Wars."

[95] Hackett and Ben Schreer (eds.), *Building Defence Capacity in Europe*; Gordon B. "Skip" Davis Jr., *The Future of NATO C4ISR: Assessment and recommendations after Madrid* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2023).

Sustaining such a force, which translates into a 60-120,000 contingent, would represent a significant burden, as it would account for between 5 and 10% of Europe's active force.

If we consider that pre-war estimates put the share of deployable European troops between 10 and 20%, this means European countries would not be able to meet many other commitments, including many current NATO plans.

A MRRF would likely be difficult to accept in many European countries, thus making alliance cohesion difficult, not least because of burden-sharing issues.

A possible exception is a smaller coalition of some committed European countries: Nordics, Baltics, Poland may probably have the willingness, but it is not clear they have all the capabilities and especially the capacity for a sustained engagement.

Escalation risks are very high as well as risks of provocations. Since such a force would make it difficult for Russia both to continue its offensive and start it again after a ceasefire, there are all the reasons to think that Moscow will resort to nuclear threats and asymmetric tactics.

Based on past operations, the cost of such an operation would amount to €15bn per year, but obviously a lot depends on battlefield attrition, munition consumption and casualties.[96]

Costs could grow significantly, if combat occurs. A MRRF would require a few weeks between organization, planning and deployment – akin to NATO Rapid Response Force.

The impact of such a force would be at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels – potentially high in deterring aggression. A MRRF would be suitable for deployment before and after a ceasefire, if the ceasefire is breached, and in case a truce is never reached.

Combat-Ready Joint Deployment (CRJD)

A Combat-Ready Joint Deployment would serve as a deterrence and defense instrument which, in light of its sheer numbers, can deter Russian aggression and defeat it, if necessary, through both air and land power.

Historical analogies like NATO in West Germany where 300,000–500,000 troops defended a 1,400 km-long frontline or South Korea where a 150,000-200,000 strong-force defends the demilitarized zone (DMZ).[97]

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[96] Assuming a cost per troop per year of €500,000, a 30,000 deployment would cost €15bn. Hartley, *The Economics of Arms*, 145-78.

[97] Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO Divided, NATO United: The Evolution of an Alliance* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004): 45-67; Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2010): 132-56; William P. Mako, *U.S. Ground Forces and the Defense of Central Europe* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983): 56-78; Fred Zilian, *From*

These analogies suggest that defending Ukraine's 2,000–3,000km border with Russia and Belarus requires around 200,000 troops (67–100 troops/km).

Capability-wise, European countries possess most, although not all, the necessary assets – 650,000 active troops, 500 combat aircraft, artillery, and intelligence.[98]

They lack, however, the theater commands and theater support assets discussed for the MRRF option. NATO Joint Force Commands (Naples or Brunssum) would have to be involved to execute the command and control (C2) aspects, but would need significant augmentation for the sustainment, fires, integrated air and missile defense as well as C4ISR capabilities needed for a theater-sized force.

At the moment, only the United States has the trained staff and systems outside of NATO Command Structure for this type of engagement. Capacity-wise, sustaining a 200,000-strong deployed force demands around 600,000 total (1:1:1 rotation), nearly half of the EU's 1.34 million active personnel.

It is difficult to say how many forces European countries can currently deploy, but a recent article in the *Economist*, based on a report from the think tank Bruegel, claims that many "European countries would struggle to produce a single combat-capable brigade each."[99]

Richard Hooker adds that France and the UK can deploy a division in 2-to-3 months, and Italy 2 brigades. Additionally, European countries lack the strategic transport capabilities and the enablers at the corps level for executing such a mission.[100]

In other words, the CRJD option is currently unfeasible.[101] Political salience of this mission is very high – opposition in countries like Italy, Spain or Germany would undermine alliance cohesion.[102] Escalation risks are severe, probably even more acute than the provocation risks: Russia would not tolerate such a deployment and likely play dangerous escalation games to break the European front.

In terms of economic costs, a CRJD would represent a massive expenditure. If we use the ISAF mission in Afghanistan as a benchmark, roughly €70bn per year for 130,000 forces, to derive the costs of the CRDJ, we obtain over €100bn per year, or around a third of the entire European defense expenditure, which currently sits at €320bn.[103]

Confrontation to Cooperation: The Transformation of the U.S. Army in Germany (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999): 34–50.

[98] SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2024*.

[99] "Can Europe confront Vladimir Putin's Russia on its own? An independent army, air force and nuclear bomb would come at a high price," *The Economist*, February 25th 2025.

[100] Richard D. Hooker Jr. with Max Molot, *Building a Stronger Europe: A Companion to the Belfer Center Task Force Report on a New Transatlantic Bargain* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2025): 19-22.

[101] David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

[102] François Heisbourg, *Où va la défense européenne ?* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2016): 123-150.

[103] High-intensity combat may cost some €350-500,000 per troop per year, which leads to €70-100bn. See Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan: War Fighting, Intelligence, and Force Transformation* (Washington, DC: Center

Since the ISAF mission still operated in a medium-intensity environment, the CRDJ could potentially cost significantly more, in the €150-200bn range per year. Such a force would have a high strategic impact, as it would prevent and eventually fight an aggression.

However, deploying such a force would take several months, and ensuring its capacity to operate for a long time would require years.[104] Casualty risks depend on the conflagration of a conflict: in that case, casualties would be significant.

Summary

Our analysis suggests that Europe faces stark trade-offs and no solution addresses all issues. However, by connecting the analysis of all options, a quadrilemma emerges for Europe with impact at the core and three related trade-offs against feasibility, escalation and provocation, and alliance cohesion.

In other words, the options delivering more impact are likely to be unfeasible, to lead to escalation and provocations, and/or to be hard to accept either domestically or at the coalition level.

- *Impact vs Feasibility*. Europe faces a first stark trade-off between what is achievable and what delivers decisive outcomes. Low-commitment options like Special Forces (500–2,000 troops) leverage Europe's strengths and offer rapid deployment (days to weeks). Yet, their impact is also limited: SF disrupts at the tactical level but lacks operational depth.

  Along the same lines, Air and Missile Defense protects the skies without altering ground dynamics – let alone that Ukrainian forces are already successfully protecting their country's airspace. Conversely, high-commitment options like Combat-Ready Joint Deployment (200,000+ troops) and Air-to-Ground Campaign (hundreds of aircraft) promise strategic-operational shifts – preventing aggression or breaking stalemates – but they are unsustainable either in terms of capacity or capability, or both, let alone their enormous economic costs compared to current European countries' defense budgets.

  Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support and Mobile Rapid Reaction Force (both between 20,000–40,000) strike a middle ground as they can sustain Ukraine's army or flexibly deter and defend across scenarios, respectively. However, both capability- and capacity-wise, they are probably around the most European countries can realistically do and maybe even beyond.

- *Impact vs Escalation and Provocations*. Second, Russia's nuclear and hybrid threats cast a shadow over all options. Some options like Trip-Wire, No-Fly Zone, Air-to-Ground Campaign

for Strategic and International Studies, 2010); 89-112; European Defence Agency, *Defence Data 2023-2024* (Brussels: European Defence Agency, 2024).

[104] Hackett and Ben Schreer (eds.), *Building Defence Capacity in Europe.*

and Combat-Ready Joint Deployment carry high-to-very high escalation risks, making Russia's nuclear coercion very likely.

Europe's significantly more modest nuclear arsenal vis-à-vis Russia, coupled with a possible lack of U.S. nuclear backing, makes the situation particularly complicated.

European countries do not want to find themselves under Russia's nuclear coercion because of a policy they pursued.

Provocation risks peak with Peace-Enforcement, where hybrid tactics (e.g., snipers, drones) could test resolve.

Special Forces and Non-Combat Support offer lower escalation profiles but provocation risks are relatively high.

Analogously, an Air and Missile Defense mission would invite Russia to increase its missile attacks, to saturate European Air and Missile Defenses in Ukraine, undermine their credibility and eventually even deplete European munition stockpiles, with broader implications for deterrence and defense in Europe.

- *Impact vs Alliance Cohesion.* Finally, the most impactful options are also those likely raising the higher domestic opposition or friction among allies: Air-to-Ground Campaign, Mobile Rapid Reaction Force and Combat-Ready Joint Deployment are very difficult options to accept in most European countries and to build a coalition on.

  Conversely, the options which likely generate lesser domestic opposition or lower disagreements among allies are also the least impactful: Peace-Enforcement, No-Fly Zone and Trip-Wire. Tellingly, even those options are currently generating significant tension in many European countries.

Table 2: Assessment of the 9 military options for European countries from the easiest to the most difficult

	Capability	Capacity	Political Salience & Alliance Cohesion	Escalation & Provocation	Cost per Year	Troops (in 1000s)	Impact	Tempo	Scenario Suitability	Casualties Risk & Estimate
NCS	Medium	Medium	Medium, medium	Medium, high	€5-20bn	10-40	Strat-Op Preventing defeat	Weeks-to-months	All	Low risk, low
PE	Easy	Med	Low, high	Low, medium	€3-6bn	30-60	Strat-Op Securing stable peace.	Weeks-to-months	Cease-fire, peace	Medium, low
AD	Medium	Medium-Difficult	Low, high	Medium, high	€3.5-40bn	0.5-2	Strat-Op Preventing defeat	Weeks	All	Low risks, low
NFZ	Medium-Difficult	Medium-Difficult	Medium-high, Medium-low	High, high	$5bn	1-2	Strat-Op-Tact Preventing defeat	Weeks-to-months	Cease-fire, peace	Medium risk, low
SF	Easy	Easy	High, low	High, high	€100-500m	0.1-1	Tact-Op Sustain the war effort	Days	Ongoing fighting	High risk, very low
TW	Easy	Medium-Easy	High, low	Very high, very high	€10bn	15-25	Strat-Op Securing stable peace.	Months	Cease-fire, peace	Uncertain risk, potentially high
MRRF	Medium	Medium-Difficult	High, low	High, high	€15bn	20-40	Strat-Op-Tact, Securing stable peace	Weeks	All	High, medium-high
AGC	Medium-Difficult	Medium-Difficult	High, low	Very high	€10bn	2-5	Strat-Op-Tact Sustain the war effort	Weeks-to-months	Ongoing fighting	High, low
CRJD	Difficult	Difficult	Very high, very low	Very high, very high	€100bn	200	Strat-Op-Tact, Sustain the war effort	Several Months	All	High, high

Note: SF=Special forces; TW=Trip-Wire; NCS=Non-Combat Support; AD=Air and Missile Defense, NFZ=No-fly zone, AGC=Air-to-ground campaign; PE=Peace-Enforcement; MRRF=Mobile Rapid Reaction Force; CRJD=Combat-ready joint deployment; CPB=Capability; CPC=Capacity; PSAC=Political salience and alliance cohesion; E&P=Escalation and provocation risks; EC+T=Economic costs and troops number; IMP=Impact; TEM=Tempo of operations; SCUS= Scenario suitability; CASO+N= Casualty risks and numbers. *based on the sole value of the annual U.S. aid to Ukraine in this category.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this concluding chapter, we identify the key insights, elaborate our recommendations, highlight the limitations and derive the strategic imperatives from our analysis.

Key insights

In this policy brief, we have assessed nine options for a possible military intervention in Ukraine. Our analysis reveals stark trade-offs and capability gaps that constrain Europe's strategic choices. Every option balances impact against feasibility, escalation, and cohesion.

Special forces deploy swiftly but the option lacks strategic weight; Trip-Wire and Combat-Ready Joint Deployment deter aggression but risk nuclear escalation; Air and Missile Defense and No-Fly Zone defend airspace yet invite Russian saturation or provocations.

Politically, options like Trip-Wire, Air-to-Ground Campaign and Special Forces seem very difficult either at the domestic or at the alliance level, or both while Combat-Ready Joint Deployment is unfeasible without U.S. support.

Air and Missile Defense and Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support seem viable, but it is necessary to understand the advantages of deploying these forces in Ukraine when the same support can be provided either through weapons transfer or from Europe.

Peace-Enforcement, though vulnerable to hybrid threats, is among the few options both militarily sustainable and politically feasible. However, it is appropriate only after a peace deal is reached.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis, we recommend the following course of action:

- European countries should start planning and preparing a Peace-Enforcement mission. They have the capabilities and they have the capacity: a 30,000-strong force requires around 100,000 units for rotation which European countries can afford.

- European countries should also pursue a UN resolution to legitimize the mission and look for non-European countries joining their efforts. Even if unsuccessful, these steps will legitimize their actions before their publics and parliaments.

  Legitimacy is in fact a critical asset as Russia's disinformation will likely try to sabotage European plans.

- At the same time, European countries should also start preparing either a Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support mission or a Mobile Rapid Reaction Force operation. The goal is both preparing against Russia's likely violations of the ceasefire or peace agreement, if ever reached, and deterring against future actions. European countries cannot realistically plan simultaneously for a PE, NCS and MRFF.

  A key question concerns whether European countries have both the capacity and capability

for either the Non-Combat Security Assistance and Support mission or a Mobile Rapid Reaction Force and how many, relevant and large are their military shortcomings.

In our analysis, we could not determine this with precision. Irrespective, if a PE mission is deployed, it is fundamentally important to have contingency plans for handling a deterioration of the situation.

Limitations

- The first limitation of our work concerns our estimates which, as noted, are approximations. Precise figures require details about political conditions, rules of engagements, and missions, among others which, at this stage, cannot be known. Similarly, our estimates are based on past operations and figures on paper: however, past operations are not a perfect proxy and figures about capabilities and capacities in existing publications may turn out to be misleading, for political, logistical or other considerations.[105]

- The report has, intentionally, eschewed the discussion of non-military instruments. Any analysis should look also at the interaction of other options, including diplomacy, sanctions, and arms control.

- We also ruled out from the equation a possible role of the United States and NATO. At the time of writing, this is a safe assumption. However, in some time, this could be questioned.

Strategic Imperatives

Our analysis highlights several strategic imperatives for Europe.

- Europe's limited military power constrains its strategic options. Without the support of NATO C2 assets or the United States, 7 out of 9 options are medium difficult to impossible. European countries must thus address their military shortfalls.

- Europe may have a public opinion problem with military and defense issues. We noted this aspect in our previous policy brief: whether it is culture, demography or other factors we cannot say. However, this should be clearly analyzed and studied more in depth.[106]

- Vulnerability to Russia's nuclear coercion or asymmetric attrition in all our options stresses the need for devising counter-measures. In some areas, the challenge lies with industrial capacity (munition stocks), in other with policy responses (cyber attacks). In some cases, like

[105] That country C has N number of tanks or jet aircraft may mean little if they are not properly maintained, spare parts are lacking, crew is not trained or the country is simply unwilling to provide such assets.

[106] Gilli, Gilli and Petrelli, "Before Vegetius:" 7-9.

nuclear coercion, the challenge for Europe is bigger. Regardless, serious attention should be paid to these questions.

- William Wohlforth, a prominent U.S. political scientist, warned in 1994 that Moscow's rapid power shifts—from pre-WWI rise to post-Cold War decline – have long destabilized international politics. "Russia may be down now, but prudent policymakers should not count it out." We think Wohlforth's warning should not be dismissed this time.[107]

- This leads us to our final consideration. Beside planning for military options in Ukraine, Europe must also deter and defend against Russia. As highlighted a few times in this report, the two needs may be in tension, especially when both entail large force commitments. European countries should thus develop strategies that complicate Moscow's plans and calculations. The military support to Kyiv and Europe's defenses are two sides of the same coin. In the short run it might appear that providing scarce arms to Ukraine weakens Europe's defenses as support for Kyiv represents a low-cost option to buy time to strengthen European defenses.

- Even with the EU's new grandiose defense spending plans, resources will remain scarce for some time and the need to reconcile the twin-imperative of supporting Ukraine and deterring Russia will hence likely not go away. We will discuss this issue in our "EUse Your Illusion II" following policy brief.

[107] William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter, 1994-1995): 91-129.