Five Tests for Europe's Security and Agency

Contributors: Jared Wright, Tone Langengen, Keegan McBride, Antonia Battaglia

Rising Stakes in a Changing World

Europe should be a superpower: economically, politically and militarily. With its economic weight, population, technological base and global interests, Europe has always had both the means and the responsibility to act as a serious security power in its own region and in defence of its strategic interests abroad. Its failure to do so is long-standing – even if recent transatlantic debates have brought renewed focus on Europe's role – and reflects decades of strategic complacency.

For much of the post-Cold War period, European security rested on a set of assumptions that were always fragile. The United States would remain the global policeman. Russia could be transformed through trade and integration. China could be managed through rules and institutions. Defence could remain marginal to economic and industrial policy. And consensus-driven political systems designed for peacetime governance would be sufficient to manage security in perpetuity.

These assumptions did not collapse overnight – but the world around Europe has hardened. Power is once again defined by coercion, military capacity, industrial mobilisation and the ability to act quickly under pressure. The international system is becoming more Hobbesian: less governed by shared rules, more shaped by force, leverage and risk-taking. In that world, Europe's long-standing underinvestment in defence is no longer merely inefficient. It is dangerous.

Russia's war against Ukraine has exposed the consequences of this neglect. Russian aggression now extends well beyond the battlefield to include sabotage, cyber-attacks, disinformation and political interference across Europe. This is not a temporary crisis but a sustained threat to Europe's security interests – and the crucial test of whether Europe can function as a strategic actor at all.

A stronger Europe is not about seeking confrontation, but about acting with clarity and responsibility rather than naivety in the face of Vladimir Putin's attempts to push Russia into a sustained adversarial relationship with Europe and NATO. European leaders must therefore remain clear-eyed about prospects for near-term normalisation, and focus instead on changing the strategic conditions through credible deterrence and defence that demonstrate coercion will fail, first and foremost in Ukraine. A different relationship may one day be possible, but until Russian behaviour changes in demonstrable ways, Europe must lead with resolve.

A continent of Europe's scale cannot outsource its security indefinitely. That responsibility necessarily extends beyond the European Union itself, requiring a genuinely European effort that brings together EU and non-EU states alike, in particular the United Kingdom and Norway. The task is to build a Europe that can act militarily to secure its regional and global interests, deterring aggression, and contributing real capability within NATO and alongside the US. Strengthening Europe's defence is therefore essential to NATO's credibility and Europe's strategic autonomy.

The task now facing European leaders can be understood through five tests.

1. Whether Europe is prepared to do everything that it takes to ensure Ukraine can defend itself and negotiate from a position of strength, and that the outcome of the war strengthens European security.

2. Whether it can impose sufficient costs to deter Russian sabotage and subversion inside Europe.

3. Whether it can make the reforms and trade-offs required to generate and deploy military capability at scale, including force mobilisation.

4. Whether it can build and sustain public support for defence efforts amid pressure on living standards.

5. Whether it can build decision-making systems that enable all of the above, allowing Europe to act quickly and collectively.

The central challenge is structural. Europe faces a growing external threat in an evolving world order at the same time as its political, fiscal and industrial systems are struggling to respond. Economic security, energy security, technology, trade and defence are now tightly linked, yet they remain governed through fragmented institutions and slow processes.

This is as much a political task as a technical one. Europe's ability to deliver at the pace and scale required will hinge on whether political systems can sustain higher defence spending amid weak growth, high debt and pressure on living standards. Aligning economic and security policy, mobilising state capacity and sustaining public trust will be decisive.

European leaders cannot afford to fail. At stake is not only Europe's security, but its agency. Power is increasingly shaped by the ability to generate and sustain military force, mobilise industry and act quickly in a crisis. A Europe that cannot defend itself or act decisively will lose influence, with decisions about its security increasingly shaped by others.

Five Tests Political Leaders Must Meet on Defence

1. SUSTAIN UKRAINE'S ABILITY TO FIGHT AND FORCE A SETTLEMENT ON FAVOURABLE TERMS

Ukraine's ability to defend itself and shape any future settlement is central to Europe's long-term security. The outcome of the war will define Europe's strategic environment for a generation.

As the war continues, Ukraine faces sustained capability, fiscal and troop constraints, alongside growing pressure to accept an unfavourable settlement. Continued US support remains essential, but shaping the outcome of the war will require Europe to act with greater clarity, scale and resolve.

European support has been substantial but uneven. Short-term funding cycles, fragmented supply chains and limited industrial capacity restrict Ukraine's ability to plan and sustain operations, weakening Europe's leverage over the course of the war.

The test for European leaders is whether they are prepared to provide predictable, multi-year support, and whether they are willing to exercise the political and economic boldness required to sustain it. This includes readiness to mobilise military effort at scale and to take decisive action across economic and legal domains, including the use of frozen Russian state assets.

Europe must integrate Ukraine structurally into the European defence and industrial base. Ukraine's experience in drones, electronic warfare, battlefield software and rapid adaptation should be embedded in European procurement, capability development and operational planning. Ukraine should therefore not be seen as a recipient of European support, but as one of Europe's most experienced and battle-hardened military actors whose operational insight can materially strengthen Europe's overall defence posture.

Supporting Ukraine should not be assessed solely in budgetary terms. Ukraine's resistance already functions as a forward pillar of European defence by degrading Russian military power and reducing the risk of wider aggression. The objective is clear: ensure Ukraine can continue to defend itself and enter any settlement on terms that strengthen both its own security and Europe's.

For that outcome to endure, any settlement must be sufficiently credible for Europe's future security to alter Russia's strategic calculus – making a different post-war relationship possible rather than entrenching the belief that further gains can be pursued through force or coercion.

2. IMPOSE CLEAR AND CREDIBLE COSTS FOR RUSSIAN SABOTAGE, SUBVERSION AND AGGRESSION

Russia is conducting a sustained campaign against Europe that extends well beyond the war against Ukraine. This includes sabotage, cyber-attacks, disinformation, political interference and increasingly overt military probing.

These actions are not isolated incidents, but form a continuous campaign below the threshold of armed conflict, targeting energy systems, data flows, logistics hubs and critical maritime infrastructure, alongside repeated airspace violations and covert operations targeting transport and supply chains.

Europe's response to Russian subversion remains uneven. Incidents are often addressed in isolation, attribution is delayed and political agreement on a response is slow. Existing frameworks, including NATO's Article 5 (the alliance's mutual-defence clause), are poorly suited to persistent hybrid warfare designed to avoid clear escalation thresholds.

While intelligence, counter-sabotage and disruption activities are already taking place, the challenge for political leaders is whether Europe is publicly willing to impose sustained political, economic and operational costs on Russian aggression. This requires agreeing in advance how hostile acts will be met, and responding quickly and collectively when they occur. Individuals and networks responsible for these activities must face cumulative financial, legal and operational consequences.

Deterrence will be visible when repeated attacks trigger predefined, coordinated responses rather than renewed debate, and when continued subversion becomes costly and unreliable.

3. REBUILD CREDIBLE DETERRENCE BY BOOSTING READINESS, SCALING INDUSTRY AND DELIVERING CAPABILITY FASTER

Europe's ability to take responsibility for its own defence, protect its strategic interests and project power globally will ultimately depend on whether it can generate real military capability at scale and speed. Effective deterrence will be judged by the ability to field, deploy and sustain forces that adversaries believe European leaders are willing and able to use.

Defence spending across Europe has risen sharply in the past few years, supported by higher national budgets and EU instruments such as Security Action for Europe, a financial initiative designed to boost defence capabilities.[1,2] These measures matter. But Europe has persistently failed to convert resources into military power. Addressing this requires a fundamental rethink of how European defence operates, from planning to procurement to delivery.

Today, Europe cannot reliably generate the forces, weapons, munitions or industrial capacity required for high-intensity conflict. Many countries have insufficient troop numbers, depleted stockpiles and inadequate production capacity. Gaps extend beyond weapons systems to essential enablers such as logistics functions, command-and-control systems and mobility assets, which are either non-existent or severely under-equipped. Fragmented procurement and slow acquisition cycles have created a profound disconnect between ambition and delivery.

Europe's procurement systems remain shaped by peacetime logic, prioritising national economic imperatives over interoperability, process over speed and small numbers of expensive, exquisite systems over scalable mass. This approach constrains production, weakens supply chains, limits readiness, and suppresses industrial competition and innovation – particularly in areas where capabilities evolve on much shorter innovation cycles than legacy systems. Rebuilding deterrence therefore requires a shift towards the rapid delivery at scale of reliable, attritable capability: systems designed to be produced in large numbers, upgraded iteratively and replaced quickly when lost.

In the near term, Europe will continue to rely on US systems where European alternatives do not yet exist. This is unavoidable, but carries risks. Many systems ordered today will not be delivered for years and will lock in new dependencies. At the same time, uncoordinated national procurement risks duplication and missed opportunities to build European scale and industrial depth.

Addressing this requires political choices. The first step is to agree collectively on which capabilities should be prioritised and developed at the European level. The second, and harder, step is reforming the policies and structures that govern the defence industry and procurement. Without changing how capacity is generated, not just what is bought, higher spending will continue to deliver weak returns – wasting taxpayer funds and undermining public support.

The core question is not whether Europe can deliver incremental upgrades to existing programmes, but whether it can make binding political decisions on strategic capabilities and build a system that can adapt as the nature of war changes. This requires fundamentally rethinking Europe's defence architecture to reward speed and agility, support modular and adaptable design, and optimise capabilities over time rather than focusing on one-off procurement cycles.

Europe must therefore pursue immediate procurement and long-term industrial investment in parallel. Priorities include European air and missile defence; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) (including space and satellites); long-range precision strike capabilities; land forces able to generate combat mass; and the integration of digital and AI-enabled systems across operations.

Rebuilding deterrence will require expanding defence-production capacity and building a more integrated European industrial base that enables supply chains to surge across borders and output to scale rapidly. This means prioritising outputs over inputs, and aligning financial, regulatory and institutional systems around a sustained, multi-year effort that gives industry predictable demand and confidence to invest. Innovation must move more

quickly from testing to deployment, with operational forces shaping requirements and feeding battlefield lessons directly into development and production. Partnering with Ukraine on this is key.

Europe has the resources, financial tools and industrial potential to do this, but only if it uses these assets differently. As the Draghi report on EU competitiveness makes clear, the constraint is not access to capital or technology, but how policy, regulation and investment decisions are structured.[3] Structural reform is therefore the starting point. Pooled procurement, joint funding of strategic technologies, and interoperable systems and infrastructure are essential to overcoming the inefficiencies created by national silos.

Technology is central to these efforts, shaping both military outcomes and economic strength.[4] However, no matter its significance, technology is no replacement for troops on the battlefield. Credible deterrence still requires sufficient force strength, units that are ready to deploy quickly and personnel trained to operate advanced systems at scale. Procurement reform and industrial investment must therefore be matched by renewed attention to the enabling structures that support force generation and sustainment, including the difficult but necessary question of how Europe maintains adequate numbers of deployable troops.

4. REDEFINE THE SOCIAL CONTRACT BY REBUILDING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING, RESILIENCE AND SUPPORT FOR SECURITY

If political leaders are to turn commitments into real action, they must be able to sustain public support for increased defence spending amid economic pressures and competing priorities. Without public backing, neither higher spending nor institutional reform will endure.

For decades, national security was largely assumed rather than explained, leaving a widening gap between defence policy and daily life. In many countries, citizens struggle to see how security connects to the issues that matter most to them, particularly economic stability, public services and personal wellbeing.

Public concern about security has risen sharply since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but this should not be mistaken for automatic or permanent backing. Support will come under pressure as defence spending becomes more visible, costs are felt more directly and trade-offs become clearer. Poor delivery, delays or spending that appears wasteful will quickly weaken confidence and fuel resistance to sustained defence efforts.

Public attitudes also vary widely across the continent. Polling suggests that only around a third of EU citizens overall are willing to fight for their country, with levels ranging from 45 per cent in Poland to 14 per cent in Italy, underlining the scale of the political challenge.[5] Leaders across Europe must be able to explain why security matters, what it costs, how the burden is shared and how it protects everyday life.

This is not simply a communications problem. It is a question of delivery and credibility. Trust is built when governments spend effectively, deliver capability on time, invest visibly in resilience and respond competently when crises occur. Defence policy must be connected to outcomes people can see, understand and recognise as relevant to their lives.

A redefined social contract on security – led by politicians prepared to make hard choices, explain their costs and prove through action that defence is inseparable from Europe's economic and social foundations – is needed. Only then can Europe secure the public consent required for sustained political, fiscal and operational commitment to defence and resilience.

5. REWIRE EUROPE'S SECURITY DECISION-MAKING TO ACT AT SPEED

Europe's security environment is moving faster than its political systems. Threats are persistent, cross-border and often ambiguous, yet the institutions and processes designed to manage them remain slow and fragmented. Europe's ability to support Ukraine, deter aggression, rebuild capability and sustain public consent depends on whether it can address this issue.

This is not about creating new institutions or duplicating NATO's role. It is about changing how decisions are taken, authority is exercised and delivery is driven across existing European and transatlantic structures, so that priorities can be aligned and action taken quickly.

Today's patchwork of NATO, EU, bilateral and ad-hoc arrangements often diffuses responsibility rather than concentrating it. Within the EU, unanimity requirements, blurred accountability and weak links between political decisions and operational delivery slow action and widen the gap between commitments and results.

The central question is whether political leaders are willing to concentrate authority where speed matters. Smaller groupings have shown that faster and more decisive action is possible when political will is aligned among a limited number of capable states. In the context of strengthening support for Ukraine, coordination among the E3 in London, Paris and Berlin – supported by the key roles played by Warsaw and Rome – has demonstrated how shared ambition, clearer leadership and tighter coordination can accelerate delivery and translate intent into action. But such formats will succeed only if they are embedded in a more durable framework, without which momentum will fragment and delivery will fall short.

The test is whether Europe can take binding security decisions and begin implementation within days rather than months when crises emerge. This means the rapid formation of coalitions of the willing, clear political leadership by a small number of states, and immediate mobilisation of diplomatic, economic and military tools without prolonged procedural delay.

Without changes to how decisions are made and enforced, Europe's ambitions will continue to outpace its capacity. In today's environment, power is exercised by those who can decide on, mobilise and sustain action quickly. Europe's political systems must be reshaped to meet that reality.

What Success Looks Like

The path ahead for Europe's leaders will not be easy. It will require difficult and sometimes unpopular choices. But the cost of failing to build credible deterrence and act decisively when strategic interests are threatened will be far higher. In a more competitive and less forgiving world, drift is no longer a neutral option.

Success will be measured by outcomes, rather than intent or rhetoric. Europe will have succeeded if it can take binding political decisions and generate the military capacity to act decisively in its own region when required. NATO will remain the foundation of collective defence, strengthened by a Europe that contributes real capability and acts alongside the US rather than relying on it by default.

Success will be evident if Europe can support Ukraine to reach a settlement that preserves its sovereignty and practically reduces Russia's capacity for further aggression; if Moscow's sabotage and subversion are met with swift and escalating costs; and if Europe can field and sustain real military power at scale, including generating deployable forces, a more responsive defence industry, and the ability to mobilise and sustain high-intensity operations by the mid-2030s.

Political sustainability will be decisive. Europe will achieve this only if leaders can navigate economic and geopolitical headwinds while building and sustaining public support for defence by connecting security spending to tangible outcomes voters can see, trust and value.

Lastly, success will be visible in how Europe responds in crisis – whether it can take binding decisions, act together and translate intent into delivery within days rather than months.

Ultimately, this is a question of agency. In a world shaped by power and speed, Europe's influence will depend on its ability to take rapid collective action. A Europe that can do so – and take responsibility for its own defence and security – will remain a shaper of the international order. A Europe that cannot will be shaped by others.

About the Authors

General Sir Nick Carter, TBI Strategic Counsellor and former UK Chief of the Defence Staff

Élie Tenenbaum, Director of the Security Studies Centre, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)

Patrick Keller, Deputy Research Director, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)

Alessandro Marrone, Head of the Defence, Security and Space Programme, Istituto Affari Internazionali

Marcin Terlikowski, Head of the International Security Programme, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

External authors are contributing in their personal capacities.

Endnotes

1 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-numbers/

2 https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/safe-security-action-europe%5Fen

3 https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/draghi-report%5Fen

4 https://institute.global/insights/tech-and-digitalisation/europe-in-the-age-of-ai-how-technology-leadership-can-boost-competitiveness-and-security

5 https://www.gallup-international.com/survey-results-and-news/survey-result/fewer-people-are-willing-to-fight-for-their-country-compared-to-ten-years-ago

TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE FOR
GLOBAL CHANGE

Follow us

facebook.com/instituteglobal

x.com/instituteGC

instagram.com/institutegc

General enquiries

info@institute.global