

Five minutes to midnight

Can Europe confront Vladimir Putin's Russia on its own?

An independent army, air force and nuclear bomb would come at a high price



Photograph: Getty Images

Feb 25th 2025

WITHIN HOURS of his party winning national elections, [Friedrich Merz](#), Germany's presumptive next leader, offered a bombshell on national television. Donald Trump "does not care much about the fate of Europe," he told Germans, and the priority was to "step by step...achieve independence from the USA". This was not some distant objective. He was unsure, he said, whether NATO would still exist "in its current form" in June, when leaders are due to meet in the Netherlands, "or whether we will have to establish an independent European defence capability much more quickly".

If anyone thought Mr Merz was being alarmist they were swiftly disabused. On February 24th America sided with Russia and North Korea in voting against a UN resolution proposed by its European allies that blamed Russia for invading Ukraine. It then pushed through its own resolution in the Security Council with the support of Russia and China that called for a "swift end" to the war, but without repeating previous calls of support for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Mr Merz is not the only staunch transatlanticist flirting with radical ideas over the future of NATO in the face of Donald Trump's assault on the alliance that kept the peace in Europe for nearly eight decades. "The security architecture that Europe has relied on for generations is gone and is not coming back," writes Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a former secretary-general of NATO, in [an essay for *The Economist*](#). "Europe must come to terms with the fact that we are not only existentially vulnerable, but also seemingly alone."

In truth, it could take a decade before Europe is able to defend itself without America's help. To understand Europe's challenge, start with the debate over Ukraine. European countries are currently discussing the prospect of a military deployment in Ukraine to enforce any future peace deal. The talks, which are being led by France and [Britain](#), envisage [sending a relatively modest force](#), of perhaps low tens of thousands of troops. They would not be deployed in the east at the front line, but to Ukrainian cities, ports, nuclear power plants and other critical national infrastructure, according to a Western official.

Any such deployment would, however, expose three serious weaknesses. One is that it would stretch European forces thin. There are approximately 230 Russian and Ukrainian brigades in Ukraine, though most are understrength. Many European countries would struggle to produce one combat-capable brigade each. Second, it would open up serious gaps in Europe's own defences. A British deployment to Ukraine, for instance, would probably swallow up units currently earmarked as high-readiness and reserve forces for NATO, leaving holes in the alliance's war plans. Above all, the Europeans acknowledge that any deployment would need significant

American support not only in the form of specific “enablers”, such as intelligence and air-defence assets, but also the promise of back-up should Russia attack.

The fact that Europe would struggle to generate an independent division-sized force for Ukraine demonstrates the scale of the task involved in Mr Merz’s vision. Meeting NATO’s existing war plans—with America present—would require Europe to spend 3% of GDP on defence, far above existing levels for most countries. Britain took a step in that direction on February 25th, announcing a plan to spend 2.5% of GDP by 2027, but even that may not be enough. Mark Rutte, the secretary-general of NATO, is said to be touting a target of 3.7%. But making good American shortfalls would require a figure well above 4%, probably much higher.

Paying for that would be hard enough. But translating cash into capability is also harder than it looks. Europe would need to form 50 new brigades, calculates Bruegel, a Brussels-based think-tank, many of them “heavy” units with armour, to replace the 300,000 American troops that it estimates would be deployed to the continent in a war. The manpower requirements would be forbidding, given that European armies struggle to recruit enough people even at their current sizes.

These figures are guesstimates. Bruegel’s suggestion that Europe would need 1,400 tanks to prevent a Russian breakthrough in the Baltic states reflects traditional planning assumptions and is probably on the high side. In any case, this sort of bean counting tells only half the story. Deploying credible military forces requires not just combat forces themselves, but also less visible capabilities. Europe has impressive air forces with a lot of modern jets. But those jets do not have a meaningful stockpile of munitions capable of destroying enemy air defences or striking distant targets on land or in the air, explains Justin Bronk of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a think-tank in London, in a forthcoming paper. Nor do their pilots and crews train sufficiently. Only some air forces, like those of Sweden, have maintained pilot proficiency for demanding high-intensity aerial warfare. Moreover, airborne electronic warfare and intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance (ISTAR), or the ability to find and understand targets, “are almost exclusively provided by the US”, notes Mr Bronk.

Another glaring problem is command and control, or the institutions and individuals that actually co-ordinate and lead large military formations in times of war. NATO has a sprawling set of headquarters across Europe, with the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium, at the top, led by Chris Cavoli who, like every Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) before him, is an American. “NATO co-ordination is often a euphemism for US staff officers,” says Matthew Savill, a former British defence official now at RUSI.

European expertise in running big formations is overwhelmingly concentrated in British and French officers, he says—both countries oversee SACEUR’s two reserve “corps”, which are very high-level headquarters that sit above divisions—though Turkey and Poland, with large and growing armies, are getting better. But Britain, he says, would probably be incapable of running a complex air operation on the same scale and intensity as that of Israel’s air war in Gaza and Lebanon. “We’re still absorbing the lessons of modern AI-assisted data-basing and targeting,” warns Mr Savill. “There is nothing that I’m aware of that Europe has that actually approaches the scale of what the Israelis have allegedly done.”

If Europeans are able to generate and command their own forces, the next question is whether they could be kept fed with munitions. [Europe’s artillery production](#) has skyrocketed over the past three years, though Russia, aided by North Korea, remains ahead. There are also a handful of advanced European missile-makers: MBDA, a pan-European company with headquarters in France, makes one of the world’s best air-to-air missiles, the Meteor. France, Norway and Germany make excellent air-defence systems. Turkey is turning into a serious defence-industrial player.

Between February 2022 and September 2024, European NATO states procured 52% of new systems from within Europe and bought just 34% from America, according to a recent paper by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), another think-tank. But that 34% is often vital. Europe needs America for rocket artillery, longer-range air defence and stealthy aircraft. Even for simpler weapons, demand far outstrips capacity, one reason why European countries have turned to Brazil, Israel and South Korea for armoured vehicles and artillery shells.

The level of dependence on America is not uniform across the continent. Britain, for instance, is uniquely intertwined with America's military, intelligence machinery and industry. If America were to cut off access to satellite imagery and other geospatial information, such as terrain maps, the consequences would be profound. Perhaps the main reason that Britain required America's assent to allow Ukraine to fire British Storm Shadow cruise missiles into Russia last year is that the missiles relied on American geospatial data for effective targeting. Britain would have to spend billions to buy replacement images, says Mr Savill, or turn to France, which maintains its own sovereign capabilities in this area. On the other hand, British entanglement with America can also provide leverage. Around 15% of components in the F-35 jet used by American and allied forces are made by Britain, including tricky-to-replace parts like the ejector seat.

If the enormous task of building truly independent conventional armed forces were not daunting enough, Europe faces another challenge. For 80 years its conventional forces have also sheltered under the American nuclear umbrella. If Europe is really "alone", as Mr Rasmussen claims, and as many fear, then the problem is not just that American troops would not fight for Europe. It is also that American nuclear weapons, both the strategic ones that reach deep into Russia, and the "sub-strategic" ones which America deploys in Europe for carriage by European air forces, might also be absent.

On February 21st Mr Merz thrust that problem into the open. "We need to have discussions with both the British and the French—the two European nuclear powers," he suggested, "about whether nuclear sharing, or at least nuclear security...could also apply to us." In practice, Britain and France cannot replicate America's nuclear shield over Europe. One problem is the relatively small size of their arsenals—around 400 warheads between them, compared to more than 1,700 deployed Russian warheads. American nuclear insiders sniff at the idea that this is adequate for deterrence, because they believe that Russia would be able to limit the damage to itself (never mind that Moscow might be gone) while inflicting worse on Europe. Doubling or tripling the size of the Anglo-French arsenals would probably take years and cannibalise money needed to build up conventional forces; in Britain the deterrent already consumes a fifth of defence spending.

Another issue is that although France has nuclear weapons aboard submarines and planes, Britain has only the former, which limits its ability to engage in nuclear "signaling" in a crisis, for instance by using low-yield nuclear weapons, since doing so would risk exposing the position of its submarines and thereby put its strategic deterrent at risk. Moreover, although Britain can fire its nuclear weapons without American permission, it leases the missiles from America—those not aboard submarines are held in a joint pool in the state of Georgia—and relies on American co-operation for components like the re-entry vehicle which houses the warhead.

These are problems; but they need not be insurmountable ones. Quiet conversations on European nuclear deterrence among European defence ministers have picked up in recent months. "The German debate is maturing at warp speed," notes Bruno Tertrais, one of Europe's leading thinkers on nuclear matters. "The British and the French will need to rise to the challenge."

Nuclear deterrence is not just a numbers game, he writes, but a question of will. Mr Putin might take more seriously threats of mutual destruction from Paris or London than from Washington, Mr Tertrais argues. These are the questions that preoccupied European thinkers throughout the cold war; their return marks a new and dark period for the continent. "This", pronounced Mr Merz on February 24th, "is really five minutes to midnight for Europe."■