

How should Europe assess and respond to the threat from Russia?

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Abstract

Faced with an aggressive Russia and an unreliable American ally, Europeans have pursued a program of rearmament and a renewal of interest in nuclear deterrence. Does the Russian threat merit such a response? This article considers both capabilities and intentions, with a basic comparison of population, economic strength, and military production between members of the European Union and Russia, before focusing on the security predicament of Narva, Estonia. It suggests ways to bolster the security of NATO's borders without the dangerous and dubious reliance on nuclear weapons.

Abstract (Italiano)

Di fronte a una Russia aggressiva e a un alleato americano inaffidabile, gli europei hanno perseguito un programma di riarmo e un rinnovato interesse per la deterrenza nucleare. La minaccia russa merita una risposta del genere? Questo articolo considera sia le capacità che le intenzioni, con un confronto di base tra popolazione, forza economica e produzione militare tra i membri dell'Unione Europea e la Russia, prima di concentrarsi sulla situazione di sicurezza di Narva, in Estonia. Suggerisce modi per rafforzare la sicurezza dei confini della NATO senza la pericolosa e dubbia dipendenza dalle armi nucleari.

Keywords: European security, nuclear deterrence, Estonia, Russia, European Nuclear Study Group

We typically judge the military threat from an adversary by assessing the combination of intentions and capabilities. During the Cold War, the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization assumed aggressive intentions on the part of the Soviet Union—an intention to invade Western Europe. Its capabilities in the early

postwar period were claimed adequate to accomplish an invasion in a matter of days against weak Western resistance. In this view, only US possession of nuclear weapons forestalled such a calamity. A classic rendition of this account came from (former and future) British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a radio broadcast in 1950: “It is indeed a melancholy thought that nothing preserves Europe from an overwhelming military attack except the devastating resources of the United States in this awful weapon” (Churchill, 1952: 356).

In hindsight, with the opening of Soviet bloc archives, we have a different understanding. What the late US political scientist Robert Jervis wrote more than twenty years ago remains true today: “The Soviet archives have yet to reveal any serious plans for unprovoked aggression against Western Europe, not to mention a first strike against the United States” (Jervis, 2001: 59; Mastny, 2006; Uhl, 2012; for a contrary but unconvincing view, cf. Gogun, 2025). During the Cold War both superpowers favored the status quo in Europe, yet the logic of the “security dilemma”—where preparations for defense were interpreted as implying aggressive intentions—created an ever-present risk of war. The division of Europe into blocs produced a certain stability, albeit at the expense of human rights in the East (the only victims of Soviet military action in Europe were the Soviet Union’s own allies). Meanwhile the deployment of thousands of so-called tactical nuclear weapons on both sides increased the risk of nuclear holocaust.

Much is different today. Faced with an aggressive Russia under Vladimir Putin and an unreliable American ally under Donald Trump, Europeans have pursued a program of rearmament and a renewal of interest in nuclear deterrence. Does the Russian threat merit such a response? This article considers both capabilities and intentions, with a basic comparison of population, economic strength, and military production between members of the European Union and Russia, before focusing on the security predicament of Narva, Estonia. Intervention in the small Baltic state on Russia’s border is the kind of aggression Russia might attempt, despite its relatively weak position following the disastrous and criminal miscalculation in invading Ukraine. More attention is necessary to ways of bolstering the security of NATO’s borders without the dangerous and dubious reliance on nuclear weapons.

Comparing capabilities: population, economy, military power

Regarding Europe, neither NATO nor Russia is a status quo power. Since the end of the Cold War NATO has continued to expand its membership eastward to include former republics of the USSR and it made promises of membership to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008. Not coincidentally, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 to occupy the Donbas and annex Crimea, and it launched a full-scale invasion in 2022 with the explicit objective to eliminate Ukraine as an independent state. Moreover, Russian President Vladimir Putin has implicitly threatened a NATO member by staking a historical claim to the Estonian city of Narva, a vulnerable outpost that borders Russia (Putin, 2022). A Russian infiltration of Narva has even become the topic of a fictionalized yet plausible account of a future aggression against NATO, although specialists had called attention to the risk already in the first decade of Putin's rule (Masala, 2026; Motyl, 2008). Some analyses and predictions have proved even more alarmist than the fictional accounts (Rosenbach et al., 2026; Trofimov, 2026; EER News, 2026).

In economic and demographic terms and in overall military spending, Russia is far inferior to the countries of the European Union. The gross domestic product (GDP) of the EU, at \$20.29 trillion, is nearly ten times that of Russia (\$2.2 trillion), whose GDP is smaller than Italy's, according to the International Monetary Fund (2025). The population of the EU is estimated by the World Bank at about 449 million, compared to Russia's at about 145 million and declining (World Bank Group, 2026). According to an Atlantic Council report, members of the EU collectively spent \$457 billion on the military in 2024 compared to Russia's \$146 billion (Grigas, 2024).

For those concerned about a Russian war against Europe, however, these figures are less meaningful than the fact that Russian military spending increased by 227 percent since the year 2000, whereas Europe's military spending declined until 2014 and stayed stable until the recent boost in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "Despite Russia's comparative economic weakness," reports a recent study by London's Royal United Services Institute, "Russia still managed to out-produce NATO in military materiel throughout 2022–24, even with significant efforts in some NATO member states to expand defence

production” (Danylyuk and Watling, 2025: 4). Moreover, European countries are heavily dependent on imports of advanced-technology weapons from the United States, now perceived as a potential adversary rather than a reliable ally (Djokic, 2025).

Yet detailed “bean-counting” comparisons of Russian and European military equipment and production have identified a striking imbalance in Europe’s favor (De Andreis, forthcoming). Russia’s estimated losses of military equipment in Ukraine (to September 2025) give a sense of how sharply its reserves have been depleted, especially in comparison to what European NATO states (and the United States) have lost there: 4124 vs. 107 main battle tanks; 9058 vs. 987 amphibious combat vehicles; 2031 vs. 342 artillery pieces; 163 to 12 combat aircraft; 163 to 2 helicopters (De Andreis, forthcoming), based on the visually verified tally published by the Oryx website.

Russia’s economy and the impact of sanctions

It is not surprising then that Russia has boosted its military production. It is bogged down in a stalemated war in Ukraine that it expected easily to win. It has resorted to “military Keynesianism” (Bluhm, 2025) to maintain production and has increased its central bank’s interest rate to an extraordinary 21 percent (later reduced to 19 percent) to keep inflation at bay (Belton, 2024). “International targeted sanctions and the demands of the conflict have severely affected Russia’s military-industrial complex,” according to a report by Britain’s Chatham House. “The current situation is unsustainable for Russia: the country’s military industry is heading into a period of decline and stagnating innovation, and is having to simplify production in order to cope” (Boulègue, et al., 2024). That is a far cry from the initial hopes that sanctions—including the unprecedented blocking of Russian banks from the SWIFT system of international financial transactions—would halt the invasion in its tracks (Swift, 2022). Yet, if the concern is a future Russian war launched against Europe, the challenges the country faces in maintaining its military-technical capabilities and production as a result of sanctions should matter.

Access to Western semiconductor chips constitutes a particularly vulnerable choke point for Russian military technology (Miller, 2024). Efforts at developing an indigenous chip industry specifically for military purposes have produced uneven results. China has sought to fill the gap, and some Western chips have been smuggled through Turkey. With each Russian effort to evade sanctions, Western states have responded with more specifically targeted restrictions. Sanctions have been expanded to target Chinese companies that provide components to the Russian military-industrial effort, as well as Indian and Turkish ones (US Department of State, 2025; US Department of the Treasury, 2024). As economist Chris Miller (2024: 2) has observed, “Whack-a-mole is a frustrating game for Western governments to play, but it is almost certainly frustrating for supply-chain managers at Russian missile and drone factories too.” A detailed study of the effect of restrictions on microprocessors and advanced machine tools—even after taking into account imports from Iran and North Korea and efforts at domestic import substitution—nevertheless anticipates a “gradual stagnation in Russia’s ability to build advanced weaponry” and in the longer term, a growing “technological gap between Russia and the West” (Gorenburg et al., 2024: ii).

From capabilities to intentions

By early 2026, Russian military casualties (dead, wounded, and missing) were estimated at 1.2 million, with as many as 325,000 soldiers killed (Jones and McCabe, 2026). Researchers identified 208,755 deaths by name as of April 2026 (Krutov, 2025a; Mediazona, 2026). What is the likelihood that Russia, under these conditions, would fulfill the fears that NATO expressed of the Soviet Union during the Cold War and carry out a full-scale invasion of Western Europe?

It is doubtful that the capability is there. Ukraine’s Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi has claimed that Russia “can mobilize 5 million troops who have undergone military service and training, while its overall mobilization capacity is as many as 20 million”. Ukrainian media describe these figures as intended “to underscore the disparity between Russia’s and Ukraine’s potential, arguing that

Kyiv must keep mobilizing its forces to sustain resistance against Moscow's onslaught" (Fornusek, 2025). Yet there has been considerable popular backlash even against the current "partial" mobilization in a war justified as essential to regaining historical Russian territory—to the point that Russia has recruited foreign soldiers from North Korea and China, Bosnian Serb mercenaries, and coerced migrant workers from Central Asia (Latypeva, 2024; Krutov, 2025b). Would Russia really be capable of mobilizing a mass army adequate to launch a "war of choice" against Western Europe? Even Soviet leaders, faced on two occasions—in 1956 and 1981—with a rebellious Poland that challenged the rule of pro-Moscow communists, refrained from intervening as they had done in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, out of concern that the Poles would put up too much of a fight (Kramer, 1998; Kramer, 2010). Could Putin really imagine that the Russian armed forces are capable of marching across Ukraine and Poland unhindered to threaten Germany or France?

Capabilities, aside, what about Russia's intentions? Because Putin has clearly exhibited his aggressive intentions vis-à-vis Ukraine, we should not dismiss his threats as mere bluffs. Although the prospect for an all-out attack against Western Europe seems doubtful, the risk of a more limited incursion should be taken seriously, not to mention so-called hybrid warfare (Praks, 2015; Breccia, 2025). Estonians, for example, have reason to worry, especially about their city of Narva, with its population of 88 percent Russians, many of whom have been denied Estonian citizenship because they speak poor or little Estonian.

For nearly a hundred years Sweden had controlled the twin cities of Narva and Ivangorod, now divided by the Estonian-Russian border (the Narva River) until Peter I conquered them in 1704. In June 2022, as Russia's war against Ukraine was bogging down following the invasion in February, Putin commemorated the event. He remarked that "none of the European countries recognized this territory as part of Russia; everyone recognized it as part of Sweden." Tsar Peter's long war was required to return it to proper Russian sovereignty. "From time immemorial, the Slavs lived there along with the Finno-Ugric peoples, and this territory was under Russia's control," claimed Putin. "The same is true of the western direction,

Narva,” the object of Peter’s “first campaigns. Why would he go there? He was returning and reinforcing, that is what he was doing” (Putin, 2022). Modeling himself on Peter the Great, Putin clearly has his eye on Narva—closer geographically to Putin’s hometown of St. Petersburg than to the Estonian capital of Tallinn and located on a traditional invasion route.

Narva’s vulnerable security predicament stems from the apparent ease with which Russian troops could overwhelm it—perhaps after infiltrating “little green men” and fostering an insurrection as in the Donbas in 2014—simply by wading across the river or crossing the bridge between Ivangorod and Narva. The risks would be high, but from Putin’s standpoint so would the potential gains: undermining the credibility of the NATO alliance (even though Donald Trump has already contributed much to that end). NATO vows to honor its Article 5 commitment to defend Estonia, and Baltic leaders are keen to hold the alliance to its promise to defend “every square centimeter” of territory, however unrealistic from a military standpoint (ERR News, 2022). Ultimately the alliance counts on the threat of escalation of violence to the point of nuclear war as a way to deter Russian intervention.

Extended nuclear deterrence as a solution?

Because the threat implied by “extended nuclear deterrence” necessarily entails the risk of a Europe-wide or even worldwide nuclear catastrophe, it may not seem credible—neither to decisionmakers in Moscow nor to the people of Estonia (Erästö, 2024). The lack of US interest in defending NATO Europe, let alone risking nuclear war to do so, has led to an explosion of interest in European-based extended nuclear deterrence. Proposals to bolster European security by substituting US nuclear guarantees with French or joint European nuclear forces would mean inheriting this impossible predicament (Onderco and Kühn, 2025).

The lack of credibility of a US nuclear response to Russian aggression was made apparent by the policies of Donald Trump’s administration. The 2026 *National Defense Strategy*, issued by his renamed Department of War, contains no mention of extended

nuclear deterrence in the context of threats to European security. It makes the case instead that Europe is capable of handling any threat from Russia without much US help, which would not be a high priority anyhow given Europe's decreasing economic importance to the United States:

Moscow is in no position to make a bid for European hegemony. European NATO dwarfs Russia in economic scale, population, and, thus, latent military power. At the same time, although Europe remains important, it has a smaller and decreasing share of global economic power. It follows that, although we are and will remain engaged in Europe, we must—and will—prioritize defending the U.S. Homeland and deterring China (US Department of War, 2026: 10).

The waning US commitment to European security has led some analysts to seek alternatives to the metaphorical US “nuclear umbrella.”

For authors of the European Nuclear Study Group, concern for credibility is uppermost in their minds and seems to outweigh the risks of nuclear war itself. “Concerns about the enduring credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence,” they write, “raise the question of how Europe can avoid a deterrence gap, where it is left without an effective nuclear umbrella” (Bunde et al., 2026: 21). Assessing the prospects for a European nuclear force independent of the United States, they question whether European institutions could summon “credible will.” Credible will, for the authors, “requires first and foremost political institutions and processes that signal a ‘readiness to push the button’ across the range of plausible scenarios for which deterrence is designed” (Bunde et al., 2026: 21).

What the authors fail to recognize is that deterrence is not inherent in the weapons themselves, but depends on the adversary's reaction to them. As one scholar explained, “one cannot say, ‘I hereby deter you,’ but one can say, ‘you deterred me’” (Vuori, 2016: 24). Even the US armed forces have recognized that the adversary gets to decide whether deterrence works. The 2025 version of the US Air Force publication *Nuclear Operations*, for example, explains that “extended deterrence is less about retaliation and more about posturing to convince an enemy they are unlikely to achieve the political

and military objectives behind any attack on the US, its allies, or its partners.” Yet it admits that “the credibility of deterrence is contingent upon how the adversary perceives it.” To make the deterrent threat seem credible to the adversary requires “a compelling capability to carry out a range of both nuclear and nonnuclear options and demonstrating a readiness to employ these options” (US Air Force, 2025: 2). Still, even readiness to “push the button” and unleash massive destruction does not necessarily enhance deterrence because of the dangers of miscalculation and the risks of provoking a wider (nuclear) war.

Critics of French and Scandinavian proposals for extended nuclear deterrence have pointed to these dangers in responding to French President Emmanuel Macron’s suggestion of dispersing French nuclear weapons throughout Europe in the event of a potential aggression from Russia:

While spreading French or US nuclear warheads during a crisis would increase uncertainty about their location and therefore complicate counterforce targeting, Russia can hedge against this uncertainty by simply expanding the list of targets to include not only the known but also the potential nuclear weapon infrastructure. As a result, instead of having the intended effect of countering Moscow’s nuclear coercion, the dispersal strategy could risk accelerating escalation during a potential war between NATO and Russia by exposing a bigger portion of European territory to potential pre-emptive nuclear strikes. In such a scenario, Nordic countries would likely also be targeted insofar as they allowed the deployment or transit of nuclear weapons on their territories (Erästö, 2026).

An alternative to dispersal, reflected in deployments of nuclear weapons along the inter-German border during the Cold War, poses its own risks. The problem of “use ‘em or lose ‘em” referred to the fact that if “tactical” nuclear weapons deployed on the front line face capture or destruction by the adversary at the outset of a war, commanders come under pressure to launch them first.

Criticisms about dispersed nuclear forces, or, in fact, any nuclear forces on a country’s territory, were, in part, what led states such as Sweden to renounce any military nuclear ambitions, and

for Norway and Denmark to distance themselves from US nuclear policy (Jonter, 2016; Nyberg, 1984). Welcoming nuclear weapons onto a state's territory would make it a target for nuclear preemption or retaliation. A sizeable portion of the British population in the 1980s advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament using similar arguments, many of them set forth in detailed studies of alternatives to nuclear deterrence (Alternative Defence Commission, 1983). Such ideas were also key to German proposals for conventional defensive structures—*strukturelle Nichtangriffsfähigkeit* (structural inability to attack). Alternative nonnuclear defense strategies were developed explicitly to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons. The strategies eschewed deployment of nuclear weapons and avoided large concentrations of forces and equipment so as not to provide tempting targets to a nuclear-armed adversary, and they sought to reduce pressures for preemption by restricting capabilities for offensive action (Krause, 1988).

Another echo of the nuclear dangers of the Cold War comes in proposals for “integrated deterrence” (Giles and Menke, 2025). In the policy document, *NATO's nuclear deterrence policy and forces*, for example, we find the language of “integration” invoked, but with little substantive content: “The Alliance is committed to ensuring greater integration and coherence of capabilities and activities across all domains and the spectrum of conflict, while reaffirming the unique and distinct role of nuclear deterrence.” Rather than specify how nuclear weapons can be both integrated with conventional forces and retain a “unique and distinct role,” the document offers a reassurance that the alliance deploys “an *appropriate* mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities, complemented by space and cyber capabilities” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025, emphasis added). Such vague language does not offer convincing evidence of a credible security posture that can forestall nuclear war.

The situation is possibly more dangerous today than during the Cold War because Russia has now adopted the US/NATO policy of willingness to initiate the use of nuclear weapons. The “escalate to de-escalate” doctrine that many attribute to Russia would entail first use of nuclear weapons under a range of circumstances, in a hope to end the conflict on favorable terms. With both sides willing to initiate nuclear use or respond to the other side's nuclear

attacks by engaging in a nuclear war on European soil, and seeking to “dominate” at each level of the “escalation ladder,” it is doubtful that vast destruction could be prevented in the event that war broke out. Dima Adamsky has pointed to the particular danger entailed in the fact that both NATO and Russia have adopted strategies of “integrated deterrence,” by which he means not only integration of conventional and nuclear forces but also integration of military and non-military instruments. He warns that “when competitors from different strategic cultures use an integrated approach to coercion against one other, the chances of misperception, miscommunication, and inadvertent escalation increase exponentially” (Adamsky, 2024-2025: 82).

Analysts such as the members of the European Nuclear Study Group, concerned about bridging a “deterrence gap” and making sure that Europeans are prepared to “push the button” in the event of war with Russia, should study the lessons of the Cold War nuclear arms race and consider the risks entailed in their proposals.

Reconsidering rearmament

Nor does massive European rearmament in conventional forces offer a solution to plausible acts of Russian aggression, such as threats to vulnerable enclaves like Narva. NATO’s strategy of maneuver warfare entails ceding territory before reconquering it—a devastating prospect for the civilians living there (Milevski, 2024; Mengelkamp and Vincent, 2026). Estonia is building some 600 bunkers to house a platoon of soldiers each, at an estimated cost of €60 million in an effort to slow an invasion before NATO reinforcements arrive (ERR News, 2024).

That level of militarization is generally considered acceptable for a potential “frontline” state. For the rest of Europe, however, one must consider the opportunity costs to civilian economies, especially at a time of great financial uncertainty caused by the policies of Donald Trump’s administration. Is it worth giving up on climate goals for the sake of remilitarizing the European economies, for example? Why not continue to reinforce and improve sanctions as a means to weaken Russian military capability? The imposition

of sanctions and efforts to “defund” Russia’s war are, moreover, climate-friendly policies because they limit imports of Russian oil and gas (Cortright and Romandash, 2024; Pelopidas, 2025). The current turbulence in energy markets, provoked by Trump’s tariffs, have led to a crash in Russian oil prices, with Urals crude sinking below the cap set by Western states to restrict Russian revenues (Paraskova, 2025; Kennedy, 2025). The US and Israeli aggression against Iran, and that country’s retaliatory response of closing the Strait of Hormuz, have been a gift to Russia in raising energy prices. Still the long-term goal should be to deprive Russia of those resources by emphasizing renewable sources of energy.

Clearly Russia is not a status-quo power in Europe of the sort we now understand the Soviet Union to have been. Yet there is no evidence that it intends or could sustain a major invasion of Western Europe. Its military capability remains vulnerable to sanctions. There is no reason to revert to Cold War policies that risk nuclear escalation. Better would be to consider the alternative approaches to nuclear deterrence that helped end the Cold War: mutual reductions in conventional and nuclear forces, demilitarized zones, confidence-building measures, inspections, nuclear-free zones (Evangelista, 1999). As for the vulnerable states on Russia’s borders, they should consider means to build up the resilience of their societies and economies and ensure the loyalty of their residents against Russian infiltration. (Unfortunately, Estonia is doing the opposite by denying its Russian-speaking non-citizens voting rights in municipal elections and Russian-language instruction in schools: ERR News, 2025; Pettai, 2024.) Ukrainians, for example, have demonstrated various means to make sure that Russia’s invasion and occupation don’t pay, from decentralizing reforms to maintain basic services even under war-time conditions, without allowing Russia to reap economic gains, to disciplined nonviolent civilian resistance (Kosenko and Liberman, 2025; Rabinovych, 2024; Christoyannopoulos, 2022). When the war in Ukraine ends, states will have a choice between recreating the Cold War division of Europe further east or seeking to establish a more stable and just security order as an alternative (Sauer, 2026). Surely such alternatives deserve serious consideration, given what is at stake in a major remilitarization and renuclearization of Europe.

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