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THE NB8–UKRAINE SECURITY NEXUS

Shaping Europe's Future Defence Architecture



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SCEEUS

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SUMMARY

The Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8)-Ukraine security nexus has the potential to become the operational core of a wider European response to Russia's long-standing security threat. The Nordic-Baltic countries combined have high levels of political trust in Ukraine, a shared assessment of the Russian threat, advanced defence industries and growing military integration through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). Ukraine's Defence Forces, which are the world's most skilled and experienced at Warfare 5.0,[1] possess battle-proven doctrine, unmanned systems capabilities across all domains, a combat-validated battle management system, industrial-scale drone production capability and a vast repository of classified AI training data. **Ukraine could partner with the NB8 countries through a modular and tailored framework that covers Warfare 5.0 technical solutions, doctrine transfer, training, electronic warfare, counter-drone architecture, and unmanned ground and maritime operations.**

This cooperation should concentrate on the threats the region already faces. Ukraine and the NB8 should jointly develop layered counter-unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and electronic warfare (EW) architectures for airports, military installations and critical infrastructure; affordable air and missile interceptors; maritime and underwater surveillance and unmanned systems for the Baltic and the North Atlantic; resilient battlefield command and control (C2) and communications under heavy EW; and all-weather intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). Ukrainian teams should participate systematically in JEF exercises, capability audits, Red Teaming and regional contingency planning. The forces of NB8 member states should train against Russian tactics reproduced by Ukrainian instructors and operators rather than simulated using peacetime assumptions.

The same logic should shape defence production. Instead of separate national supply chains, Ukraine and its NB8 partners could build distributed production networks with shared standards, licensing arrangements, interchangeable components, reserve stocks and alternative manufacturing sites able to maintain output if facilities are attacked. Existing cooperation with Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Latvia provides the foundations for such a model. Joint programmes could connect Ukrainian battlefield validation directly to European procurement and scaling, using the logic already demonstrated by

1 Warfare 5.0 can be understood as an integrated, networked model of warfare that combines network-centric operations, combat-cloud architecture, multi-domain operations and fusion warfare into a single interdependent system of systems. Its effectiveness depends on connecting sensors, command structures, information flows and effectors across land, sea, air, space and cyber domains so that capabilities reinforce one another rather than operate separately. Layton stresses that Russian thinking extends this model beyond the conventional battlespace, treating political systems, economies, law, public opinion and the human mind itself as operational targets. *Peter Layton,* "Fifth Generation Warfare: An Evolving Technical Dimension of War", *Over the Horizon Journal*, 31 July 2017, https://othjournal.com/2017/07/31/5th-gen-warfare/.

DELTA *(Ukraine's battlefield management and situational awareness ecosystem)*, **Brave1** *(Ukraine's defence innovation and technology acceleration platform)* and **DOT-Chain Defence** *(a digital marketplace that directly connects military demand with defence suppliers)*.

At the same time, the NB8-Ukraine framework could become a bridge to the wider European security architecture. Incorporation into European contingency planning, intelligence exchanges, exercises, capability development and emerging command structures should happen now rather than after these structures have been designed. The JEF offers a vehicle for deeper operational integration, while a future European Security Council could provide the political framework for permanent Ukrainian participation. A multinational European unmanned-systems capability built around Ukrainian combat experience and deployable against drone incursions and sabotage would offer an early practical test of this deeper integration.

The resulting agenda is concrete: integrate Ukraine into emerging European defence structures; fully leverage the Ukraine-JEF enhanced partnership, which would involve deepening Ukraine's operational integration into the JEF; build a distributed Ukrainian-European production base; establish a European unmanned-systems capability with Ukraine as co-developer; integrate Ukraine into European responses to sabotage, cyberattacks, drone incursions and other sub-threshold operations; create permanent joint cognitive-threat monitoring and exercises; and connect battlefield testing directly to procurement and industrial scaling. These steps would move the relationship from assistance to reciprocal defence integration and make the NB8-Ukraine nexus a working model for a wider European security architecture.

Ukraine is not just a recipient of security assistance. Beyond serving as Europe's frontline against Russian aggression, it now possesses military experience, technologies and operational knowledge that are directly relevant to Europe's own defence. It is in Europe's interest to absorb these lessons as quickly as possible. The immediate objective should therefore be to turn existing bilateral agreements and political declarations into operational mechanisms that link defence ministries, armed forces, procurement agencies, intelligence communities and defence companies.

INTRODUCTION

Europe's security order is undergoing a structural transformation. The assumptions that underpinned the post-Cold War architecture – stable deterrence, US primacy and predictable threat environments – have been eroded under pressure from Russia's protracted war against Ukraine and its broader campaign of sub-threshold operations across the continent. In this emerging landscape, Ukraine is no longer merely a recipient of security assistance. It is a central contributor to Europe's defence capacity and a driver of its adaptation.

From large-scale drone warfare and AI-enabled targeting to countering electronic warfare and adapting to constant technological iteration, Ukraine has become a laboratory for the future of conflict. Its ability to scale low-cost, high-precision capabilities and integrate them into operational doctrine offers lessons for European armed forces that are only beginning to adjust to these realities. These lessons become even more important amid growing warnings that Russia might be preparing for a major deniable attack, or even a direct incursion, against a NATO member in months rather than years.[2]

The industrial and institutional dimensions of the current transformation are critical. Shaped by wartime necessity, Ukraine's defence ecosystem is evolving into a dynamic environment for innovation, rapid prototyping and cooperation with international partners. This raises questions about how European countries can integrate Ukraine into joint production, procurement and capability development, moving beyond traditional models of defence cooperation.

Civil resilience is one of Ukraine's most important contributions to Europe's emerging security architecture. Ukraine's experience shows that resilience is a practical, society-wide capability – built through preparation, self-organisation and adaptation – that enables the state to function and fight under extreme pressure.[3] Integrating citizens, institutions and the private sector into security planning is critical for sustaining resistance and ensuring continuity in modern war.

Whether through a reformed NATO, new regional defence frameworks or hybrid arrangements, the integration of Ukraine as a fully fledged security

2 See e.g. "Russia's escalating hybrid campaign against Europe", *Financial Times*, 28 September 2026, https://www.ft.com/content/533fc709-72f8-44bb-bd0d-c52bb2fb8886?syn-25a6b1a6=1.

3 Elena Davlikanova, Lesia Ogryzko, Stanislav Boiko, Andriana Hamar and Volodymyr Lytvyn, *Coping Under Fire: Insights from Ukrainian Society's Experience of War and Resilience* (Kyiv: Sahaidachnyi Security Center, 2026), https://sahasec.org/research/coping-under-fire-insights-from-ukrainian-society-s-experience-of-war-and-resilience/.

actor is essential to achieve European defence readiness. This is a matter not only of political inclusion, but also of operational necessity. Countries that share a common threat perception must develop interoperable capabilities, aligned doctrines and coordinated responses.

Russia is already waging a war against Europe, as clearly demonstrated by the *Everywhere War: Sub-Threshold Warfare Tracker*, which was officially launched by Sahaidachnyi Security Center in 2026.[4] The growing number and increasing audacity of its attacks indicate rehearsals for a wider confrontation. Today's policies will shape the future of the continent scale, as elaborated in the *Ukraine 2032* and *Russia 2032 Scenarios*.[5]

4 Sahaidachnyi Security Center, "The Everywhere War: Sub-threshold warfare tracker", accessed 21 September 2026, https://sahasec.org/tracker/.

5 Olena Davlikanova and Victoria Vdovychenko, *Ukraine-2032 Scenarios: A Decade Post the Full-Scale Invasion* (Kyiv: Vistka, 2025); and Olena Davlikanova and Lesia Ogryzko, eds, *Russia 2032 Scenarios: A Decade Post Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine: Perspectives from a Neighbor Who Knows Too Well*, Sahaidachnyi Security Center, 2025, https://sahasec.org/research/russia-2032-scenarios-a-decade-post-full-scaleinvasion-of-ukraine/.

CHAPTER 1

01

THE END OF STRATEGIC CERTAINTY

Russia constitutes the most immediate and consequential military threat to European security. To understand the threat, however, requires more than a conventional force-on-force assessment. Moscow combines its military power with sabotage and cyber operations, political interference, intelligence activity, coercion and attacks on critical infrastructure. In early 2025, Russia established a new Department of Special Tasks in the GRU,[6] combining units responsible for assassinations, infrastructure sabotage and espionage. Its Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI) is actively mapping Europe's network of subsea communications cables and energy pipelines in preparation for future sabotage operations.

The **distinction between the frontline and the rear is being eroded**. In a future confrontation, ports, railways, telecommunications networks, energy infrastructure, logistics hubs, undersea cables, industrial facilities and public institutions could all become part of the battlespace – with or without a conventional attack. National defence can therefore no longer be treated primarily as a responsibility of the armed forces. A total defence architecture is required capable of protecting civilian systems while preserving democratic freedoms and human dignity.

For many years, one reassuring assumption in European security debates has been that Russia's commitment of forces to Ukraine substantially reduces the possibility of confrontation elsewhere. However, the relevant question is increasingly not whether Russia has fully regenerated its forces, but whether Moscow could attempt to exploit the period before Europe rearms and its readiness programmes mature.

This distinction matters because Russia is itself facing constraints as its fiscal buffers deteriorate significantly. The liquid assets in the National Wealth Fund, for example, declined from the equivalent of 6.5 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at the beginning of the full-scale war to 1.8 per cent in April 2026.[7] Russia is also experiencing demographic and manpower pressures after years of heavy wartime losses.

Europe, meanwhile, has begun an extensive but incomplete rearmament process. The European Union's Readiness 2030 framework explicitly aims to close critical capability gaps by the end of the decade while NATO's 2025 capability targets call for additional forces, stronger air and missile defence, new long-range weapons, increased logistics capacity, larger land formations and expanded defence-industrial production.

This creates a potentially dangerous intersection of timelines. The relevant risk is not the moment when Russia reaches some theoretical state of full military preparedness, but the gap between Russia's continuing ability to generate military power and Europe's still incomplete efforts to rebuild deterrence. The Baltic region is particularly exposed. It lacks strategic depth while its proximity to Russia and Belarus gives NATO little time to identify an emerging attack, make political decisions and deploy an effective response.

Recognising the seriousness of the Russian threat should not lead to an exaggeration of Russia's strength.

6 Officially known as the Main Directorate of the General Staff, the GRU is the foreign military intelligence agency of the Russian Federation.

7 Torbjörn Becker, Moritz Schularick et al., *Endgame: The State of the Russian Economy*, Kiel Report (Kiel Institute for the World Economy and SITE, June 2026), https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/news/endgame-russias-war-economy-hits-its-limits/.

The war against Ukraine has exposed persistent deficiencies in Russian command, logistics, training and force employment, while imposing enormous personnel, equipment and economic costs. The danger lies elsewhere. Russia does not need to be stronger than Europe in aggregate if it can exploit European vulnerabilities faster than Europe can correct them.

Today, Europe is structurally and ethically incapable of sustaining the kind of attritional warfare that Russia will try to impose and currently lacks the means to force a different mode of engagement. This is the gap that Russia will exploit. One of Russia's strategic assets is its willingness to accept a large number of casualties. This gives Russia the ability to dictate the terms and pace of any conflict.

Moreover, Russia is not preparing for yesterday's war. Its forces and defence industry have undergone continuous adaptation in Ukraine, where drone warfare, electronic warfare, long-range strike capability, deception, dispersed operations and rapid technological counter-adaptation have become increasingly important. Russia's expanding drone production is one visible indication that Moscow is institutionalising lessons from the current war.

Together, these factors give Russia a decisive strategic advantage. It will design operations that exploit European weaknesses while neutralising Europe's traditional strengths, such as advanced aviation, artillery, naval power and space-based ISR.

The challenge for Europe will be to deny Russia the ability to impose this model through technological superiority, resilient infrastructure, sufficient industrial capacity, distributed and survivable forces and the ability to detect and counter threats across military and civilian domains. However, none of these capabilities will be sufficient without the political will to use them. Resilience without deterrence risks becoming little more than an ability to absorb repeated attacks. Europe must be prepared not just to detect and withstand hostile activity, but to attribute it to its perpetrators and impose consequences. This requires faster political decision making, a higher tolerance for calculated risk and a credible readiness to respond across the full spectrum of available instruments, from diplomatic to economic, cyber and, where legally justified and proportionate, kinetic measures.

Russia's strategy has repeatedly sought to exploit the gap between what European states can identify and what they are politically prepared to confront. Closing that disparity is as important as closing military capability gaps. The objective of European deterrence must be to convince Moscow that sabotage, coercion or military aggression will generate costs that outweigh any expected gains. Technological superiority and societal resilience become instruments of deterrence only when backed by the demonstrated political resolve to act and strike back.

Finally, European planning should avoid treating Russia as an isolated strategic actor. Its capacity to sustain the war against Ukraine increasingly rests on relationships with China, Belarus, North Korea and Iran, although the nature and depth of those relationships differ substantially.

Belarus, although often underestimated, is integrated into Russia's regional military posture. Its territory, infrastructure and armed forces extend Russia's strategic depth on NATO's eastern flank, while constitutional changes have enabled Russian nuclear deployments on Belarusian territory. Its armed forces function as an extension of Russia's western military posture rather than an independent force. Even short of direct participation in conflict, Belarus brings substantial industrial and technological capacity to Russia's war effort. Iran has played an important role in the development of Russia's scalable long-range drone-strike capability. North Korea has gone considerably further, supplying ammunition and personnel. Finally, Chinese commercial and technological links have materially supported Russia's ability to sustain military production.

These relationships show how Russia's war-making capacity is increasingly embedded in a wider network capable of exchanging materiel, components, technology, industrial capacity and operational experience. A future confrontation with Russia would not involve Russia's resources alone.

The resulting security environment is more complex than a renewed Cold War. Europe faces a principal military adversary willing to use force and a persistent sub-threshold of war campaign against its societies, as well as a wider constellation of authoritarian states that can reinforce one another's capacity to challenge the existing order.

Europe's task is not to predict the precise year, location or form of the next Russian move, but to remove the vulnerabilities that make such a move attractive. The objective should be to ensure that whether Moscow chooses conventional force, hybrid disruption or coercion below the threshold of war, it confronts a Europe capable of absorbing the first shock, adapting rapidly and destroying the enemy. In this effort, Ukraine is Europe's strategic trump card. It is the only European country with extensive contemporary experience of fighting Russia at scale, continuously adapting to its methods and identifying its vulnerabilities.

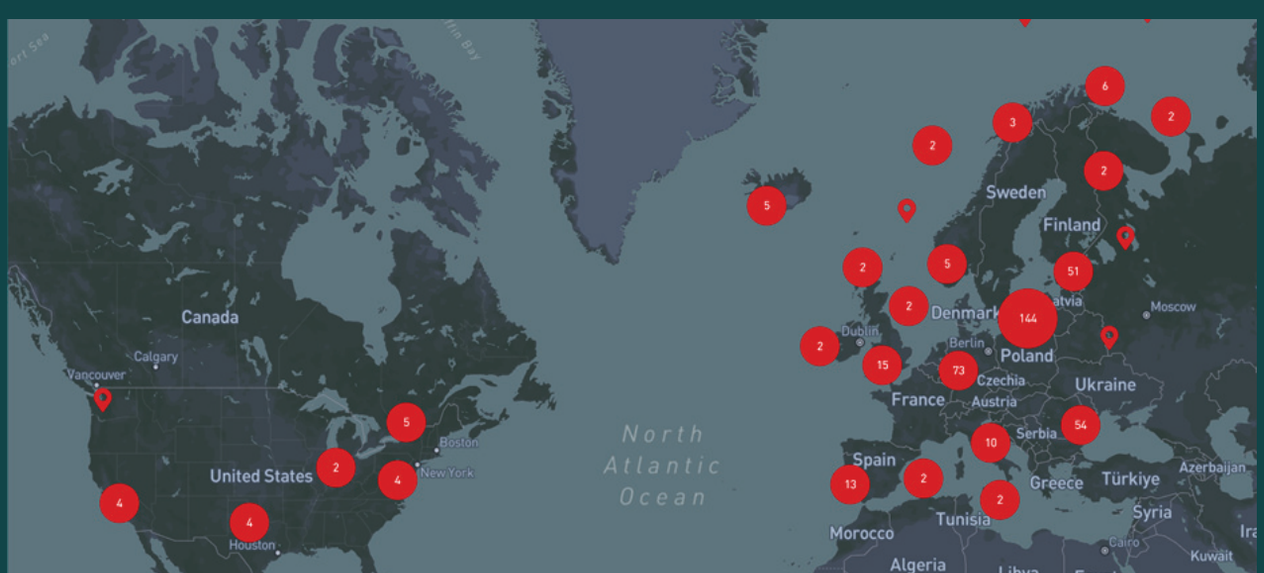
CHAPTER 2

02

TWO SIDES OF RUSSIA'S SUB-THRESHOLD WARFARE

Russia is already waging a war against Europe and describes the confrontation as systemic, civilisational and existential. In contrast, European governments still tend to divide security into periods of peace, crisis and war. Russia exploits the space between these categories, as well as the contemporary European tendency to assess costs and benefits primarily in economic terms. Moscow's own strategic calculus rests on a different political ontology in which economic growth is subordinate to the accumulation of power, territorial and political control and the reproduction of a collective nation building mythology.

Russia's *full-scale* sub-threshold warfare is becoming increasingly brazen, using hostile operations across all domains calibrated to remain formally below the threshold for conventional military retaliation or full activation of NATO's collective defence mechanisms.



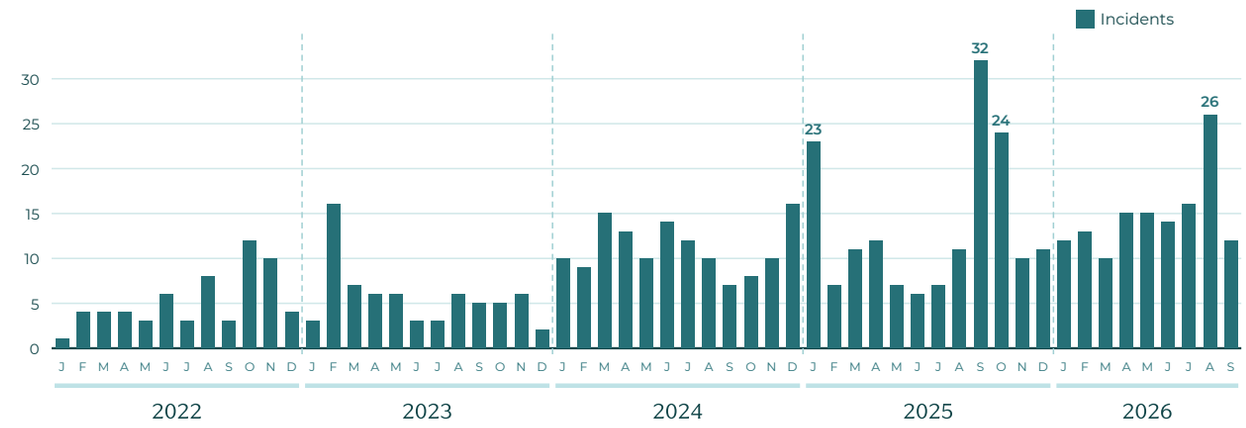
Source: *Everywhere War Tracker*

The Sahaidachnyi Security Center's *Everywhere War Tracker* has recorded more than 450 officially attributed incidents in the Euro-Atlantic region between 2022 and October 2026, as well as several hundred unattributed ones.

Russian activity was relatively dispersed throughout 2022 and 2023, reached a higher baseline in 2024, increased substantially in 2025 and has remained elevated throughout 2026. Its instruments have evolved over the same period. Russia rebuilt its intelligence networks following a mass expulsion of diplomats and intelligence officers, expanded the recruitment of disposable local proxies, industrialised and scaled-up drone production, increased its

THE NUMBER OF ATTRIBUTED RUSSIAN ATTACKS ON EUROPE, 2022–2026 (BY MONTH)

558 incidents matched. Countries: All countries. Incident types: All incident types. Attribution status: Officially attributed, Fitting the pattern.
Date range: January 15, 2022 to September 24, 2026. Grouped by month.



Source: sahasec.org/tracker

electronic warfare capacity and developed a shadow fleet able to generate revenue while creating an additional platform for intelligence gathering and coercive activity.

The kinetic side of sub-threshold warfare works through cumulative pressure, reconnaissance activity, capability development and political signalling, and preparation of the operational environment. At the same time, it is itself also an instrument of cognitive warfare as repeated incursions, sabotage and other hostile acts normalise insecurity, test public and political reactions, erode confidence in state protection and gradually reshape perceptions of the level of Russian coercion that must simply be endured.

The August 2026 attempted attack on Leipzig/Halle Airport provides a clear signal of how Russia has the potential to launch explosive attacks against civilian and military-related infrastructure deep inside Europe. Such operations could evolve into a persistent terror campaign, in which the possibility of unmanned aerial or ground vehicles carrying explosives becomes part of the everyday security environment around airports, railway hubs, defence factories, ports and energy facilities. In this sense, Europe faces a sustained state-directed campaign of low-level violence, intimidation and disruption intended to keep societies under permanent pressure while remaining below the threshold of conventional war.

Germany's response marked a shift in European official rhetoric towards open acknowledgement of the threat and speaking candidly with the public, as concern about causing alarm gave way to recognition that societies needed to understand the danger. Berlin promptly imposed costs on Moscow through diplomatic expulsions, the closure of Russian institutions and new measures against Russian networks and the shadow fleet, while raising the case with NATO and EU partners.

Such a response should be made systematic through rapid attribution, default interception of hostile platforms and direct costs for the Russian state behind each operation. If not, every successful probe will become a template for the next, more dangerous one. A military operation with limited costs for the perpetrator becomes a model available for repetition.

The same logic applies to electronic warfare, as well as cyber, maritime and sabotage operations, which increasingly reinforce one another. Russian electronic warfare capabilities around Kaliningrad can generate physical disruption without conventional attack, while cyber operations can establish dormant access to critical infrastructure for later use in a crisis. The shadow fleet combines sanctions evasion and revenue generation with opportunities for reconnaissance and sabotage. At the same time, Russian services use expendable agents to carry out low-cost arson, vandalism and reconnaissance, producing disproportionate physical, economic and cognitive effects. The May 2024 Marywilska 44 arson attack illustrates this convergence, as the perpetrators were reportedly instructed to film the fire for Russian propaganda.

TARGETING THE FOUNDATIONS OF EUROPE'S HUMAN-CENTRED POLITICAL ORDER

The clear relationship between many of these operations and European military assistance to Ukraine should not narrow their interpretation to an effort to disrupt aid flows. Russia's kinetic sub-threshold campaign has an intrinsic cognitive function: to gradually weaken societies' willingness to defend their security model, alliances and political way of life. Civilian targets are particularly useful because they move the consequences of geopolitical confrontation from government ministries and military bases into everyday experience.

The desired effect is a Europe that is more fearful, more fragmented, more cynical about democratic institutions and increasingly willing to trade principles and collective security for an illusion of immediate stability. In this sense, Moscow's objective is to cultivate political environments in which mistrust, fatalism, authoritarian reflexes, acceptance of force and the primacy of narrow national interests progressively displace confidence in democratic governance, solidarity and collective defence. In this way, kinetic pressure and cognitive warfare converge on the same strategic objective: to strengthen the centripetal political forces that aim to undermine the European project and erode Europe's value-based, humanistic societal framework.

Western concepts of cognitive warfare increasingly focus on the processes through which people interpret information and make decisions. Russian discussion of *mental'naya voyna*, or mental warfare, goes further. Its ambition is to shape what an individual or society ultimately becomes.[8]

The Kremlin's hostility towards European democracy follows from this logic. A prosperous democratic Ukraine integrated into Europe would offer Russians a culturally familiar demonstration that a post-Soviet society can reject authoritarian rule, dismantle imperial mythology and construct a different political future. Ukraine represents not only a geopolitical loss, but also a semantic challenge to the Russian regime's explanation of history and power. Europe itself presents the same threat on a wider scale.

After five years of the largest war on the European continent since World War II, there is still no common interpretation of events following decades of Russian "cognitive offensive" using diplomatic, economic, academic, cultural, sporting and religious means. Chief among these is the argument that Europe is at peace and Russia's aggression is essentially a Ukrainian problem.[9] Another presents Russia as an almost unlimited military power whose strength makes confrontation irrational.[10] A third portrays accommodation, economic engagement and renewed dialogue as the safest route to stability.[11] A fourth depicts the survival of the current Russian regime as preferable to the uncertainty associated with its defeat.[12] A fifth portrays western support for Ukraine as the cause of Russian hostility, effectively transferring agency from the aggressor to its target.[13]

This is itself an example of Russian cognitive advances in Europe, fomenting aggressive forms of nationalism and populism, EU scepticism and transatlantic turbulence. While Europe has become more proactive and vigilant in mitigating and reacting to both kinetic and cognitive threats, European states are constrained by democratic norms, legal safeguards and ethical standards. Russia explicitly treats their absence as an operational advantage. Leaked SVR correspondence on "Project Kylo" states that "morality and ethics should play no part" in covert psychological warfare and describes campaigns designed to generate fear, panic and mistrust inside western societies while concealing any connection to Russian intelligence.[14]

8 Elena Davlikanova, "Going mental: Russia's cognitive war against Europe", *European Policy Institute in Kyiv*, 28 May 2026, https://epik.eu/publication/cognitive-war/?utm_source.

9 Anatol Lieven, "The War in Ukraine Holds Two Lessons: Russia isn't an Imminent Threat, and Europe Must Rearm Regardless", *The Guardian*, 23 February 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/23/war-ukraine-russia-threat-europe-rearm-us.

10 EUvsDisinfo, "The FIMI of Russian Invincibility: How a Myth Becomes a Strategic Weapon", 21 February 2026, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-fimi-of-russian-invincibility-how-a-myth-becomes-a-strategic-weapon-2/

11 Marek Menkiszak, "Sometimes it is Better Not to Talk: Pitfalls of Potential Dialogue between Europe and Russia", *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 23 February 2026, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2026-02-23/sometimes-it-better-not-to-talk-pitfalls-potential-dialogue

12 Peter Dickinson, "Ukraine's Western Allies Should Fear Russian Victory, Not Russian Defeat", *Atlantic Council*, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-western-allies-should-fear-russian-victory-not-russian-defeat/

13 "Slovak PM Accuses West of Provoking War with Russia", *Ukrainska Pravda*, 20 September 2026, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2026/09/20/8054287/; and Steve Holland et al., "Trump and Zelenskiy Clash, Leaving Ukraine Exposed in War with Russia", Reuters, 1 March 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-zelenskiy-sign-minerals-deal-white-house-meeting-2025-02-28/.

14 Michael Weiss, Roman Dobrokhotov and Christo Grozev, "'Morality and Ethics Should Play No Part': Leaks Reveal How Russia's Foreign Intelligence Agency Runs Disinformation Campaigns in the West", *The Insider*, 4 July 2024, https://theins.press/en/politics/272870. The SVR is Russia's primary civilian external intelligence agency.

CHAPTER 3

03

UKRAINE AS A SECURITY PROVIDER

Ukraine has already moved from being principally a consumer of western security assistance to become one of Europe's most significant security providers. It fields the continent's largest and most combat-experienced conventional military, possesses direct operational knowledge of Russian tactics and command structures, and has developed a defence innovation ecosystem shaped by continuous battlefield adaptation. Its geography connects the Baltic, Black Sea and Central European theatres. Despite this, Ukraine remains outside of Europe's principal structures for collective defence.

Ukraine requires European military, financial and industrial support. At the same time, Europe increasingly requires the capabilities, knowledge and operational experience that Ukraine possesses. It has adapted force structures, procurement systems, doctrine and technologies under continuous pressure from a peer adversary. That process produces knowledge that military exercises and simulations can approximate but never fully replicate.

The implications extend beyond battlefield tactics. Ukraine's experience demonstrates how military institutions can operate when technological cycles move faster than conventional acquisition processes. It shows how military units, private sector companies, volunteer networks and state institutions can interact within a rapidly changing defence ecosystem. It also provides Europe with a continually updated understanding of Russian capabilities, vulnerabilities, operational practices and adaptation.

Ukraine's value to European defence is therefore simultaneously military, civilian, industrial, technological and geographic. The country has developed an ecosystem of capabilities that combines operational experience, doctrine, technology, training and rapid adaptation. These can increasingly be structured into **customised security packages**; that is, combinations of expertise, systems, testing and training designed around the specific vulnerabilities and capability requirements of individual partner countries.

Counter-UAS and protection of critical infrastructure represent an immediate area for cooperation. European countries are increasingly concerned about protecting their military installations, energy infrastructure, cities and wider territories against low-cost aerial threats. Ukraine can provide both individual counter-UAS technologies and an integrated approach, comprising: vulnerability and threat assessments; layered architectures that combine existing air defence with radar, acoustic, optical and radio frequency sensors; electronic warfare and kinetic interceptors; command-and-control software; and battle-tested response protocols. At the territorial level, this experience extends to distributed sensor networks, mobile interception teams and regional command centres capable of producing a common operational picture and coordinating military, police and civilian security actors.

Unmanned and robotised warfare is a second, broader field. Ukraine can help partner armed forces to integrate unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) into actual combat structures rather than treat them as stand-alone technological additions. This would include: transferring combat-tested standard operating procedures (SOPs) and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs); integrating unmanned platforms with communications, electronic warfare and battle-management systems;

developing theatre-specific operational playbooks; and conducting wargaming and Red Team exercises against realistic adversary tactics. Ukrainian expertise could also support the integration and training of AI-enabled systems using battlefield-derived data.

A related capability is **robotised last-mile logistics**. The contemporary battlefield has made conventional resupply and casualty evacuation increasingly dangerous. Ukraine has accumulated practical experience of integrating unmanned ground and aerial platforms into frontline logistics, including platform selection, communications, route planning, maintenance infrastructure and the training of operational teams. This can be connected to Ukraine's wider expertise in **military medicine**, from tactical care and casualty evacuation in contested environments to rehabilitation, prosthetics, mental health support and the longer-term reintegration of wounded personnel and veterans.

Ukraine can also transfer its experience of **electromagnetic-spectrum operations**, an area that is becoming increasingly inseparable from drone warfare. This would include spectrum mapping, dynamic deconfliction between friendly UAVs and electronic-warfare systems, adaptation of EW and electronic-intelligence capabilities and realistic EW-versus-UAS training. Particularly valuable would be Ukraine's experience of continuous counter-adaptation – building organisations capable of modifying systems and tactics as adversary frequencies and technologies change, rather than relying on static EW solutions.

For countries concerned with territorial defence, Ukraine could also contribute **survivable defence infrastructure and force protection**. Its experience encompasses dispersed and layered defensive positions, passive counter-drone protection, early warning systems, concealment and deception, protected movement between positions and rapidly constructed field fortifications. For Nordic and other maritime countries, this could be complemented with Ukrainian experience of protecting naval and offshore infrastructure against aerial, surface and subsurface unmanned threats, as well as using distributed sensors and autonomous systems for persistent surveillance of large coastlines.

Command and control provides the connective tissue across these capabilities. European forces would benefit from structured exposure to Ukraine's DELTA ecosystem and from Ukrainian expertise in designing C2 architectures for a fast-moving, sensor-saturated battlefield. The objective should not simply be to export a Ukrainian system, but to help partners connect sensors, unmanned platforms, effectors and decision makers in faster operational cycles.

Finally, Ukraine can offer something that conventional defence procurement cannot easily provide: **continuous training, operational testing and adaptation**. Ukrainian military personnel and veterans can deliver specialised courses for commanders, UAV and EW operators, ISR specialists and engineers. Mobile teams can work directly with partner units and capabilities can be stress-tested through wargaming and Red Teaming. The proposed training and interoperability model would also allow partners to audit existing capabilities, identify weaknesses and receive continuing support as threats evolve.

The strategic proposition is therefore broader than transferring Ukrainian technology. **Ukraine can help partners transform the capacity to adapt.** A "security package" would combine a capability audit, operational concepts and doctrine, technology integration, training, combat-informed testing and continuous advisory support, all tailored to the geography, force structure and threat environment of each partner. This would turn Ukraine's wartime experience into a practical contribution to Europe's own defence transformation.

CHAPTER 4

04

CONFRONTING A COMMON THREAT: THE NORDIC COUNTRIES AS UKRAINE'S PARTNERS

Cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic states has deepened since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Nordic countries are among Ukraine's strongest partners and the Nordic-Baltic region has become an arena for enhanced security cooperation with immediate operational results. Nordic cooperation was significantly boosted by Finland's and Sweden's NATO accessions.[15] The ground has been prepared for even deeper ties, although Nordic countries have until recently differed in their perception of Russia as a direct threat.

After Finland and Sweden joined NATO, Russia reviewed its Baltic–Scandinavian macro region concept, which fuses the Baltic Sea region and Scandinavia into a single strategic theatre, often branded the "Greater Baltic".[16] Russian analysts frame this as a new type of macro region in a polycentric order, stressing dense security, as well as economic and political linkages among the Nordic and Baltic countries, and borrowing EU macro regional language while recasting the area as a unified arena for strategic competition with the West.

NATO's own signalling reflects the worsening security environment. Since 2022, it has moved from emphasising its defensive character and unity to more explicit deterrence messaging. In September 2026, Military Committee Chair Giuseppe Cavo Dragone said NATO had around 4,000 pages of regional defence plans covering scenarios from limited incursions to full Article 5 activation.[17] Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John Ratcliffe's August visit to Moscow reportedly included a warning against testing NATO's collective defence commitments.[18]

Support for Ukraine among the Nordic countries is among the most robust in Europe, reflecting both limited Russian leverage over domestic political actors and broad cross party consensus in favour of Kyiv.[19] Even the right wing parties, which have been Moscow's priority targets for influence operations and whose members have expressed sympathetic views about Russia or at least scepticism about confronting the Kremlin, have largely aligned themselves with mainstream pro-Ukraine positions since 2022. In the Baltic countries, pro-Russia sentiments have failed to gain mainstream prominence in the political landscape, despite Russian efforts to appeal to the Russian speaking population. Public opinion in the NB8 countries remains strongly supportive of Ukraine, even as debates intensify over costs and burden sharing. This creates favourable ground for political decisions in support of Ukraine.[20]

15 Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, Remarks at a press briefing in Copenhagen, 1 September 2026, *Defence.Tech*, 21 September 2026, https://www.regjeringen.no/en/documents/national-security-strategy/id3099304/?ch=1.

16 Minna Ålander and Elena Davlikanova, *The Missing Piece in Nordic-Baltic Security: Ukraine as a Natural Ally*, SCEEUS Report No. 6 (Stockholm: Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies and Sahaidachnyi Security Center, 2026), https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-missing-piece-in-nordic-baltic-security-ukraine-as-a-natural-ally/.

17 Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, "We have 4000 pages of plans for the eastern flank, covering the full spectrum of situations", 21 September 2026, *Defence Tech*, 21 September 2026, https://defence.tech/we-have-4000-pages-of-plans-for-the-eastern-flank-covering-the-full-spectrum-of-situations/.

18 Lara Seligman, Alexander Ward and Josh Dawsey, "CIA chief's surprise Moscow trip was to warn Russia not to attack NATO", *Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2026, https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/cia-chiefs-surprise-moscow-trip-was-to-warn-russia-not-to-attack-nato-c2d997f3.

19 Minna Ålander and Elena Davlikanova (note 16).

20 Minna Ålander and Elena Davlikanova (note 16).

The strength of Nordic support has been clear for some years, but the fall in US funding since 2025 means that the Nordic bloc is now among the top financial contributors to Ukraine. According to the Kiel Institute Ukraine Support Tracker,[21] six of the eight NB8 countries rank as leading bilateral donors to Ukraine when government support is measured as a proportion of GDP (both including and excluding their imputed share of EU aid). Norway, Sweden and Denmark also feature in the top 10 for bilateral military aid in absolute terms, while Finland is ranked 11th. Governments justify this not just as moral solidarity, but as self-interest: if Ukraine falls, they would have to fight a larger Russian army strengthened by Ukrainian fighters from the occupied territories.

Any further increase in support is likely to be in the shape of a loan rather than direct contributions. In September 2026, Germany relaunched a plan for an EU loan backed by the €210 billion in frozen Russian assets.[22] Sweden has also been persistently pushing for the use of frozen Russian assets to help Ukraine. If granted, the request by Canada to join the EU's loan to Ukraine could open a new window.[23]

NB8-UKRAINIAN DEFENCE INDUSTRIAL INTEGRATION

The NB8 region is especially important for enhanced defence-industrial integration and security cooperation with Ukraine. Countries on the north-eastern NATO flank have a shared perception of the immediate threat from Russia and are most actively learning directly from the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the NB8 countries have demonstrated unparallelled resolve, consistency and depth of support for Ukraine. These factors have created a high-trust environment where defence cooperation can move fast and deliver operational results. Once established and proven, this can serve as a scalable model and driving force for broader coordination within NATO and the EU.

In addition, there are concrete synergies and complementarities between the NB8 countries and Ukraine that speak in favour of enhanced defence industrial cooperation. For example, Denmark and Norway maintain high-level industrial capabilities in sensors, missile technologies and maritime systems, while Ukraine has demonstrated a capacity for rapid integration, combat adaptation and rapid scaling of next-generation military technology under wartime conditions. This pairing creates a basis for cooperation on unmanned systems, modular naval assets, interceptor munitions and other systems where subsystem excellence and production scalability must be combined.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania contribute strengths in unmanned systems, robotics, laser technologies and secure communications. When linked with Ukraine's experience of large-scale deployment and continuous feedback loops from the battlefield, these capabilities support iterative development paths for systems such as UGVs and autonomous ground platforms, counter-UAS solutions and networked tactical communications. The emphasis is on short adaptation cycles rather than long-term platform development.

Finally, Norway, Finland and Sweden can bring advanced R&D ecosystems, established defence platforms and experience in high-end systems integration. Interaction with Ukraine introduces a testing environment in which adaptations to electronic warfare, attrition and rapid repair have become central design parameters. Cooperation at this level supports both incremental modernisation of existing platforms and the exploration of new jointly developed systems, notably unmanned systems in the land, air and maritime domains, armoured vehicles, aircraft subsystems and multispectral sensing architectures.

While the Nordic countries have been able to significantly increase their defence spending, they still have a hard time converting spending into capabilities and readiness.[24] All eight NB8 states concluded 10-year bilateral security cooperation agreements with Ukraine

21 Ukraine Support Tracker, "A database of military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine", Updated 8 October 2026, https://www.kielinstitut.de/research/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/

22 Hans Von Der Burchard, Nicholas Vinocur and Gregorio Sorgi, "Germany floats new Ukraine loan backed by frozen Russian assets", *Politico*, 11 September 2026, https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-ukraine-loan-frozen-russia-assets/.

23 Andy Bounds and Ilya Gridneff, "Canada seeks Ukraine loan role to deepen EU ties", *Financial Times,* 13 September 2026, https://www.ft.com/content/9cd8cc79-e98a-449f-a903-609b034a56e3?syn-25a6b1a6=1.

24 John Karlsrud und Yf Reykers, "From spending to delivery: Coalition-based governance to scale Europe's defence industry at speed", Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 21 May 2026, https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/from-spending-to-delivery-coalition-based-governance-to-scale-europe-s-defence-industry-at-speed.

in 2024, most recently complemented by Norway's strategic partnership declaration and Drone Deal agreements with Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

However, it has proved difficult to turn these agreements into operational partnerships. A solid rocket fuel plant planned to be set up in Denmark by Ukrainian missile manufacturer Fire Point, for instance, has been delayed until 2027.[25] Nonetheless, there has been significant progress in some areas. Camp Jomsborg in eastern Poland was set up at impressive speed to provide training for Ukrainian troops.[26] The Freyja partnership,[27] set up to provide Ukraine and Europe with a desperately needed lower-cost alternative to the Patriot anti-ballistic missile system, has started initial testing having achieved technical integration.[28] The 10-country Freyja partnership includes Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Freyja provides a good case study of future requirements. The project is trying to compress a capability project that normally takes seven to ten years into a single year and facing a weapons industry that seeks to maintain technological and contractual lock-ins for their existing products. It will require a cultural change in the industry, and in host states that are often major owners of such industries, to accelerate innovation and forgo proprietary ownership of specific parts of an integrated system.[29]

THE CASE FOR MINILATERALISM TO ADVANCE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Minilateral cooperation helps Ukraine's NB8 partners to adapt to the new challenges of modern and autonomous warfare. In turn, the NB8 countries can help Ukraine to overcome the obstacles to its EU and NATO integration processes and test pragmatic solutions for integrating Ukraine into future European defence solutions. Ukraine is increasingly being woven into the same multilateral frameworks that structure NB8 security cooperation. Nordic defence cooperation (NORDEFCO) has opened doors to practical collaboration on logistics, host nation support and joint exercises, whereby Ukraine's currently limited and ad hoc participation could be expanded and regularised.

Another example is Ukraine's integration into the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). All eight NB8 states are core members of the British-led JEF. In late 2025, Ukraine became an enhanced partner, making it the first non-JEF member to be integrated into this framework. For Ukraine, this means regular participation in JEF defence minister meetings, involvement in exercises across the Nordic Baltic region and closer cooperation on critical underwater infrastructure, drones, battlefield medicine and counter disinformation, as JEF nations explicitly seek to learn from Ukraine's frontline experience.

Although the regionalisation of European security is often viewed as a potential source of fragmentation, geopolitical realities could force a recalibration towards tighter groupings of reliable and capable partners. NB8+Ukraine should be seen not as the only relevant minilateral format, but as one particularly suited to advancing practical defence cooperation. Other existing frameworks offer complementary advantages. The JEF provides a more operational structure and has already taken important steps to integrate Ukraine, but does not include Germany or Poland. The Northern Group brings together the Nordic and Baltic states with Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands, and could therefore provide a useful wider format for regional defence coordination. The Council of the Baltic Sea States, meanwhile, has increased its focus on security and resilience, offers a political forum that includes both Germany and Poland, but is not designed for operational defence cooperation. These different constellations can be used for different purposes, while NB8+Ukraine provides a high-trust core for practical cooperation and broader groupings bring in key regional partners where their participation is necessary.

25 Kjeld Neubert, "Ukraine's Fire Point plant in Denmark delayed until 2027", Euractiv, 19 August 2026, https://www.euractiv.com/news/ukraines-fire-point-plant-in-denmark-delayed-until-2027/.

26 Forsvaret, "I denne norske leiren får ukrainere livsviktig læring" [In this Norwegian camp, Ukrainians receive vital training], 23 February 2026, https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/aktuelt/camp-jomsborg.

27 Tim Martin, "CEO of Ukraine's Fire Point: Freyja anti-ballistic missile program seeks 'best players'", *Breaking Defense*, 11 September 2026, https://breakingdefense.com/2026/09/ceo-of-ukraines-fire-point-freyja-anti-ballistic-missile-program-seeks-best-players/.

28 UNN (Ukrainian National News), "The most important thing is to continue working actively and jointly together: Zelenskyy following a meeting with representatives of Trump", 7 September 2026, https://unn.ua/en/news/the-most-important-thing-is-to-continue-working-actively-and-jointly-together-zelenskyy-following-a-meeting-with-representatives-of-trump.

29 Tim Martin (note 28).

CHAPTER 5

05

TOWARDS STRATEGIC UNITY: BUILDING EUROPE'S FUTURE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE WITH UKRAINE AS A CENTRAL PILLAR

Europe has entered a period in which the institutional arrangements that have sustained its security for many decades are being tested by war, technological change and a burden shift within the transatlantic alliance. The United States is increasingly moving from the role of Europe's primary conventional defender to that of a strategic enabler, while European states are being pressed to assume a substantially larger share of deterrence, defence production and military readiness. At the same time, Russia has demonstrated that confrontation with Europe extends far beyond Ukraine and includes conventional military coercion, sabotage, cyber operations, interference with critical infrastructure and sustained cognitive warfare.

This transformation, alongside additional defence spending, will require Europe to reconsider the architecture through which military power is generated, organised and employed. Besides the perennial question of whether European defence should develop primarily through NATO, the EU or smaller coalitions of willing states, a more pressing question is whether any of these structures can provide credible European defence while leaving Ukraine at their institutional periphery.

Three broad approaches currently shape the debate over Europe's future defence.[30] The first seeks a stronger European pillar within NATO. The second favours more flexible coalitions capable of acting when NATO-wide consensus proves difficult. The third places greater emphasis on the EU as an engine of capability development, defence investment and industrial integration. Each approach addresses a genuine European weakness but faces the same institutional challenge: how to incorporate Ukraine.

A Europeanisation of NATO remains attractive because NATO possesses assets that Europe would struggle to reproduce elsewhere: an integrated command structure, operational planning, force-generation mechanisms, standards, interoperability and nuclear deterrence. Under this model, European NATO members would progressively assume greater responsibility for command and control, logistics, intelligence, air and missile defence, strategic mobility, long-range strike and industrial production while maintaining the US as the ultimate strategic backstop.

The central vulnerability concerns Ukraine. If Europe assumes more responsibility for its own conventional defence while Ukraine remains outside NATO, the continent risks constructing a stronger European pillar around a strategically decisive gap on its eastern frontier. The security grey zone that emerged after the 2008 Bucharest Summit demonstrated the dangers of political ambiguity. A future architecture that institutionalises this ambiguity would reproduce the same weakness under new conditions.

30 Sauli Niinistö, Steven Blockmans, Edward Arnold, Bob Deen and Daniel Gros, *More Europe in Defence: Three Pathways* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2026), https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/more-europe-in-defence-three-pathways/.

A second model seeks greater flexibility through smaller coalitions of states able to act faster than NATO or EU consensus mechanisms sometimes permit. Recent proposals from the European Commission suggest that this logic is moving into the institutional mainstream. Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius initially advanced the idea of a European Security Council built around a relatively small group of major European powers capable of making decisions rapidly and involving non-EU partners where necessary.[31] A Defence Union that also includes the UK, Norway and Ukraine was also discussed.[32] Ursula von der Leyen's September 2026 proposal broadened the concept considerably, envisaging a European Security Council that would bring together EU leaders with the UK, Norway, Ukraine and Canada, alongside an Emergency Security Protocol and a dedicated counter-hybrid playbook.[33]

The earlier E5-style concept emphasised a compact political leadership core, potentially centred on France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the UK. The emerging Commission approach points instead to variable geometry, in which a smaller group could provide strategic direction while wider participation would depend on the threat, the geography and the capabilities required. Such a structure would gain particular military relevance through the involvement of the Nordic-Baltic countries and Ukraine. Ukraine's position is qualitatively different from that of an additional partner. Its geography, combat-experienced armed forces and defence-industrial capacity make it integral to the defence of Europe's eastern frontier and therefore to any credible future European security architecture.

For this line of thinking to succeed, Europe must move beyond the idea that the EU is an economic and political project that imports hard security from across the Atlantic. The EU was not designed as a military actor but a persistent Russian threat could gradually make deeper defence integration – including ideas now considered marginal, such as a European army – more politically relevant.

Moreover, the idea could be further developed. A European army remains politically out of reach and a multinational force that is not large enough to ensure deterrence and defence on its own would pose command problems rather than contribute effectively to security. A more realistic step would be a European Unmanned Systems Command that draws on the model of Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Forces, which were established in June 2024 as the first separate military branch dedicated to unmanned warfare.

The operational case has already been made on the Ukrainian front, where exposed personnel are hunted by drones and robotic systems increasingly carry out missions once assigned to infantry. In a recent development, for example, Ukraine's 3rd Army Corps air-dropped kamikaze ground robots more than 10 kilometres behind Russian lines during Operation Vivaldi in September 2026.[34]

Europe, by contrast, has thus far produced only national formations, such as Poland's Unmanned Systems Forces and Lithuania's ANBO unit, and procurement-focused initiatives such as LEAP, launched by France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom in February 2026. There is as yet no multinational command. Under the proposed European Security Council, such a body could combine joint training built on Ukrainian combat experience, pooled procurement and a counter-drone capability deployable at a member state's request against the sabotage and drone incursions that have multiplied across Europe since 2022.

The third pathway places the European Union at the centre of defence-industrial transformation. Here, the EU has clear comparative advantages. It can aggregate demand, finance joint procurement, stimulate defence-industrial production, reduce regulatory fragmentation and support cross-border cooperation. Security Action for Europe (SAFE), the European Defence Industry Programme, the European Defence Fund and related initiatives are gradually creating the foundations for a more integrated European defence industrial policy. While these comparative advantages are genuine, however, the EU's foreign and security policy remains consensus-based.

Alongside NATO- and EU-centric models, European experts offer unorthodox approaches such as alternat-

31 European Commission, "Speech by Commissioner Kubilius at the Folk och Försvar National Conference 2026: "'Europe Under Pressure'", 11 January 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_69.

32 EURACTIV, "Kubilius pitches new treaty to build European Defence Union", 17 April 2026, https://www.euractiv.com/news/kubilius-pitches-new-treaty-to-build-european-defence-union/.

33 European Commission, "2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen", 16 September 2026, https://cyprus.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/2026-state-union-address-president-von-der-leyen-2026-09-16_en; and Andrius Kubilius, "On 'Europeanization' of European conventional defence: The case for a European Security Council", 28 January 2026, https://andriuskubilius.lt/en/on-europeanization-of-european-conventional-defence-full/

34 Svitlana Shcherbak, "Operation Vivaldi: Ukraine's Third Corps makes world-first deployment of Kamikaze UGVs 10+ km behind Russian lines", *Defense Express*, 21 September 2026, https://en.defence-ua.com/analysis/operation_vivaldi_ukraines_third_corps_makes_world_first_deployment_of_kamikaze_ugvs_10_km_behind_russian_lines-19858.html.

ive security alliances. Concepts such as the Coalition of Like-Minded (CALM),[35] the proposed North Atlantic Defence Alliance (NAFF),[36] and an expanded role and membership of the Joint Expeditionary Force reflect the same underlying logic that security arrangements should bring together states prepared to act rapidly and sustain collective defence even when broader institutions are constrained by consensus rules or diverging threat perceptions.

CALM goes furthest by envisaging a permanent alliance with its own political council, military committee, headquarters and regional commands. NAFF proposes a wider northern and eastern European grouping that links the Nordic and Baltic countries, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, Canada and Ukraine. What makes these models strategically significant is the place they assign to Ukraine. Rather than treating it as a future beneficiary of European security, they position Ukraine as a founding military pillar whose combat experience, force size and geographic location strengthen deterrence across the eastern flank. Such arrangements could therefore complement NATO and the EU while providing Europe with a faster, more politically coherent mechanism for collective action.

Thus, Ukraine presents a critical test for Europe. The Ukrainian defence industry has become a major source of innovation in drones, electronic warfare, battlefield software and autonomous systems. Integrating Ukrainian companies into the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base would support Ukrainian reconstruction and sustain the current war effort, while also expanding Europe's own technological and industrial capacity and embedding combat-tested innovation in European capability development.

Europe's institutional sequencing creates a particular danger. Ukraine's eventual NATO and EU membership could be politically contested or procedurally lengthy, while decisions shaping Europe's future defence architecture are being taken now. Waiting for formal accession before incorporating Ukraine into emerging defence structures would mean designing the system first and integrating one of its most important military actors later.

Ukraine should participate in the construction of European defence arrangements from their formative stages. This applies to defence-industrial programmes, capability planning, military mobility, exercises, command relationships, intelligence cooperation and contingency planning. Where existing treaties create legal obstacles, Europe should use interim institutional mechanisms rather than allow such obstacles to determine strategic outcomes.

The same principle should guide emerging minilateral formats. Concepts such as the Coalition of Like-Minded, the proposed North Atlantic Defence Alliance and the expanding relationship between Ukraine and the Joint Expeditionary Force exemplify that effective collective security depends on a combination of political will and military capability. Ukraine provides both a strong understanding of the Russian threat and the military capability to counter it. As a result, it should be treated as a pillar rather than a future beneficiary of European security.

Deterrence is credible only when a potential aggressor believes that stated commitments will be enforced in practice and aggression will trigger a predictable military response. New institutions alone do not deter if the obligations behind them are vague or doubtful. This is particularly important in any discussion of a European Defence Union or similar arrangements built around Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union. While industrial cooperation, common procurement and joint capability programmes can make Europe stronger, they are no substitute for an unambiguous collective defence commitment. If Ukraine remains outside NATO while emerging European arrangements provide it with extensive assistance but uncertain defence obligations, Europe could reproduce precisely the strategic ambiguity that has already proved dangerous.

Europe therefore requires an architecture in which Ukraine is connected to the continent through formal, reciprocal and operationally credible security obligations. Once political conditions permit, full NATO membership remains the strongest existing mechanism for achieving this. In the interim, European states can create structures that progressively integrate Ukraine into planning and defence while making mutual commitments increasingly explicit.

35 Hans Petter Midttun, "The alternative to NATO: A coalition of like-minded European countries", *Euromaidan Press*, 22 December 2025, https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/12/22/the-alternative-to-nato-a-coalition-of-like-minded-european-countries/.

36 Elena Davlikanova and Arne Bård Dalhaug, "Ukraine: Founding member no. 1 of Europe's new defense alliance", *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 24 June 2026, https://cepa.org/article/ukraine-founding-member-no-1-of-europes-new-defense-alliance/.

Norway, the UK and Ukraine are “indispensable partners” for the EU.[37] Canada is also rapidly moving towards Europe. In her state of the union speech in September 2026, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen suggested that Canada should become the EU’s first associate member.[38] In the same speech, von der Leyen made it clear that a European Security Council should be in the offing. Although with different motivations and trajectories, the EU, the UK, Canada, Norway and Ukraine all want and need a deeper strategic partnership with the EU.

37 Rafael Loss, Marta Prochwicz Jazowska and Jana Puglierin, “Making defence European again”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 4 June 2026, https://ecfr.eu/publication/making-defence-european-again/#pillar-three-a-truly-pan-european-defence-industry.

38 Ursula von der Leyen, “2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”, European Commission, 16 September 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_26_1868

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Europe can no longer build its prosperity and security on cheap energy from Russia, cheap goods from China, cheap security from the US and the peace dividend of the post-Cold War era. These conditions have ended and will not return for the foreseeable future.

To expect Russia to again can become a relatively predictable business partner is a weak foundation for a necessary European strategic adjustment. Russia has not fundamentally rethought its understanding of itself, abandoned violence as a viable instrument in the international system or relinquished its ambition to restore its political and strategic predominance in parts of Europe. A settlement in Ukraine cannot by itself resolve this deeper problem.

Russia's strategic culture places a premium on power and demonstrated resolve. Moscow has repeatedly interpreted the absence of meaningful consequences as providing space for further action. In practical terms, Russia understands the language of force, denial and retaliation. European deterrence must rest on an ability to prevent Russian objectives from being achieved and to impose predictable costs when aggression occurs. Dialogue can remain an instrument of policy but it cannot substitute for power.

This leaves Europe with two interconnected long-term tasks. The first is to become sufficiently militarily capable to deter and stop further Russian aggression. The second is cognitive and political. Europe has an interest in promoting a Russia that eventually develops a national idea that does not depend on empire, territorial expansion, confrontation with the West and domination of neighbouring peoples. Europeans can support efforts at post-imperial rethinking. Containing Russian power and encouraging the emergence of a different Russian political imagination are both essential for sustainable peace in Europe.

The military challenge meanwhile requires Europe to match the speed, but not the political model, of Russia's mobilisation. Russia is militarising its state, economy and society in parallel, from the ideological and military education of children to industrial investment in capabilities suited to new-generation warfare. Europe needs a democratic equivalent in strategic seriousness: trained reserves, civil preparedness, resilient infrastructure, defence-industrial mobilisation, technological literacy, military education and procurement systems capable of incorporating battlefield innovation at speed.

A ceasefire in Ukraine, if achieved, must therefore be approached with particular caution. It might represent a step towards a sustainable settlement, but it could equally be a pause used for force regeneration, industrial expansion and preparation for a new phase of confrontation. Europe should avoid repeating the cycle in which a temporary reduction in violence produces political demobilisation and another peace dividend. A fragile ceasefire might be the calm before a larger storm.

The same applies to Ukraine's geopolitical position. For Ukraine, as well as any other small or middle power, the era of neutrality is over. Its geography, resources and strategic position make durable non-alignment exceptionally difficult in a multipolar system dominated by great power rivalry. Russia's interest in controlling Ukraine is structural rather than episodic. If Ukraine is left permanently outside credible collective security structures, the resulting grey zone will be an invitation to renewed coercion.

The consequences extend far beyond Ukraine itself. A Ukraine eventually forced back into Moscow's strategic orbit would provide Russia with additional strategic depth, population, industrial resources, military infrastructure and access to the centre of Europe. Ukrainian military capabilities that today reinforce European security could under a fundamentally different political outcome contribute to Russian power. The integration of Ukraine into the European security system is therefore a matter of European self-preservation.

EUROPEAN POLICYMAKERS SHOULD PRIORITISE THE FOLLOWING POLICIES:

01

Integrate Ukraine into Europe's evolving collective defence architecture now.

Ukraine should have a standing place in a future European Security Council and European Defence Union or any equivalent collective-defence format involving the EU, the United Kingdom, Canada and other willing European states. Participation should extend beyond political consultation to contingency planning, intelligence exchanges, exercises, command relationships and capability planning. Where NATO or EU membership cannot yet provide the institutional framework, interim arrangements could create increasingly explicit reciprocal security obligations.

02

Build a standing European unmanned systems capability with Ukraine as a co-developer.

Europe should establish a common framework for doctrine, training, testing, procurement and interoperability across aerial, maritime and ground unmanned systems, backed by a rapidly deployable counter-UAS component. Existing initiatives such as LEAP and national programmes could feed into this structure, while Ukraine contributes combat-tested doctrine, instructors and operational lessons as a full partner. While a European army remains politically out of reach, one institutional option would be a multinational European Unmanned Systems Force under a future European Security Council, providing a practical test of deeper defence integration without requiring a unified European military.

03

Turn the NB8–Ukraine relationship into an operational security framework.

The June 2026 NB8-Ukraine declaration already commits the parties to closer defence-industrial cooperation, joint production, technology transfer, joint exercises and information sharing. The next institutional step would be a permanent NB8-Ukraine defence format linking defence ministries, armed forces, procurement agencies and industry. Rather than creating another political forum or formal institutional structure, it could coordinate a limited number of common capability programmes, regional contingency planning and implementation of lessons from Ukraine across the northern and eastern flanks.

04

Operationalise the existing JEF-Ukraine Enhanced Partnership as a collective-defence instrument.

Ukraine already holds enhanced partnership status with the JEF and partially participates in exercises, total-defence exchanges, technological cooperation and regional security activities. The next step should be deeper integration into operational planning, command-post exercises, maritime and critical-infrastructure protection and crisis-to-conflict transition planning. One of the key priorities is to operationalise Ukraine's battle-won lessons learned in tangible "security packages" that could be provided to NB8/JEF countries within the enhanced partnership.

05

Move from defence assistance to joint capability portfolios.

NB8-Ukraine cooperation could concentrate resources on several common operational problems rather than proliferate small bilateral projects: counter-UAS and electronic warfare; affordable air and missile defence; autonomous maritime and underwater systems; resilient C2 and battlefield AI; and all-weather ISR. This should be framed as an extension of the Brave1 model across the NB8. Building on the Norwegian and Lithuanian precedent, Ukraine and the remaining Nordic-Baltic countries could establish more specialised bilateral programmes under the Brave International framework. Rather than duplication, each should exploit national comparative advantages.

06

Create a distributed Ukrainian-European production base designed to survive a prolonged war.

Co-production could be organised deliberately across Ukraine and several European states, with shared technical standards, pre-agreed licensing, alternative production sites, common component stocks and the ability to shift output when one facility is disrupted. Denmark is already financing Ukrainian-produced capabilities that correspond to Danish defence requirements; Norway has opened the way for Ukrainian drone production in Norway; Sweden has established a framework for joint production; and Latvia is developing technology transfer and manufacturing projects with Ukrainian industry. The strategic objective is distributed production resilience rather than parallel national supply chains competing for the same components in a crisis.

07

Make Ukraine part of the European operational response to Russian sub-threshold warfare.

Europe's problem is less detection than the absence of a predictable connection between attribution and consequences. The EU has already committed itself to preventing, deterring and responding to hybrid campaigns and has established Hybrid Rapid Response Teams for member states and partners. Ukraine's experience could be incorporated into exercises that test responses to combinations of sabotage, cyber penetration, drone incursions, infrastructure disruption and information operations. The purpose would be to establish in advance which combinations of diplomatic, intelligence, law-enforcement, economic, cyber and military measures become available as Russian activity escalates. Most importantly, European states need to respond to hybrid operations with countermeasures that fundamentally alter the perpetrator's cost-benefit calculus.

08

Build a joint European-Ukrainian cognitive-security capability rather than treating disinformation as a communications problem.

Ukraine has accumulated extensive evidence of how Russian operations are aiming for national identity change. The European External Action Service and Ukraine's Center for Countering Disinformation are already conducting joint Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) analysis, while NATO's StratCom structures are expanding work with Ukraine on information-environment assessment and foreign interference. This cooperation could evolve into permanent joint threat mapping, Russian-language monitoring, AI-assisted identification of coordinated campaigns and exercises simulating cognitive effects, alongside kinetic attacks and rapid sharing of Russian narratives among Ukraine, the NB8 and the wider EU. However, most important will be to "crack the ontological code" that ties Russian national identity to empire, territorial expansion and domination of neighbouring societies. Europe cannot prescribe Russia's future identity, but it can preserve the intellectual and information space for Russians to develop a post-imperial one.

09

Institutionalise the innovation-to-procurement pipeline.

Rather than finance innovation and acquisition separately, European cooperation with Ukraine should connect battlefield testing, operational validation, procurement and industrial scaling within a single cycle. Ukraine already provides a working model. DELTA records combat performance, ePoints translates verified results into demand, Brave1 supports testing and market access and DOT-Chain Defence allows units to select relevant systems while central structures contract and finance procurement. European and NB8 programmes should build comparable pathways in which successful technologies move rapidly from operational testing and codification to pre-qualified supplier pools, framework agreements and repeat procurement. This approach should be extended beyond drones to counter-UAS, EW, autonomous maritime systems, battlefield software and affordable interceptors, while procurement volumes expand as operational evidence accumulates.

ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ANBO	ANBO unit / formation, Lithuania
Brave1	Ukrainian defence innovation and technology acceleration platform
C2	Command and Control
CALM	Coalition of Like-Minded
DELTA	Ukraine's battlefield management and situational-awareness ecosystem
DOT / DOT-Chain Defence	Defence procurement / digital defence procurement marketplace in Ukraine
EU	European Union
EW	Electronic warfare
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRU	Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation / Russian military intelligence
GUGI	Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
JEF	Joint Expeditionary Force
LEAP	European defence initiative launched by France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom
NAFF	North Atlantic Defence Alliance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NB8	Nordic-Baltic Eight
UAS	Unmanned Aerial Systems
UAVs	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UGVs	Unmanned Ground Vehicles
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

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- Klara Lindström, Vladyslav Panov and Stanislav Boiko, *Deepening NB8-Ukraine Defence-Industrial Cooperation: A Strategic Win-Win for European Security*, SCEEUS Report no. 5 (Stockholm: Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies and Sahaidachnyi Security Center, 2026), https://sceeus.se/en/publications/deepening-nb8-ukraine-defence-industrial-cooperation-a-strategic-win-win-for-european-security/.
- Minna Ålander and Elena Davlikanova, *The Missing Piece in Nordic-Baltic Security: Ukraine as a Natural Ally*, SCEEUS Report No. 6 (Stockholm: Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies and Sahaidachnyi Security Center, 2026), https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-missing-piece-in-nordic-baltic-security-ukraine-as-a-natural-ally/.

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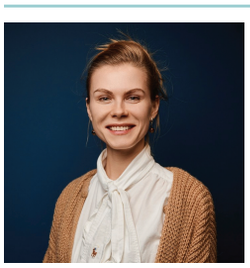
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RESEARCH PAPER
DEFENCE & SECURITY

THE NB8–UKRAINE SECURITY NEXUS

Shaping Europe's Future Defence Architecture

Olena Davlikanova · John Karlsrud · Klara Lindström · Lesia Ogryzko

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