



The Beowulf Group: Taking the lead to defend Europe

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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exposed divisions in European strategic culture and threat perception. The search for a lowest-common-denominator response to the threat has hampered the European reply to the Russian aggression, often forcing the EU to move at the speed of its slowest member, whether in supplying ammunition and equipment to Ukraine or setting up the defence industry needed to accelerate such a supply in the future. Notwithstanding the importance of keeping a broad coalition together, this article argues that it is now time to create a vanguard of like-minded European nations, led by France, Poland and, though not an EU member, the UK, but open to other states, which can force the creation of a new strategic culture able to meet the Russian threat. This 'Beowulf Group', named after the Danish hero from the Anglo-Saxon epic who stood up to the marauding monster Grendel, could establish a Strategic College for Europe, a joint Elite European Reserve Legion and a strategic communications centre, to move European policy in a more active direction.

Keywords

Defence, European defence, Reserve forces, Strategic culture, Russian aggression, Defence policy, Defence doctrine

Introduction

The spring of 2024 showed how dependent on the US European security has become. While US aid was stalled in Congress by House Speaker Michael Johnson at the behest of Donald Trump, Ukrainian units were forced to retreat in the face of a Russian offensive because they had to ration ammunition. From the point at which

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the aid was approved, Ukrainian troops have been able to regain the initiative and recapture lost territory.

Supply appears to be what Clausewitz would have called the ‘centre of gravity’ of this campaign: the hinge upon which the campaign turns. But supply is itself an outcome of decisions made to provide support and to build the industry needed to produce it: these decisions emerge from a country’s strategic culture. Efforts are under way to improve European supply, including as outlined in the Joint Communication on Defence Industrial Strategy (European Commission 2024); through the expected upgrade of the Directorate General Defence Industry and Space, which is to be led by a full EU commissioner; and through the passing of the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) (European Parliament and Council 2023).

Despite these steps, Europe’s defence is still heavily dependent on American industry, American supply, and American research and development. As I showed in *Freedom Must Be Better Armed Than Tyranny* (Walshe 2023), the European states most concerned about Russian aggression—the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and Poland, in particular—are heavily dependent on American equipment. This reliance was an understandable hedge. In an ironic echo of Cold War worries about whether the US would risk nuclear war to defend Western Europe against a Soviet attack, Central and Eastern European countries worry that France, Germany and Italy would not risk their own survival to protect Eastern Europe from aggression from Putin’s Russia. The behaviour of the French, German and Italian leaders following Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, and the initial attack on Ukraine in 2014, did little to disabuse them of this concern. The Minsk accords that, had they been implemented, would have left Ukraine dysfunctional and under permanent Russian influence, further reinforced this fear. (The UK, for reasons that are still unclear, was absent from efforts to support Ukraine after the Maidan). Opting for dependence on the US rather than Western Europe was a rational response to the conditions of the time, but these have changed markedly since Trump first took office and would change more radically still, should he be re-elected.

Precisely because Soviet domination suppressed Eastern European economies between 1945 and 1989, Europe’s major industrial economies lacked ancestral memories of Russian imperialism. Yet, since Putin’s ascent to power in Russia in 1999, a number of these European states, most obviously Germany and Italy, and also previously France, have maintained ambiguous relations with Russia. France only cancelled its sale of the amphibious landing ship *Mistral* when Russia occupied Crimea, and Germany continued to build Nordstream 2 until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

France’s initial response to the war exposed traditional Quai d’Orsay thinking, betraying the idea that France could position itself as a mediator between Russia and the ‘Anglo-Saxons’. Macron insisted that Putin not be ‘humiliated’ (Sabbagh 2022) and French lobbying held up the unfortunately misnamed ‘ASAP’ EU artillery shell acquisition act, as Paris argued that it was more important for the ammunition to be made in Europe than for it to get to the battlefield on time. There has, however, been an evolution

of the French position. French rhetoric, at least, began to change with Macron's speech at the Globsec summit in Slovakia in 2022 (Macron 2022), and France has dispatched Caesar Howitzers, AMX-13 light tanks and the SCALP (also known by its British name, Storm Shadow), and has even hinted that Mirage aircraft might be on their way as part of Western attempts to equip Ukraine's air force (Calcutt 2024). However, the 2024 legislative elections lead to a national assembly that has struggled to produce a stable majority. Though the French president has control over foreign policy and defence, the majority in the national assembly controls the budget.

Yet even this change of policy, accompanied by similar changes of policy in Germany and Italy, indicates the limits to the adjustments that the large states of Western Europe have made to their security posture. Unlike the Nordics, the Netherlands, Poland, Czechia and, evidently, the Baltic states, the actions of the Big Four (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) reveal that they have classified Russian aggression against Ukraine as an important, but ultimately second-order, threat. Rhetoric aside, Paris, Berlin, Rome and London have not switched to a war footing.

Still, it is possible to discern an important difference in attitude towards the threat posed by Russia, and this has affected the policy to organise supply—that is, decisions about whether to build up the defence industries needed and arrange the defence industrial strategy required. If supply is needed to win wars, the correct strategic culture is needed to make the political decisions that allow the supply to be created.

Threat perception and strategic culture

It is not surprising that threat perception among policy elites owes a lot to geography and history. Policy elites in the Baltic states and Finland, countries that have borders with Russia, see Moscow as a direct threat, whereas those in Ireland and Portugal, for example, do not.¹ Other countries, such as the UK, see Russia as a threat to its national security, interests and the global order, but would not consider it a territorial threat. How this threat is mediated into policy, however, can vary significantly.

In the UK and Poland, where memories of the failure of appeasement in the 1930s define national historical narratives to a great extent, the immediate instinct is to work out how to confront the threat. In Germany and Italy, by contrast, the default stance had been to avoid confrontation by establishing relationships of mutual commercial dependence. Berlin and Rome did not see this as a matter of buying Russia off, but of creating a situation of mutual benefit, the collapse of which would incur significant costs. Whether support for this stance was due to the significant personal benefit it brought to important German and Italian politicians is outside the scope of this article. However, it reflects the understandable reluctance of those countries' elites to allow the emotions associated with militarism to influence foreign policy as it did during their fascist dictatorships in the first half of the twentieth century. The question of whether it is wiser to confront an opponent or make a deal with them is fundamentally one of strategic culture, and this takes considerable time to change.

It might be argued that Finland engaged in precisely such a shift in relatively short order when it applied to join NATO just three months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but this is to misunderstand the Finnish position. Helsinki was prevented from joining the West by Soviet power, and as soon as the USSR's power weakened, it made efforts to integrate itself with the West, joining the EU in 1994. The difference between its stance and that of Austria is striking. Austria, also forced to be neutral (as part of the agreement to withdraw Soviet troops in 1955), opted to cultivate a deep economic relationship with Russia, particularly after the Soviet collapse. Whereas Helsinki sees the relationship with Russia as similar to that with a hostile former colonial power, Austria, benefiting at least from much greater physical distance from Russian territory, views it as a business relationship between independent, and substantively equal, sovereign states. (Nor is this as fanciful as it might appear—though Russia obviously has far more people and territory than Austria, the alpine state's economy is around 25% of Russia's GDP.)² Helsinki's current stance, is not, therefore, determined by its Cold War-era neutrality. Finland understands that being part of a Western alliance allows it to confront Russian aggression.

The distinction is thus not one between confrontation and appeasement, but between whether the relationship with Russia is best seen as a zero-sum game, or one in which constructive economic cooperation can create mutually beneficial outcomes. Or to put it another way: is Russia best understood as an enemy or as a trading partner motivated by rational self-interest?

Appeasement may be the only alternative available to a weaker power confronted by a hostile neighbour, even if it involves the transfer of resources to one's enemy. However, appeasers at least know that the target of their appeasement is hostile. Though it can be a mistake (whether throwing a piece of meat at a crocodile helps you depends on whether it distracts the beast long enough for you to get away, or causes it to conclude that if it follows you it will be fed another steak), appeasement at least recognises the threat for what it is.

In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin described the accession to NATO of the independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe as 'a serious provocation' and the West of 'trying to impose new dividing lines and walls on us' (Putin 2007). This was followed by his invasion of Georgia in 2008. After these events, anyone thinking that Putin's Russia was interested in a transactional relationship of mutual benefit with the West had willingly suspended disbelief.

Yet despite the full-scale war, that suspension of disbelief remains. The delay in producing ammunition and supplying aircraft, and even the baffling refusal to move on from the line that Ukraine will be supported 'for as long as it takes', rather than 'until it restores its internationally recognised borders', betray this failure to face reality. Last year, vital time was lost supplying main battle tanks, contributing to the failure of Ukraine's 2023 counter-offensive, and leaving Ukraine vulnerable to a spring 2024 attack on its critical infrastructure. The US only imposed secondary financial sanctions

in June 2024, after Russia had spent two years importing sanctioned components through Central Asia. Rather than Western nations transferring the Russian assets frozen by the West to Ukraine, though they constitute only a small portion of the reparations Russia will eventually have to pay for the destruction it has caused, consensus has only been achieved on transferring the interest earned on those assets (around \$50 billion).

This is the effect of an informal Western alliance that has to move at the speed of its slowest member. This practice is also formally reflected in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, where decisions have to be made with unanimity and are frequently blocked by Orbán's Hungary, allowing other member states to protect their interests in Russia while escaping the diplomatic opprobrium that would attach to their vetoing anti-Russian measures. Appropriate though the search for unity may be in peacetime, it is not enough when we are at war.

Beyond the lowest common denominator

While it is understandable that there is an advantage to securing the broadest possible coalition of support for Ukraine, if this is the only way they are to be helped, it comes at a considerable cost. Timing is everything in war: bringing concentrated force to bear upon the enemy can destroy their forces and take resources away from them so they cannot use them against you again. It is an area of human activity where concentrating the firepower of a hundred tanks in one place achieves effects that attacking with 10 tanks for 10 days does not. In conventional war, marshalling resources to concentrate them on particular parts of the enemy's fighting power has non-linear effects: attacking with a certain level of force can achieve a breakthrough, but doing so with three-quarters of that force does not achieve three-quarters of that breakthrough.

This is very different from the economic thinking that dominates the assessment of most public policy. In most areas, policy outcomes are, roughly, linear. Education is typical: if you train twice as many teachers and build twice as many classrooms, one can cut class sizes by half; but if one trains only a quarter as many more teachers and builds a quarter as many classrooms, one can only cut class sizes by a quarter.

In war, outcomes are not as predictable: small gains now can translate into disproportionate advantage later. Moreover, war is adversarial: the enemy can apply the concentration of force to you, if they are able to concentrate it first, which means that speed matters.

Thus, at the same time as constructing broad institutional coalitions, there is significant advantage in building a core group of countries with the strategic culture to act quickly, and prepared for a single threat on which it can focus. This group should serve as a rallying point for all Europeans, but be led by the major states that understand the Russian threat and have the strategic tradition that understands confrontation is necessary. It would complement other initiatives, such as the UK-initiated Joint Expeditionary Force or the French-led European Intervention Initiative. Based on the model of the

Weimar Triangle, it should address the broad security policy community including, but not limited to, national defence establishments. It should be anchored by France, Poland and, though it is outside the EU, the UK. Like-minded smaller states, including the Nordic countries, Czechia, Romania and the Netherlands, should also be invited to join. Its explicit mission should be to support Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat, not for as long as it takes, but as soon as possible.

Notwithstanding the absolutely unequivocal support given to Ukraine by Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, the Italian and German strategic cultures have yet to evolve sufficiently. Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto called for a ceasefire—which would lock in Russia’s territorial gains—in May 2024 (Ostiller 2024), while German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s strong *Zeitenwende* speech (Scholz 2022) has been followed by years of foot-dragging when it has come to the actual supply of weapons. At the time of writing, Scholz continues to refuse to send Taurus missiles to Ukraine. At this point, including Berlin and Rome in this initiative would merely recreate existing arrangements and prevent a vanguard of countries from advancing further in support of Kyiv. It should be noted that, unfortunately, this limits the scope of this new arrangement, and in particular makes it unsuitable for joint procurement. Just as there can be no reasonable operational defence of Europe without the UK, it would be difficult to improve defence production without the German and Italian defence industries (in the event that the Starmer government in the UK is unable to come to a defence agreement with the EU that includes procurement, the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR) could be used to make progress in this regard (Walshe 2022)). And should German or Italian strategic culture evolve further, they would of course be welcome to take part.

Confronting Grendel

In the Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf is the hero who confronts and kills Grendel, the monster that has been terrorising the lands of Danish King Hrothgar. Beowulf understands that there is no sense in continuing to appease the monster, nor hope of organising a better deal with it. In modern, and decidedly less Anglo-Saxon terms, we might say he brought the right strategic culture back to Hrothgar’s kingdom and freed his people from Grendel’s terror.

Obviously a modern strategic culture consists of far more than a single hero willing to fight a dragon and his mother, and involves more than just purely military elements. As well as conventional defence, it needs political leadership to integrate the military, diplomatic and other security policies of the state; to equip countries to see threats clearly; and to develop the means to resist them. As discussed above, the absence of Italy and Germany would make this initiative unsuitable for defence industrial production, and probably also for the related question of technology transfer. Developing a single envelope within which technology could be shared between European allies—an equivalent of the US International Traffic In Arms Regulations—would benefit greatly from Italian and German involvement. But as in procurement, the sharing of this technological

know-how might also be somewhat separable from the situations in which the equipment based on it would be deployed. The Beowulf Group's agenda could, however, have the following elements:

1. Regular, high-level summits, modelled on those of the Weimar Triangle, intended to help members' security establishments align on policy priorities and to communicate the existence of this new vanguard of nations.
2. A Strategic College for Europe, modelled on, for instance, the National Defence University in the US but with a broader remit, to include diplomatic and security services; elements of the police; gendarmeries, where they exist; and institutions in charge of domestic resilience. Unlike the European Security and Defence College, the UK, though outside the EU, would be a full member.
3. A European Elite Reserve (EER) Legion constituted of forces from the member states, who would train together at UK, French and Polish sites. The aim here would be to create elite reserves, on the model of the UK's Honourable Artillery Company, rather than mass reserves on the basis of conscription (which might of course also have its place in appropriate circumstances), in the land, air and naval service branches. Modern warfare requires highly expert personnel able to operate advanced equipment, and EER Legion reservists would be able to bring skills learned in civilian life into high-tech areas of war-fighting. Led by the UK, France and Poland, these reserve forces would be under NATO command, open to other nationals of EU or NATO member states (as, for instance, the British Army is open to Irish and Commonwealth nationals), and would serve in an integrated fashion. The EER Legion should also consider how to liaise with national elite reserve forces, including those in the US and Japan, and, eventually, with the Ukrainian forces.
4. A strategic communications centre could be established to support the aim of the Beowulf Group to operate more nimbly and aggressively than initiatives such as the European External Action Service's East Stratcom unit. It should not be prevented from engaging in counter-disinformation activity originating from within EU member states.

Conclusion

The cadence of war is ill-suited to the peacetime European practice of taking decisions deliberately in order to build the largest possible coalition for them. This has caused significant problems for the supply of aid to Ukraine, which has often come too late to make the difference it would have made earlier. Since European policy elites have different perceptions of the Russian threat, and different strategic cultures, broad-based attempts to deal with Russia's invasion have managed to stave off Russian victory. They have not, however, been large or nimble enough to give Ukraine the support it needs in time or to equip European defences to face future Russian aggression, particularly should Trump be re-elected and Europeans be forced to defend their continent either on their own or with limited US support.

Yet a solid group of countries determined to move faster has emerged; this includes large EU members such as Poland and now France, non-EU member the UK, as well as Czechia, the Nordic countries and the Baltic states. This grouping would be a good starting point from which to form a vanguard of European countries that accurately perceive the Russian threat and possess the strategic culture to act. Neither Germany nor Italy have made the requisite changes to their strategic culture to fit into such a group, and therefore this group should not take on defence production, industrial strategy, or technology transfer and pooling. It would be, nonetheless, in a position to lead the European debate and practice in a number of areas, including by establishing a Strategic College for Europe, a joint EER Legion and a strategic communications centre, as well as building awareness of this new bloc through regular high-visibility summits. In the spirit of the Northern European mythical hero who slayed the monster terrorising Denmark, I propose it should be called the Beowulf Group.

Notes

1. Public opinion is a different matter. Large portions of the Irish (72%) and Portuguese public (85%) see Russia as a threat (see Eurobarometer 2023), but this has not translated into significant increases in defence spending, or, in Ireland's case, an application to join NATO. Instead there have been incremental changes in policy.
2. Austria's GDP is \$520 billion; Russia's is \$2 trillion, see IMF 2024.

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