Holding the Line: Mapping Europe's Security Horizons

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Global Affairs Program of Institute of Politics
Europe
Global Affairs Journal

Executive Summary

This paper examines how Europe can enhance its defense and resilience in the face of shifting geopolitical realities and the erosion of U.S. security guarantees. It also explores three potential scenarios for the continent — halted military actions, continuation of hybrid conflict, and Russian full-scale invasion — considering how each would test Europe's capacity to coordinate, deter, and adapt. Drawing on policy documents, defense data, and scholarly work, this evaluation assesses the effectiveness of NATO and EU frameworks while identifying pathways toward greater strategic autonomy. The analysis culminates in practical policy options to enhance Europe's preparedness, unity, and ability to shape its own security horizon in an era of renewed geopolitical contestation.

"GAP World Stage: Preparing for the Wrong War? NATO and the Challenge of Russian Threats"
Guest Speaker: Tormod Heier
This event helped inform the paper.
Thank you to the speaker and participants!

I. Introduction and Background

In November, a major rail link in eastern Poland––a key corridor for military aid and logistics across Europe––was struck by an "unprecedented act of sabotage," according to the Polish Prime Minister (Wiener, 2025). That single event has been joined by multiple arrests of suspected saboteurs and the uncovering of intelligence-linked plots on Polish soil, marking clear escalation of what officials call a "shadow war" beneath the threshold of open combat. In 2025, Europe faced a surge in cyberattacks, with government agencies, energy grids, and transport networks across multiple EU member states targeted. Hostile actions are testing the continent's ability to detect, attribute, and respond to various types of aggression, which are illustrated by the graph produced by CSIS (CSIS, 2025). It is becoming increasingly likely that such operations are not isolated incidents, but rather part of a broader campaign aimed at undermining public confidence––identified by professor of military strategy and operations Tormod Heier as one of the weakest links in democratic societies (Heier, 2025 [interview])––thereby straining security resources and eroding Europe's collective will to act. With Europe's frontline states under direct pressure, the illusion of safe rear areas is collapsing. Europe now stands on the threshold of a wider confrontation, as acts of sabotage, military provocation, and strategic pressure test not just national defenses, but the continent's collective capacity to deter escalation, revealing how quickly regional instability could ignite a broader European conflict. Mapping Europe's security horizons is a necessary reckoning because the battlefield is moving from eastern Ukraine to the entire European continent. More importantly, the crippling security scene and weak institutions encourage economic, military, and political attacks from Russia and China. Given their authoritarian systems, they can act unilaterally, which gives them a significant advantage in conflicts with Western systems and institutions.

II. Issue Description

Europe's security challenge has evolved beyond traditional military threats to become systemic, multidimensional, and pressing. The erosion of U.S. security guarantees, the persistence of Russian aggression, and the expansion of hybrid tactics have left Europe navigating a new era of strategic uncertainty. According to Professor Heier, the prevailing uncertainty explains the 40% rise in defense budgets from European countries by 2025 (Heier, 2025 [interview]).

Despite rising defense budgets and renewed calls for European autonomy, coordination among EU member states and within NATO remains uneven. Critical vulnerabilities persist in supply chains, cyber defenses, energy infrastructure, and societal resilience against disinformation, reflecting the EU's decentralized security system and the United States' capacity to act unilaterally in defense––an imbalance that directly exposes the structural gap between the EU and NATO (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025). Equally pressing is the erosion of public trust and institutional credibility under the weight of disinformation campaigns that exploit social and political divides within European societies. Europe lacks a cohesive, long-term framework to manage simultaneous crises––whether hybrid or economic––and to act decisively without excessive reliance on external security guarantors, such as the United States (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025). This was evident in the 2022 gas crisis, when member states prioritized national interests over a unified policy, resulting in separate national adjustments rather than a cohesive strategy (Frizzelle et al., 2022). The EU is not a unitary actor: while states such as Poland and Finland are concerned with active military threats from Russia, Western European countries prioritize other issues that disturb their states' domestic affairs (Heier 2025, [interview]). The central problem this paper addresses is how Europe can develop and sustain a coherent, collective defense posture capable of deterring aggression, mitigating hybrid threats, and preserving stability under three plausible futures: postwar reconstruction, ongoing hybrid con-

flict, and full-scale invasion.

III. Scenario I: Postwar Reconstruction

In the most optimistic scenario, Europe sees a negotiated end to active hostilities, with the war in Ukraine reaching a ceasefire and frontline combat largely coming to a halt. Then, the immediate military threat recedes and pressures on NATO ease. However, this scenario hinges critically on how the conflict concludes. Three outcomes are possible: a Ukrainian victory, a Russian victory, or a negotiated settlement. The Ukrainian grand triumph seems implausible given the events on the ground, as Russia advanced an average of 8.6 km^2 per day in September and October, while in mid-November, it rose to 17.6 km^2 (DeepStateMap, 2025). A Russian victory likewise appears unlikely, given that nearly one million Russian soldiers have been killed or injured since the start of the war (Edwards, 2025), key domestic industries are under severe strain (Prem, 2025), and Ukrainian strikes deep inside Russian territory have intensified. Therefore, the most plausible pathway toward postwar reconstruction is a negotiated settlement, such as the ceasefire proposal advanced by President Trump and his administration, which would involve freezing the front line and halting active hostilities (Jensen & Yasir Atalan, 2025). The terms of any ceasefire – who controls which borders, who monitors them, what guarantees are in place – will therefore shape Europe's security order for years to come (Marangé & Stewart, 2025).

What are the priorities for European policy in such a case?

Under these conditions, Europe's task is to transition from wartime footing to a peacetime posture without surrendering hard-won deterrence or coordination. More specifically, Europe will have to prepare for future conflict by supporting Ukraine, guaranteeing the deal, protecting other states in Russia's line of fire, and substantially increasing its own military capabilities and spending. Thus, Europe will have to do more, not less, to contain Russia and protect not only Ukraine, but also the European continent as a whole (Zuleeg, 2025).

Starting with the defense budgets, NATO's leaders have already agreed that a spending target even beyond the 2% GDP standard "is needed urgently" to remedy capability shortfalls (NATO Heads of State and Government, 2024).

Thus, a prudent response would be to reallocate a peace dividend into modernization and resilience. As analysts note, if Europe invests rationally and coordinately, higher defence outlays can yield economic dividends by strengthening the European defence industry (Hartley, 2025). Therefore, NATO should keep strong forward forces and regular exercises on the eastern flank instead of scaling them back. EU countries, utilizing tools such as PESCO and the Strategic Compass, should continue to increase their defence budgets and expedite long-delayed capability projects. Priority investments include modern air and missile defence, drones, cyber resilience, and rapid-response forces. The EU's new Defence Industrial Strategy, which aims for half of defence procurement to be joint by 2030 (European Commission, 2024), should be accelerated in a post-war period to build a shared supply chain and avoid duplication, while the members should work closer with each other, getting ready to counter Washington's role becoming more transactional (Marangé & Stewart, 2025).

Second, the EU and its partners should lock in stability throughout the continent. Policymakers should treat any ceasefire as merely a pause, not a solution. This means maintaining support to Ukraine and its neighbours even if direct fighting stops. EU leaders should work with Ukraine now on a "beyond the horizon" plan: assistance for reconstruction, continued military aid, and integration of Ukraine into European markets and institutions (Tenev, 2025). For instance, the EU Military Assistance Mission may need to deploy trainers and equipment into Ukraine to help Kyiv maintain control of its airspace and coastline (Gray, 2025). Europe should also bolster its own resilience against sabotage. Key infrastructure (energy grids, supply routes, undersea cables, etc) must be hardened, and NATO/EU exercises expanded to include cyber and information warfare defense. The war has shown that Russia wields disinformation and cyber operations aggressively, with experts emphasizing that "years––if not decades––of relentless hybrid warfare" should be expected (Tenev, 2025). EU agencies should therefore

fund counter-disinformation campaigns, secure civilian communication networks, and expand the NATO Cyber Defence Centre to shore up networks.

Overall, although Scenario I appears to be the least likely based on current developments, it still requires planning for a cautious recalibration, rather than a relaxation. Europe can lower the risk of aggression, but many security challenges will remain. The EU, working hand-in-glove with NATO, should use this pause to strengthen cooperation, modernize forces, and prepare for hybrid contests. That way, the continent is not caught flat-footed if the "peace" proves only temporary or if new crises arise.

IV. Scenario II: Hybrid Warfare

The second scenario describes the continuation of hybrid threats. According to NATO's definition, hybrid threats combine military and non-military, as well as covert and overt, means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, the deployment of irregular armed groups, and the use of regular forces

(NATO, 2024). Russia is known for its indirect operations in Europe, including interference in elections – for instance, spreading pro-Brexit content during the 2016 British referendum – cyberattacks, and manipulation of public opinion through social media (Gressel, 2019). After 2022, this has intensified, as Russian sabotage of European critical infrastructures has increased by 246% in only one year from 2023 to 2024. According to publicly available information, there have been 25 incidents of sabotage, espionage, and vandalism against NATO military infrastructure in the first five months of 2025 (Charlie Edwards, 2025). Moreover, there were multiple events of Russian military aircraft, along with drones, flying into European airspace (Reuters, 2025). In addition, more disruptive attacks involved anchor-dragging by Russia's "shadow fleet." One of such incident involved the Cook Islands-flagged Eagle S, which dragged its anchor and cut the Estlink-2 undersea cable in the Gulf of Finland, and the Chinese-flagged Yi Peng 3, which is suspected of having deliberately dragged its anchor to cut the C-Lion1 cable connecting Finland and Germany and the Arelion cable linking Sweden and Lithuania (Cooney, 2024). There have also been cases of cyberattacks, misinformation campaigns, and various other indirect threats (Newton, 2021).

According to Prof. Tormod Heier, the frequency of such incidents is likely to increase. As he notes, drawing on a quotation from Chinese philosophy, actors should "protect their own weaknesses and identify where their enemy is most vulnerable." A direct attack on Europe will not end well for Russia, as Europe's military potential is larger than Russia's, particularly when considering the combined forces of NATO and the EU, which have more active personnel, aircraft, and armored vehicles. Consequently, as Professor Heier argues, Russia is more likely to target Europe's points of vulnerability – most notably its civil society – rather than engage in direct military confrontation (Heier, 2025 [interview]).

Given that attacks have recently intensified, Europe needs to be prepared to counter such threats in the near future. For example, NATO has already stated that serious cyberattacks could trigger Article 5, acknowledging that online operations can have real-world consequences. Overall, deterrence against hybrid threats has become more prominent in NATO's strategy recently, as evidenced by the steps taken between the Wales and Warsaw summits, which laid the groundwork for countering hybrid threats (Colom Piella, 2022). Moreover, they began conducting joint exercises, such as Locked Shields 2025, hosted by the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. It is crucial that European countries, outside of the NATO alliance, are also invited to participate, thereby improving the overall continent's readiness. However, it is also important to show that any attack will have a response. International law permits non-forcible responses, including retorsions and proportionate countermeasures, in response to cyber wrongdoing. This may include disrupting hostile digital infrastructure, seizing illegal devices, restricting network access, and blocking unlawful transmissions, as long as the actions remain legal, proportional, and safe, al-

lowing European countries to utilize them. European countries also need to be prepared for more airspace violations, since it can be seen that as Russian attacks on Ukraine intensify, the number of foreign objects flying over the EU border increases. Thus, European countries need to invest in measures that help mitigate the impact of foreign drones on civil aviation safety. A safer approach combines layered detection with non-jamming countermeasures that preserve evidence for legal use. They should also consider allowing police or gendarmerie helicopter teams to operate with military sensor support, deploying compliant takeover tools or physical interceptors while maintaining a full chain of custody (Janjalia, 2025). Moreover, major maritime areas, especially ones that contain strategic infrastructural objects, need to be monitored extensively, using 24/7 surveillance and joint military patrols.

It is essential to recognize that the effectiveness of deterrence and the extent of the countermeasures needed will depend on how the aggressor perceives Europe's military capabilities and political will. Recent talks about a "response" (Efrat Lachter, 2025) are a good example, as they raise the stakes for Russia's potential attacks. There is a high chance that Russia will retaliate; however, the risk can be mitigated by acting strictly within the law and emphasizing safety, including no broad jamming near airports, no interdictions that violate the law of the sea, and no covert launches from allied territory.

Meanwhile, turning to the impact on civilians — greatly emphasized by Professor Heier (Heier, 2025 [interview]) — Europe should focus work on its Civil Society Strategy, which was recently presented (Civil Society Europe, 2025). As long as citizens have confidence in their governments, the states are safe. Otherwise, adversaries might see it as an opportunity to fuel polarization and cause internal disputes, which could shatter the country's stability.

V. Scenario III: Full-Scale Invasion

The third scenario is certainly the most drastic:

war between Russia and NATO. In recent years, rhetoric surrounding this particular scenario has blossomed, leaving military analysts speculating about if, when, and how Russia could invade. As has been previously discussed, the likelihood of this scenario is contingent upon the outcome of war in Ukraine. Yet, as peace plans start to emerge and diplomatic talks to halt the conflict seem ubiquitous, a real study of possible post-war outcomes becomes increasingly necessary.

Since January of 2024, Western intelligence services have been issuing warnings to the Western community: war with Russia is not an outlandish theory; instead, it could become a real possibility (Psaropoulos 2025). In late 2025, a top German operational commander, Inspector General of the Bundeswehr Carsten Breuer, warned that Russia would possess the capacity to launch a large-scale offensive against NATO by 2029 (Urbancik 2025). He stressed that Moscow is already capable of conducting a regionally limited strike, particularly along the Baltic frontier. In parallel, Russia has been rebuilding its land forces, expanding drone programs, and modernizing its nuclear arsenal, upgrading as many as 21 ICBM regiments. For many Western officials, like former Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, plans to grow active duty forces by 50 percent to as many as 1.5 million troops demonstrate not only that Russia is manufacturing its capacity to invade, but also highlight its active desire to do so (Lunday& Fürsen 2025; Saradzhyan 2025). Therefore, while the Russian military does not currently possess the infrastructure necessary for a large-scale invasion, analysts posit that they are amassing the resources to do so. Indeed, according to a recent study by the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, the majority of leaders predicting an attack on NATO find it most plausible that Russia could or would invade around 2030. Joseph Fitsanakis, the assistant director of the Center for Applied Intelligence at Coastal Carolina University, an institution dedicated to teaching intelligence politics, describes the present moment as a "period of emergency" (Duty, 2025): the most overt phase of Russian military preparati-

on against the West, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Hybrid attacks and instances of fighter and reconnaissance jets flying into European airspace (as they did in September in both Estonia and Germany) appear designed less as hybrid tactics for destabilization, and more to actively probe vulnerabilities in Western defenses. This pattern aligns with historical examples of Soviet and Russian war preparations: before the 2008 war in Georgia, for example, evidence suggests that Russia launched large cyber operations to degrade Georgian systems as well as to gather evidence (Psaropoulos 2025; Chincharadze 2024)

The likelihood of escalation also depends on the political context that emerges at the end of the Ukraine war. Several proposed peace deals, including the 28-point plan recently advanced by Washington, would restrict Ukraine's military capabilities, block its NATO membership, and freeze Russian territorial gains. Critics argue that such an arrangement would weaken deterrence, reward aggression, and give Russia time to rebuild its forces. The result could amount to what Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk called a "creeping capitulation" (Benson, Murphy, 2025). If Ukraine is left unable to defend itself and the West appears unwilling to project power into the region, Russia may judge that another offensive will encounter limited resistance.

There are a few plausible scenarios for Russian military intervention against NATO. One of the most widely discussed pivots around Estonia, which sits at a vulnerable intersection between St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad. Its 180-mile border with Russia presents opportunities for limited, rapid action. Analysts have pointed to recent incidents on the frontier, including armed individuals attempting to cross from Russia and the incursion of fighter jets into their airspace in September, as potential tests of NATO reactions.

Carlo Masala, a renowned professor of politics at Bundeswehr University, where he teaches future German military officers, asserts that a likely scenario involves a Russian move on the city of Narva, where a majority of residents are Russian-speaking. In the same way that Russia justified their aggression in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia would likely wield propaganda to hail itself as a protector of "mistreated" Russian minorities abroad. Using hybrid warfare tactics to disunite NATO, Russia might count on the alliance hesitating to invoke Article 5 for such a small territory (Cole 2025). This moment of indecision could erode NATO's strength, specifically its credibility through unity. Instead, profound distrust would continue seeping through the alliance, effectively disarming it against the Russian threat.

Indeed, while Europe is depleting its arsenals in Ukraine, Russian preparations are already visible: military factories are running at wartime levels. New mechanized infantry, helicopter air assault and Navy divisions are likely being formed. Hybrid operations, ranging from sabotage to targeted disinformation, are continually testing European responses (Lunday 2025). In response, European leaders are trying to amass support for increased military spending (Saradzhyan 2025). At their 2025 Summit

in The Hague, for examNATO members pledged to increase defense spending to 5 percent of GDP annually (The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2025). Unilateral efforts are also emerging: French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, recently unveiled a plan to reintroduce a form of military service (Gozzi 2025). Yet, Western intelligence officials warn that Europe remains insufficiently prepared. From disagreements on levels of military spending to restrictions on intelligence sharing and Washington's reticence to support the alliance, NATO's collective readiness remains subpar (Psaropoulos 2025).

In conclusion, the best way to avoid a full-fledged conflict is to prepare for it: only a unified front can persuade Russia that attacking would be too costly for them. That requires clear political will, increased military preparation, intelligence cooperation, and support for Ukraine. Without these steps, the scenario that once seemed unthinkable may edge closer to reality.

VI. Conclusion and Next Steps

Europe faces an imperative: translate political will and budget increases into coordinated, durable security capacity. Across the ceasefire, hybrid, and invasion scenarios, the priorities are consistent: strengthen EU-NATO planning and intelligence-sharing; prioritize interoperable procurement and common logistics; and harden critical civilian infrastructure, including energy, transport, communications, and undersea cables, against cyber and physical sabotage. Sustained material and diplomatic support for Ukraine should be framed as stabilisation, not charity, while reconstruction planning must begin now to avoid ad-hoc responses later. Equally important is rebuilding public confidence through transparent crisis management and targeted counter-disinformation measures that reinforce civic resilience. These steps are manageable, but they require sustained political leadership, clearer burden-sharing, and a willingness to adapt institutions that were designed for a different era. If policymakers act with sit-

uations that were designed for a different era. If policymakers act with realism and consistency, Europe can reduce its exposure to coercion and preserve strategic autonomy. If they do not, vulnerabilities will compound, and choices will narrow.

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