



From reinforcement to foundation: Ukraine and the future of NATO's high-readiness forces in the new European security environment

European View

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of NATO's high-readiness force structure amid the rebalancing of transatlantic burden-sharing. It argues that while the Alliance has significantly strengthened its rapid-reaction posture, its force model remains structurally dependent on the US and insufficiently adapted to the operational realities of contemporary high-intensity warfare. Against the backdrop of the US's strategic reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific and Western hemisphere, Europe must develop new sources of military capability. The article argues that Ukraine should be integrated into NATO's Allied Reaction Force not merely as another troop contributor, but as a foundational pillar of Europe's continental defence, bringing its unparalleled combat experience, doctrinal innovation and operational expertise, acquired during the largest conventional war in Europe since the Second World War. Such integration would significantly enhance European military capabilities while strengthening the continent's defence sovereignty and long-term security.

Keywords

NATO Allied Reaction Force, European security, Ukraine, Military doctrine, Transatlantic relations

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Introduction

The transatlantic relationship has long been shaped by competing visions of the US's role in Europe. This debate can be traced back to the earliest years of the American republic and the differing worldviews of two of its principal founding fathers. While Alexander Hamilton believed that the US should engage actively in international affairs to protect its political and economic interests, Thomas Jefferson argued that the young republic's security depended upon avoiding permanent entanglement in Europe's conflicts. Two hundred and fifty years later, these positions still pose a strategic tension in American foreign policy: should the US serve as a guarantor of European security or encourage Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own defence?

For much of the twentieth century, the Hamiltonian vision prevailed. Through the establishment of NATO, successive US administrations accepted that maintaining a substantial military presence in Europe was indispensable to preserving stability on the continent and deterring Soviet aggression. The US became the Alliance's principal military power, providing not only troops but also the strategic capabilities that enabled NATO to function as an integrated defence organisation. Command and control, strategic intelligence, long-range logistics, missile defence, cyber capabilities and nuclear deterrence have remained overwhelmingly dependent upon American resources.

Today, those assumptions are under strain. Washington has steadily shifted attention towards the Indo-Pacific and the Western hemisphere, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has only emphasised the expectation that European allies will assume greater responsibility for the continent's conventional defence (Greenall 2025).

Recent policy signals reinforce this trend. US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has called for a comprehensive review of NATO burden-sharing, and has argued that Europe must assume primary responsibility for deterring Russia (Britzky 2026). This does not mean the end of the transatlantic alliance or a full American withdrawal. It means that Europe can no longer assume unrestricted access to US military capabilities on the scale and with the immediacy of the post-Cold War period.

In this changing environment, Ukraine reshapes the European security equation. More than four years of high-intensity warfare against Russia have transformed it from a recipient of security assistance into one of Europe's most capable military powers, with unparalleled experience in conventional warfare, drone operations, electronic warfare, cyber defence and battlefield innovation.

Ukraine should therefore no longer be viewed solely as a future beneficiary of NATO security, but as a foundational contributor to the Alliance's evolving high-readiness force structure. Integrating Ukraine's combat-tested forces, operational expertise and doctrinal innovation into NATO would strengthen European deterrence while enabling a more balanced distribution of transatlantic security responsibilities. By making this change, Ukraine would move from reinforcing Europe's security to becoming one of its principal foundations.

Ukraine's contribution in this instance would not only help offset the gradual rebalancing of US military capabilities and fill emerging gaps, but also strengthen Europe's sovereignty in defence and security. At a time of unprecedented geopolitical fragmentation, growing strategic uncertainty and the rapid evolution of asymmetric warfare, Europe's ability to provide for its own security is becoming indispensable. While European states will continue to invest in developing their own strategic enablers and force readiness, integrating Ukraine's battlefield experience and defence innovation into NATO's high-readiness force structure would provide Europe with an immediate strategic advantage and accelerate the development of a more capable, resilient and sovereign European pillar within the transatlantic alliance.

Existing US capabilities on the European continent

The US remains the indispensable military power within NATO. As of early 2026, approximately 84,000 active-duty US military personnel were stationed across Europe (Carlough et al. 2025), supported by an extensive network of land, air and naval bases stretching from the UK to Romania. Although troop numbers remain significant, the strategic value of the US presence lies less in manpower than in the unique enabling capabilities it provides to the Alliance. These include command and control, intelligence gathering, strategic mobility, missile defence, electronic warfare, cyber capabilities and nuclear deterrence (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation 2021)—capabilities that European allies have yet to replicate at comparable scale.

The concentration of US forces continues to reflect the strategic geography of Europe. Germany remains the centre of the US military architecture on the continent, hosting approximately 35,000 personnel and more than 40 military installations (Military OneSource n.d.a; Carlough et al. 2025). It is home to the headquarters of the US European Command, US Africa Command and US Air Forces in Europe, making it the principal command-and-control hub for US military operations across Europe and Africa (US Army Europe and Africa n.d.; Martin and Mazumdar 2026). Ramstein Air Base serves as the Alliance's primary strategic airlift and logistics hub (US Air Force n.d.), while US Army Garrison Bavaria remains one of NATO's most important multinational training centres (Military OneSource n.d.a). Together, these facilities provide the operational backbone that enables rapid reinforcement, multinational interoperability and force projection across the European theatre.

The UK represents the second pillar of the US military presence in Europe. Approximately 10,000 American personnel are stationed across several strategically important Royal Air Force (RAF) installations (Mills and Brooke-Holland 2026, 4). RAF Lakenheath hosts advanced fighter aircraft, including F-35s, while RAF Mildenhall provides the only permanent US aerial refuelling capability in the European theatre (Royal Air Force Mildenhall n.d.). RAF Fairford functions as the principal forward operating location for US strategic bombers and high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft. Beyond conventional military capabilities, the UK also hosts some of the Alliance's most important intelligence infrastructure, including RAF Menwith Hill and RAF Croughton, both

of which play central roles in global communications, signals intelligence and satellite operations (Mills and Brooke-Holland 2026, 7).

Further south, Italy serves as the principal hub for US military operations across the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa. Approximately 12,600 US personnel are stationed across a network of air, naval and logistics facilities, including Naval Support Activity Naples, which hosts the headquarters of US Naval Forces Europe–Africa and the US Sixth Fleet, Aviano Air Base and Naval Air Station Sigonella (Military OneSource n.d.b). These installations underpin the US naval presence in the Mediterranean while providing strategic access to multiple theatres beyond Europe.

On NATO's eastern flank, Poland has emerged as one of Washington's closest military partners. Approximately 10,000 US troops are currently stationed in the country, supported by the first permanent US Army garrison established in Poland, the forward headquarters of V Corps, the Redzikowo Aegis Ashore missile defence site and significant investments in logistics infrastructure (Poland, Ministry of National Defence n.d.). Unlike the more mature US presence in Germany, the bases in Poland reflect a forward-oriented posture designed to strengthen deterrence against Russia and facilitate rapid reinforcement of the eastern flank.

Romania has similarly grown in strategic importance, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While hosting a comparatively modest American force of approximately 1,000 personnel, Romania provides critical access to the Black Sea region and increasingly supports both NATO's regional deterrence posture and wider US contingency operations (US State Department 2026; Gozzi 2025).

Yet the significance of the American military presence in Europe cannot be measured solely by troop numbers or the distribution of bases. Its greatest contribution lies in the sophisticated network of strategic enablers that allows NATO to function as an integrated military alliance.

Perhaps the most important of these is the US's command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance architecture (MacAskill and Dance 2013). The US continues to dominate NATO's intelligence ecosystem through a combination of headquarters, satellite networks, airborne surveillance platforms and signals intelligence facilities. The National Security Agency and its Cybersecurity Collaboration Center Europe, headquartered alongside US European Command in Stuttgart, coordinates American signals intelligence activities across the European theatre. Supporting this architecture are the European Technical Center and the Consolidated Intelligence Center in Wiesbaden, which process communications and intelligence for US forces operating across Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

The UK hosts several of the Alliance's most important intelligence facilities. RAF Croughton processes approximately one-third of all US military communications in Europe, while RAF Menwith Hill remains one of the world's largest satellite interception

and electronic monitoring stations. RAF Fylingdales contributes to ballistic missile early warning, further reinforcing NATO's strategic awareness (Mills and Brooke-Holland 2026).

American airborne intelligence capabilities remain equally dominant. RC-135 Rivet Joint aircraft provide both communications intelligence (Barrie 2025) and electronic intelligence, while RQ-4 Global Hawk (Litnarovych 2025) unmanned aerial vehicles conduct persistent reconnaissance missions along NATO's eastern flank and over the Black Sea. Maritime surveillance is supported by P-8 Poseidon aircraft operating primarily from Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy (Coats 2019), while MQ-9 Reaper systems based in Poland provide additional reconnaissance capability over Eastern Europe (Cenciotti 2020).

The US also provides the overwhelming share of NATO's electronic warfare capability. Aircraft such as the EA-18G Growler and the newly introduced EA-37B Compass Call enable long-range electromagnetic attack, disrupting enemy air defences, communications, navigation systems and command networks (Bronk 2025). Although several European allies are investing in electronic warfare capabilities, no comparable indigenous capacity currently exists within Europe at similar scale.

A similar pattern exists in cyberspace (Klimburg 2026, 9). European governments continue to rely heavily on American cybersecurity providers, including Microsoft, CrowdStrike and Cloudflare (Paulus 2025), while US European Command and US Cyber Command remain central to military cyber operations within the Alliance. US leadership also extends into the space domain, where satellite communications, missile warning systems and space-based intelligence remain essential enablers of NATO operations.

Finally, the US nuclear umbrella continues to underpin European deterrence. Approximately 100 US nuclear weapons remain deployed across several NATO member states under the Alliance's nuclear sharing arrangements (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation 2021). Recent discussions in Washington regarding the potential expansion of nuclear-capable aircraft deployments, together with interest expressed by Poland and Lithuania in assuming a greater role within NATO's nuclear deterrence posture, demonstrate that nuclear burden-sharing remains an evolving component of European security (Ciobanu 2026).

Taken together, these capabilities illustrate that Europe's dependence on the US extends far beyond troop numbers. While European allies have significantly increased defence spending and force generation since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Alliance continues to rely disproportionately on US command-and-control systems, strategic intelligence, electronic warfare, cyber capabilities, missile defence and nuclear deterrence. At the same time, Washington's strategic attention is increasingly divided between Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Americas and the Middle East. The issue, therefore, is not one of US withdrawal but of strategic prioritisation. As the US rebalances its

global commitments, Europe can no longer assume unlimited access to its military capacity. This emerging capability gap requires new approaches to strengthening NATO's forward defence—an opportunity in which Ukraine's battlefield experience, operational innovation and combat-tested armed forces assume strategic importance.

Ukraine as a foundational pillar of NATO's future high-readiness force structure

If the previous section demonstrates that Europe remains heavily dependent on US military enablers, the logical question is where can the Alliance develop additional capability from within the European theatre itself? Increasing defence expenditure and expanding force generation are necessary, but they cannot rapidly produce the operational experience that modern warfare now demands. In this regard, Ukraine represents a unique strategic asset. After more than four years of full-scale war against Russia, it has evolved from being a recipient of Western security assistance into one of Europe's most capable military powers and an increasingly important contributor to regional security (Hlivco 2026, 3).

Ukraine's armed forces have undergone a transformation unprecedented in modern Europe. Fighting the largest conventional war on the continent since the Second World War has compelled Ukraine to innovate at extraordinary speed, adapting its doctrine, command structures and technological capabilities in real time. In doing so, it has accumulated combat experience unmatched anywhere else within NATO. Ukrainian forces now possess an unrivalled understanding of Russian military doctrine, operational planning, electronic warfare, missile deployment, drone warfare, cyber operations and high-intensity attritional combat.

The significance of these capabilities extends well beyond Ukraine's own defence. Today, Ukraine effectively protects NATO's eastern flank by engaging Russian forces using predominantly Western equipment, NATO-compatible procedures and increasingly interoperable command structures. In practice, Ukrainian forces are already operating within the Alliance's broader military ecosystem. Their experience has therefore become an increasingly valuable source of operational knowledge for European armed forces seeking to prepare for the possibility of a future conflict with Russia.

Ukraine's contribution is not limited to manpower. The war has transformed the country into a laboratory for modern warfare, where new operational concepts are continuously being developed, tested and refined under combat conditions. Ukrainian forces have pioneered the integration of unmanned aerial systems at every level of military operations, combining reconnaissance, first-person-view drones, loitering munitions, electronic warfare and artillery. They have simultaneously developed sophisticated capabilities in electronic warfare, resilient communications, distributed command structures and cyber defence. Ukraine has therefore become a testing ground for the next generation of Western military doctrine (Bronk 2025). The challenge for NATO is no longer

whether these lessons should be incorporated into Allied planning, but how rapidly they can be institutionalised across the Alliance.

One of the most effective mechanisms for achieving this would be Ukraine's integration into NATO's Allied Reaction Force, established in 2024 as the immediate-response component of the broader NATO Force Model (NATO 2024). Rather than viewing Ukraine simply as another contributor of troops, the Alliance should consider it a foundational pillar of the future development of the Allied Reaction Force. Such an approach would fundamentally strengthen NATO's forward defence by integrating combat-tested forces alongside the operational concepts and doctrinal innovation that Ukraine has developed throughout the war.

The benefits of such integration would extend across multiple operational domains. Ukrainian forces possess extensive expertise in countering one-way attack drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missile threats through layered air and missile defence. They have developed advanced counter-drone capabilities, combining electronic warfare with kinetic interception to defeat increasingly complex unmanned systems. Ukraine also offers valuable experience of integrating intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance with real-time battlefield decision-making, creating highly responsive command structures capable of operating in contested electromagnetic environments. At sea, the innovative deployment of unmanned surface vessels and unmanned subsea systems has fundamentally challenged traditional assumptions about maritime superiority in the Black Sea and demonstrated new methods of denying adversaries freedom of manoeuvre without relying on conventional naval superiority.

Equally important is Ukraine's growing contribution to NATO's intellectual transformation. Ukrainian officers have already participated in Allied exercises as Red Teams, exposing NATO formations to realistic representations of Russian tactics, techniques and procedures (Kharuk 2026). These contributions have accelerated Allied understanding of modern warfare. Rather than remaining an ad hoc arrangement, this cooperation should become institutionalised as a permanent feature of NATO's force development, doctrine and professional military education.

The integration of Ukrainian capabilities into the Allied Reaction Force could realistically proceed in two stages. While active hostilities continue, Ukrainian expert teams could be embedded within NATO formations along the eastern flank, supporting training, doctrine development and operational preparation, similar to advisory models previously employed by the Ukrainian military in the Middle East. Their role would focus on transferring battlefield knowledge, particularly in drone warfare, electronic warfare and contemporary Russian tactics.

Following a ceasefire, this cooperation could evolve into the deployment of a combined-arms Ukrainian contingent of up to 50,000 personnel within NATO's high-readiness force structure. Rather than replacing national contributions, such a force would reinforce the Alliance's forward presence in those member states most exposed to Russian military

pressure, stretching from the Baltic region to the Black Sea. More importantly, it would provide NATO with combat-experienced formations capable of immediate integration into multinational operations, significantly enhancing deterrence and reducing the time required to generate credible combat power in the event of a crisis.

Such a proposal should not be interpreted as an alternative to NATO enlargement, nor as a substitute for Article 5 guarantees. Instead, it represents a pragmatic response to Europe's evolving security environment. The US is likely to remain Europe's indispensable strategic ally, but Washington's growing global commitments increasingly require European allies to assume greater responsibility for conventional deterrence. Ukraine offers Europe things no other ally can currently provide: large-scale combat experience, continuous doctrinal innovation and an armed force already adapted to the realities of twenty-first century warfare.

The future European security architecture will not be built solely through increased defence spending or expanded force structures. It will depend equally upon integrating operational knowledge gained on contemporary battlefields. In that respect, Ukraine should no longer be viewed merely as a state seeking security guarantees. It has become a security provider in its own right. Incorporating Ukrainian capabilities into NATO's future high-readiness forces would therefore represent a strategic investment in the Alliance's long-term military effectiveness and Europe's collective defence.

Conclusion

Europe's security architecture is entering a period of profound transformation. The transatlantic alliance remains the cornerstone of European defence, and the US will continue to be Europe's indispensable strategic ally. However, the gradual rebalancing of US strategic priorities means that Europe can no longer assume unrestricted access to its military capabilities on the previous scale and with the same immediacy. The challenge, therefore, is not to replace the US, but to strengthen Europe's ability to assume greater responsibility within the Alliance and reinforce its defence sovereignty.

Building credible deterrence will require more than increased defence spending or larger force structures. It will also demand the integration of the combat experience, doctrinal innovation and operational knowledge acquired on today's battlefields.

Ukraine offers precisely these capabilities. After more than four years of high-intensity war against Russia, it has developed Europe's most combat-experienced armed forces and become a laboratory for military innovation. Its expertise in large-scale conventional warfare, drone operations, electronic warfare, cyber defence and multi-domain operations provides capabilities that no other European military currently possesses at comparable scale or intensity.

Integrating Ukraine into NATO's Allied Reaction Force structure would therefore represent not only a logical step in strengthening the Alliance's deterrence posture, but

also an adaptation to the changing strategic balance within the transatlantic relationship. As Europe assumes greater responsibility within the Alliance, Ukraine should no longer be viewed solely as a future beneficiary of European security. It has already become one of its principal providers. At a time of profound geopolitical uncertainty and shifting defence priorities within NATO, integrating Ukraine's combat experience, doctrinal innovation and battle-tested forces into the Alliance's high-readiness force structure would not only enhance Europe's military capabilities in the age of technologically driven, asymmetric warfare, but also strengthen its defence sovereignty and capacity to provide for its own security.

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