



CONSERVATIVE EUROPEAN FORUM



TOWARDS A NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Rt Hon Sir David Lidington KCB CBE

October 2026

*The views and ideas expressed in this paper are not necessarily the views and ideas of the Conservative European Forum nor should they be considered to represent Conservative European Forum policy.



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FOREWORD

Any political party aspiring to form the next government requires a credible account of how this country is to be defended. The Conservative Party is right to have identified the threat and to have committed itself to a substantial increase in defence expenditure. The present Government, despite its commitment to meet the NATO target for allies to spend 3.5% of GDP on defence by 2035, and a further 1.5% on broader security and resilience programmes, has still not set out the framework through which that promise of increased defence spending is to be converted into deterrent effect, nor the arrangements under which our forces would operate alongside those of our European allies were the United States to decline to lead.

During the six years in which I represented the United Kingdom at the European Union, NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe, and during the period in which I subsequently served on the National Security Council, the reorientation of American strategic attention away from the Euro-Atlantic was already an established feature recognised in British foreign policy. Successive American administrations of both parties had warned us and all European allies that we needed to contribute much more towards the cost of our mutual defence.

During President Trump's second term, both the President himself and senior members of his administration have publicly called into question America's commitment to the defence of the European democracies. The United States is now reviewing its military deployments in Europe, with the declared intention of reducing them significantly.

Following its invasions of Georgia, in 2008, Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, and the whole of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has in recent years initiated against democratic Europe, including the United Kingdom, a campaign of cyber-attacks, assassination, sabotage and airspace violation which shows no sign of abating.

Europe's response to these developments has been welcome. Our country has concluded bilateral treaties with France and with Germany; developed the Joint Expeditionary Force with a number of Northern European allies; taken an active role in a number of formats to co-ordinate political action between the larger European states, and, successively under Conservative and Labour Prime Ministers, taken a leading role in building a coalition of thirty-four countries in support of Ukraine.

The European Union has adopted a White Paper, a defence readiness roadmap, a substantial loan instrument and an industrial programme. Yet when seen in the wider context, it becomes apparent that there exists no standing legal and institutional framework within which the democracies of Europe, including those outside the European Union, can take a decision to act and then give effect to it without American participation.

This paper argues that such a framework should be created by treaty; that it should be anchored within NATO; that membership should be open to all the democracies of Europe, including Ukraine; that the European Union should accede to it as a party alongside its member states; and that its purpose should be to enable coalitions of the willing to be assembled and to operate on a proper legal and operational footing, drawing as each mission requires on the assets of both NATO and the European Union. In substance it proposes that we should undertake again, and in a form adapted to present conditions, what our predecessors undertook in 1954, and that we should be candid about the fact that the reasons given in 2010 for winding up the Western European Union no longer hold.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- a. The democracies of Europe possess, between them, considerable military strength, a substantial industrial base and a network of defence agreements. Yet currently they do not possess any standing legal and institutional framework through which they can decide upon and conduct a military operation in the absence of American leadership. This paper argues that such a framework should be established by treaty, anchored within the Atlantic Alliance, open to all European democracies including Ukraine, and joined by the European Union as a contracting party alongside its member states.
- b. The character of the threat has been firmly established. Two statutory public inquiries conducted by senior judges under the Inquiries Act 2005, and on evidence which included closed intelligence material, have found that operations to kill on British soil were approved at the highest levels of the Russian state.¹ Since 2022 the pattern has broadened to encompass the systematic sabotage of undersea cables and energy interconnectors and repeated violations of allied airspace. On 1 September 2026 the Federal Government of Germany formally attributed to Russia an attempted attack by an explosive-laden drone at Leipzig/Halle Airport, which serves as a hub for NATO's strategic airlift arrangements, and ordered in consequence the closure of the last Russian consulate-general on German soil.² Three weeks earlier the North Atlantic Council had recorded that Russia bears full responsibility for airspace violations which demonstrate its "increasing tolerance for risk".³
- c. The American critique of European defence efforts is largely correct, namely that European democracies must spend more on their collective security. It should be recognised that the profound shift in the United States' strategic priorities over the past twenty-five years means the long-standing assumption of American support can no

¹*The Litvinenko Inquiry: Report into the Death of Alexander Litvinenko* (HC 695, 2016) para 10.16; *The Dawn Sturgess Inquiry: Report into the Death of Dawn Sturgess* (HC 1525, 2025).

²'Germany blames Russia for Leipzig airport drone attack, orders Russian consulate closed' *France 24* (1 September 2026); 'Germany blames Russia for last month's attempted drone attack at Leipzig airport' *Associated Press* (1 September 2026).

³NATO, 'NATO Allies condemn recent airspace violations and incidents' (12 August 2026) <<https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/08/12/nato-allies-condemn-recent-airspace-violations-and-incidents>>.

longer be sustained, as candidates face a more nationalist electorate and will make the case that Europe should be paying more for its security.

d.. On 27 July 2026 the Department of Defense commenced a six-month review of United States force posture in Europe, intended, in the words of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, to move the Alliance “fast and irreversibly toward Europe taking primary responsibility for its conventional defense”, and due to produce force options by early November 2026.⁴ European governments would be unwise to plan on any assumption other than that the direction of travel has been settled.

e. The arrangements which European states have introduced since 2022 are welcome but insufficient. The bilateral treaties with France and Germany, the Joint Expeditionary Force, the E3, Weimar+ and E5 formats and the Coalition of the Willing are important steps forward, but none of them constitutes a standing framework. The political formats depend on the personal relationships of a particular set of leaders and are vulnerable to elections, of which the French presidential contest of April and May 2027 is the most immediate. The Coalition of the Willing, whose Multinational Force for Ukraine was declared ready to operate in July 2026, rests upon political declarations rather than treaty obligations and was assembled from first principles for a single contingency.

f. The European Union cannot itself supply the answer. It excludes the United Kingdom, Norway and Iceland, and therefore the whole of the northern approaches, the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom gap and the greater part of the European Arctic seaboard. It excludes Ukraine, which fields the largest and by a considerable margin the most combat-experienced army in Europe and which has become the principal source of battlefield innovation on the continent. The EU's decision-making procedures were not designed for operational command. Decisions on the Union's Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP) require unanimous agreement, giving every country a veto. While the Lisbon Treaty provided for a shift to qualified majority voting, any such change would itself need unanimous agreement. Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union, which permits the Council to entrust a task to a group of willing member states, has not once been used since it entered into force in 2009.⁵ No-one who has sat at the Council table and witnessed hours of wrangling over the minutiae of sanctions measures, or even whether Ukraine could be described as a “European country”, can seriously see the EU

⁴Pentagon has “kicked off” review of US force posture in Europe’ *Defense News* (29 July 2026).

⁵Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2016] OJ C202/13, art 44.

as currently constituted being capable of acting as the defence pillar of the European democracies.

- g. The EU must nonetheless be at the table. It holds competences which bear directly on containing the forms of aggression which Europe now faces, including sanctions and restrictions on trade and on the export of technology, and it now disposes of substantial defence finance. It represents, for the smaller member states, an indispensable assurance that decisions taken by the larger powers will not be taken wholly without them.
- h. The Western European Union supplies the precedent for the proposed treaty. The Modified Brussels Treaty of 1954 combined an unqualified mutual defence obligation with an express undertaking not to duplicate the military staffs of NATO.⁶ It was wound up in 2010 on the ground that Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union had rendered it redundant.⁷ This reasoning no longer holds. Article 42(7) binds the member states of the EU and no other party; it does not reach the United Kingdom, Norway or Ukraine; and it has been invoked on just one occasion since 2009.
- i. A new treaty should be anchored within NATO, both in order to retain American engagement so far as that remains possible and to avoid the wasteful reinvention of command arrangements, standards, planning procedures and training which already exist. Membership should be open to any European democracy eligible in principle for membership of NATO or of the EU. Ukraine should be a founding party. It is desirable for the EU to accede alongside its member states. Provision should be made for partnership with Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand and Australia, amongst other willing democracies. The institutional apparatus should be deliberately light.
- j. The central purpose of the treaty should be to provide the framework within which coalitions of the willing may be assembled and operational. No European government will accept qualified majority voting on the deployment of its armed forces, and none should be asked to do so. Equally, no state should be in a position to prevent others from acting. No new decision rule is required. The requirement is for mechanisms to

⁶Treaty of Economic, Social and Cultural Collaboration and Collective Self-Defence (Brussels, 17 March 1948), as amended by the Protocol Modifying and Completing the Brussels Treaty (Paris, 23 October 1954) ('Modified Brussels Treaty') arts IV,V.

⁷Statement of the Presidency of the Permanent Council of Western European Union on behalf of the High Contracting Parties to the Modified Brussels Treaty (Brussels, 31 March 2010).

enable willing states to act quickly once they have determined to do so, comprising pre-agreed command arrangements, status of forces provisions, force generation procedures and rules governing recourse to NATO and EU assets.

- k. Additional expenditure will be wasted in the absence of industrial and procurement consolidation. The failure of the negotiations on United Kingdom participation in the Security Action for Europe instrument, which collapsed in November 2025 on the question of the size of the British contribution, was a serious and avoidable setback for which responsibility lies upon both sides of the Channel.⁸ Europe requires is sovereign capability, which is not to be equated with EU sovereign capability, and which does not require us to cease purchasing American equipment or to abandon co-operation with Canada, Japan or Australia. It requires only that we should cease to be wholly dependent. The proposed treaty would provide a forum for European sovereign capabilities to be developed and co-ordinated amongst willing states.

⁸Talks on UK access to an EU defense fund have broken down' *Associated Press* (28 November 2025).

I. INTRODUCTION

1. On 4 August 2026 a drone carrying an improvised explosive device was discovered within the secure perimeter of Leipzig/Halle Airport in Saxony, amongst parked Ukrainian Antonov freighters. The device failed to detonate. A second drone collided with a cargo aircraft which was going around after the airport had been closed. Leipzig/Halle is not an ordinary airfield but serves as a hub for NATO's Strategic Airlift International Solution, through which materiel is moved to allies on the eastern flank and to Ukraine. On 1 September 2026 the Federal Minister of the Interior announced that the configuration of the drone, its components, the explosive and the detonation technology were all familiar from other Russian hybrid operations, and that the police investigation, the pattern of the offence and intelligence findings from German and partner services together established Russian responsibility. The Federal Foreign Minister ordered the closure of the Russian consulate-general in Bonn and the termination of the lease of the Russian House in Berlin.⁹
2. The Leipzig incident was an attempt by a foreign state to interdict a military supply line within the territory of an ally. It forms part of a campaign which has been conducted against European states for two decades. Yet despite this growing threat, there has been a tendency in British politics to treat the question of European security as an argument about our relationship with Brussels rather than as an argument about our physical safety. The United Kingdom remains a party to the North Atlantic Treaty, and Article 5 obliges us, in the event of an armed attack upon any party in Europe or North America, to take such action as we deem necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain security.¹⁰ This obligation is in no way conditional on our view of the European Union.
3. The argument which follows rests upon two propositions. The first is that Russia constitutes a present and continuing threat both to the United Kingdom and to our

⁹'Germany blames Russia for airport drone plot, shuts down consulate' *Associated Press* (1 September 2026); 'Leipzig drone bomb was found near Ukrainian plane carrying ammunition, say police' *The Guardian* (6 August 2026).

¹⁰North Atlantic Treaty (Washington, 4 April 1949) art 5.

European allies, and that the character of this threat has altered. The second is that we may no longer assume that the United States will always be there to take the lead.

4. Europe's response to the events of 2022 has been welcome, enabling British bilateral treaties with France and with Germany, a deepened Joint Expeditionary Force, a series of political formats amongst the larger European states, a Coalition of the Willing of thirty-four countries and, on the EU side, a White Paper, a readiness roadmap, a €150 billion loan instrument and a defence industrial programme.
5. When those arrangements are set out and examined together a gap becomes apparent. There exists no standing legal and institutional framework within which the democracies of Europe, including those outside the EU, may take a decision to act militarily and then give effect to it, should the United States determine that a particular contingency is not one in which it wishes to be involved. Each of the arrangements now available is either bilateral, or regional, or confined to the membership of the European Union, or improvised for a single crisis. Should the next contingency arise in a form which does not conveniently resemble the last, the work will have to be begun again.
6. This paper argues that the gap should be closed by treaty. The analysis proceeds in four parts. Section 2 sets out the strategic context, comprising the Russian threat, the changing character of conflict, the reorientation of American policy and the position of the United Kingdom. Section 3 examines the arrangements which now exist and explains why, individually and cumulatively, they do not answer the threat. Section 4 sets out the proposal for a new treaty framework, anchored within the Atlantic Alliance, modelled in material respects on the Modified Brussels Treaty of 1954, open to all European democracies including Ukraine, and to which the European Union should itself accede. Section 5 addresses capability, industry and procurement, in the absence of which the proposed framework would be an empty vessel.
7. The Leader of the Opposition was right to warn, in her speech of 3 September 2026, that conflict is coming, and right to remind the country that under Article 5 an attack upon any NATO country is an attack on all of us.¹¹ The commitment to reach three per cent of gross domestic product on defence by 2030 deserves support. Unlike the government of the day, the Opposition does not have the research and analytical

¹¹Kemi Badenoch, speech on defence spending (3 September 2026), reported in 'Badenoch warns "conflict is coming" and calls for £10bn increase to defence' *London Business News* (3 September 2026).

resources of the Civil Service available to it. But as the alternative government, the Conservative Party will need to develop its ideas about how and according to what priorities the money is to be spent; alongside whom our forces are to fight in the event that the Americans stand aside, and on what legal basis they would do so. Those are questions to which a party seeking to form the next government must have answers.

2. THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

2.1. The Russian Threat

2.1.1. Assassination and Sabotage on Allied Territory

8. In assessing the extent of the threat currently posed by Russia to the United Kingdom and to Europe more widely, it is convenient to begin with the findings of Sir Robert Owen in January 2016, reporting on the death of Alexander Litvinenko. It was concluded that Litvinenko had been murdered in London in 2006 by an operation of the Russian Federal Security Service, and that the operation “was probably approved by Mr Patrushev and also by President Putin”.¹² In December 2025 Lord Hughes of Ombersley, reporting on the death of Dawn Sturgess, found that the attempt to assassinate Sergei Skripal with a military-grade nerve agent in Salisbury in March 2018 “must have been authorised at the highest level, indeed by President Putin”, and that it had been intended to stand as a public demonstration of Russian power. It was held that the deployment of such an agent in a busy city was an astonishingly reckless act, that there was a direct causal link between the actions of the Russian intelligence officers, their superiors and the President and the death of Dawn Sturgess, and that they, and they alone, bore moral responsibility for it.¹³ The Government responded by imposing sanctions on the GRU. Both inquiries were conducted by senior judges under the Inquiries Act 2005 on evidence which included closed intelligence material.
9. Since 2022, a pattern has emerged. Two major Baltic Sea communications cables were damaged in November 2024, and on Christmas Day of that year the Estlink 2 interconnector between Finland and Estonia was severed, the vessel suspected being the *Eagle S*, which is associated with the shadow fleet by which Russia evades sanctions on the export of oil, and which was subsequently boarded by the Finnish Coast Guard.¹⁴ NATO’s Allied Command Operations launched the Baltic Sentry mission on 14 January 2025 in order to protect critical undersea infrastructure in the region.¹⁵ The Joint

¹²*The Litvinenko Inquiry* (n 1) para 10.16.

¹³*The Dawn Sturgess Inquiry* (n 1); see also HC Deb 4 December 2025 (statement by the Minister for Security).

¹⁴Joint Expeditionary Force launches AI protection net for undersea cables’ *Shephard Media* (10 January 2025).

¹⁵NATO Allied Maritime Command, Baltic Sentry (launched 14 January 2025).

Expeditionary Force, operating under British command at Northwood, had activated the Nordic Warden reaction system a week earlier, thirteen days after the Estlink incident.¹⁶

10. The attack on Leipzig/Halle described at paragraph 1 must therefore be seen within the context of this pattern, and a significant escalation by Russia. Its novelty lay in the willingness to strike directly at the logistics of allied support to Ukraine on the soil of a member of the Alliance, and in the willingness of the affected government to attribute the act publicly and to impose diplomatic consequences for it.

2.1.2. Airspace Violations and Critical Infrastructure

11. On the night of 9 to 10 September 2025 some nineteen Russian drones entered Polish airspace over a period in excess of seven hours. Several were shot down by Polish and allied aircraft, amongst them Netherlands F-35s supported by a Belgian tanker, and the airspace over Warsaw, Modlin, Rzeszów-Jasionka and Lublin was closed. Poland invoked Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, under which the parties consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any party is threatened.¹⁷ NATO launched Operation Eastern Sentry two days later.¹⁸

12. Subsequent events made clear that this had not been an isolated incident. Copenhagen, Aalborg, Oslo and, twice within twenty-four hours, Munich were closed by drone sightings during September 2025, and Berlin Brandenburg suspended flights on 31 October. On 4 November Brussels Zaventem and Liège were closed following sightings over the Kleine Brogel air base, at which United States nuclear weapons are stored, whereupon the Belgian Government convened its National Security Council, announced a counter-drone programme of €50 million and established a National Airspace Security Centre. At Belgian request the United Kingdom deployed Royal Air Force counter-drone specialists and equipment.¹⁹

13. The pattern has continued through 2026. A Russian drone damaged an apartment building in the Romanian city of Galați in May; Romanian F-16s conducted the first

¹⁶Ministry of Defence, 'Joint Expeditionary Force activates UK-led reaction system to track threats to undersea infrastructure and monitor Russian shadow fleet' (6 January 2025).

¹⁷North Atlantic Treaty (n 10) art 4.

¹⁸NATO Allied Command Operations, Eastern Sentry (launched 12 September 2025).

¹⁹Belgium to strengthen airspace security following multiple drone incursions' *Euronews* (7 November 2025);

'UK military to help Belgium after drone sightings near airports' *Al Jazeera* (9 November 2025).

interception over Romanian airspace in July, followed by two further interceptions within days, and a Spanish F-18 downed a fourth aircraft near the Moldovan border. Aircraft operating on Baltic Air Policing destroyed drones over Estonia in May and over Latvia in August. On 12 August 2026 the North Atlantic Council met to consider the violations in Poland and Romania and recorded that:

Allies reiterated that Russia bears full responsibility for the airspace violations, which are dangerous and unacceptable, and demonstrate Russia's increasing tolerance for risk.²⁰

14. There has also been a shift in the nature of the assets being defended. Critical national infrastructure was formerly conceived solely in terms of installations such as a dam, a power station or a factory, which remain vulnerable. Yet the vulnerabilities which now matter most, and which our economies, our public services and our armed forces depend on are undersea cables. These carry the overwhelming majority of intercontinental data traffic, essential to energy interconnectors, satellite communications and the Global Positioning System. Were satellite positioning to be degraded across northern Europe for any sustained period, the consequences for aviation, shipping, financial markets and emergency response would be severe and would be felt within hours. Deterrence and defence against attacks of this character are not matters for armed forces alone, but they cannot be achieved without armed forces, and they cannot be achieved by any European state acting on its own.

2.2. The Changing Character of Conflict

15. The second Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 gave early warning signs of the capability of unmanned systems against conventional military tactics and has since been seen in Ukraine at industrial scale. Prior to 2022 Ukraine had some seven drone manufacturers, and it now has approximately five hundred; production has risen from around 800,000 units in 2023 to some four million in 2025, with a stated target in excess of seven million for 2026.²¹ The Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported that in January 2026 drone units had accounted for approximately 29,700 of the 31,700 Russian casualties claimed for that month.²²

²⁰NATO (n 3).

²¹'Ukraine Eyes Drone Production Topping 7 Million Units' *Aviation Week* (21 April 2026); 'Drone superpower Ukraine is now Europe's first line of defense' (Atlantic Council, 14 July 2026).

²²Statement of General Oleksandr Syrskyi, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 7 February 2026.

16. An interceptor drone capable of bringing down a Shahed-type munition costs in the order of \$2,500, as against more than \$3 million for a Patriot PAC-3 interceptor performing the same task. By February 2026 such interceptors accounted for approximately seventy per cent of Shahed kills over the Kyiv region.²³ Ukraine has also constructed, in the BraveI platform and the DOT-Chain Defence system, what is most likely the first combat-tested digital procurement system for military unmanned systems.
17. Two conclusions should be drawn from this. The first is that European democracies cannot afford to ignore this transformation in modern warfare and must be prepared to adapt to these fast-evolving technologies. The second is that any framework for European defence which does not have Ukraine within it will be cut off from the principal source of military innovation on the continent. The launch by NATO of the Drone Edge initiative at the Ankara Summit, committing more than \$40 billion to uncrewed systems and counter-drone capability over five years, is a recognition of this point.²⁴
18. We cannot, however, discard traditional thinking about defence, or its traditional capabilities, merely because the character of conflict is changing. We shall continue to require naval vessels, whether crewed or uncrewed, in order to keep sea lanes open and to protect offshore infrastructure. We shall continue to require ground-based air defence against missiles as well as against drones, together with armour, artillery and the capacity to move and sustain forces at distance. The difficulty is that we find ourselves in a transitional period in which both sets of requirements must be met at once, with limited resources.

2.3. The Reorientation of United States Policy

2.3.1. The American Critique and Burden-Sharing

19. The American complaint concerning European defence effort is neither new nor a product of the present administration. In June 2011, in his final policy address as Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates told an audience in Brussels that NATO risked collective military irrelevance and faced “a dim if not dismal future” unless its European

²³‘How Ukraine Became a Drone Superpower’ (Just Security, 1 June 2026).

²⁴NATO, ‘Secretary General on the Ankara Summit: NATO delivers’ (8 July 2026); NATO, ‘Overview – 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara’ (7–8 July 2026).

members assumed more of the financial burden. His central warning concerned American domestic politics:

The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress, and in the American body politic writ large, to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.²⁵

20. Gates had served two presidents of different parties, with the warning having been delivered under the Obama administration. Europeans who have simply treated a growing hesitancy to fund Europe's defence capabilities as an idiosyncrasy of the current occupant of the White House and his 'America First' agenda have ignored the profound shift in American strategic priorities over the past twenty-five years.

21. The criticism is substantially correct. It has prompted both European allies and Canada to increase their investments in core defence requirements by more than \$139 billion during 2025 alone. Total defence and security expenditure across the Alliance now stands at approximately four per cent of gross domestic product one year into the ten-year effort towards the five per cent commitment agreed at The Hague.²⁶ Increased expenditure is not, however, the whole solution, and Europe's strategic defence spending leaves a lot to be desired.

2.3.2. The Indo-Pacific and Domestic Constraints

22. Two further factors will continue to draw American attention away from Europe, irrespective of who holds the presidency. The first is China, which is the only country in the world that may credibly be regarded as a strategic competitor of the United States economically, technologically and militarily. The second is the disposition of the American electorate.

23. The Libyan operation of 2011 was an early illustration of this. The United States contributed substantially but insisted that the political lead, and the political responsibility, be taken by the British and French governments. The shortfalls exposed on that

²⁵Robert M Gates, Secretary of Defense, remarks to the Security and Defense Agenda (Brussels, 10 June 2011).

²⁶The Ankara Summit Declaration (8 July 2026) para 2 <<https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2026/07/08/the-ankara-summit-declaration>>; NATO, 'Secretary General on the Ankara Summit' (n 24).

occasion, in intelligence and reconnaissance, in air-to-air refuelling and in the suppression of enemy air defences, are the same shortfalls which preoccupy European forces today.

24. Domestic constraints have also since tightened considerably. The military campaign against Iran which began in February 2026 has been unpopular within the United States from the outset and has become more so. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in March 2026 found that approximately six in ten Americans disapproved of the President's handling of the conflict and a similar number considered the decision to use force to have been wrong.²⁷ By August 2026 support for the military action had fallen to thirty-one per cent, with Republican support declining from seventy-seven to sixty-nine per cent across the same period and presidential approval standing at thirty-three per cent.²⁸ It would be reasonable to expect that the political lesson drawn in Washington from this experience, and from the midterm elections of November 2026, will be that any future military operations abroad are to be avoided where possible.

2.3.3. The Force Posture Review

25. The consequences of the United States' changing strategic priorities are now becoming more apparent on the ground, where approximately 80,000 United States military and civilian personnel remain in Europe, compared with some 100,000 immediately following the invasion of Ukraine. Around 5,000 troops were withdrawn from Germany in May 2026 and a planned armoured brigade rotation to Poland was cancelled, forces having been withdrawn from Romania in October 2025. The US has also reduced the high-end capabilities it committed to NATO's force planning, including combat aircraft, tanker aircraft, maritime patrol aircraft and a carrier battle group. Congress has set a floor of 76,000 personnel in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, below which the Department may not go without notification and certification.²⁹
26. On 27 July 2026 the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy announced the commencement of a six month review of United States forces based in Europe, which had first been trailed by the Secretary at the NATO defence ministerial on 18 June. It is expressly designed, in his words, to ensure that NATO is "moving fast and irreversibly

²⁷Pew Research Center, *Americans Broadly Disapprove of U.S. Military Action in Iran* (25 March 2026).

²⁸US public support for Iran war falls as Trump approval at record low: Poll' *Al Jazeera* (24 August 2026), reporting Reuters/Ipsos polling.

²⁹Pentagon launches review that could reshape US military presence in Europe' *Stars and Stripes* (28 July 2026); National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026, Pub L No 119-60 (18 December 2025).

toward Europe taking primary responsibility for its conventional defense”, and is to produce a range of force options by early 2027.³⁰ Allies were sent a questionnaire, with responses due by 28 August, addressing restrictions placed on American forces, defence procurement, transatlantic industrial co-operation and support for wider United States foreign policy objectives.

27. European governments should not seek to comfort themselves with the thought that the review may recommend less reduction than is feared. Nor is the problem confined to burden sharing. In January 2026 the President of the United States declined to rule out the use of force in order to acquire Greenland, threatened tariffs against European states unless Denmark ceded the territory, and announced measures against allies which rejected the American claim, whereupon the Danish Prime Minister warned that such conduct might lead to the end of NATO. European troops were deployed to Greenland, until the President eventually reversed his position at Davos on 21 January.³¹ This episode did considerable damage to US-Europe relations and also exposed a weakness at the heart of NATO, that the role of the United States as a reliable ally, let alone its willingness to offer support to its fellow NATO members, could no longer be taken for granted.

2.4. The United Kingdom’s Position

28. The contention that the United Kingdom, having left the European Union, would reorient itself as a global power with its principal strategic focus outside Europe was always more attractive as rhetoric than practical as policy. The Integrated Review of 2021, published under the Johnson government and subtitled *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, which announced this proposed realignment towards the Indo-Pacific, continued to describe the Euro-Atlantic as the region of primary and overriding importance to the United Kingdom’s interests, in which our efforts would be focused through NATO.³² The Integrated Review Refresh of 2023 was more explicit still, describing the security of the Euro-Atlantic as a core priority and as the primary focus

³⁰Defense News (n 4).

³¹‘Greenland: How Trump’s push to take the island reached crisis point’ *CNBC* (21 January 2026); ‘A stunned Europe gathers to respond after Trump increases pressure over Greenland’ *CNN* (18 January 2026).

³²HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (CP 403, March 2021).

for the United Kingdom to commit its resources, whilst making clear that the tilt had been achieved largely by non-military means.³³

30. In July 2022 the United Kingdom applied to participate in the Military Mobility project under the European Union's Permanent Structured Cooperation, and the Council adopted the necessary decision on 14 November 2022, three weeks after Rishi Sunak had succeeded Liz Truss in Downing Street, and expressly acknowledged what British participation would add to the project.³⁴ Whatever may have been said at party conferences, the ministers of successive Conservative governments understood perfectly well that European alliances were essential to our national security.

31. The challenges faced by the Labour Government in this regard have been of a different order: On 11 June 2026 the former Secretary of State for Defence John Healey resigned over the funding of the Defence Investment Plan, writing that the then Prime Minister had been unable, and the Treasury unwilling, to commit the resources which the nation required at a time of rising threats, and that a settlement rising only to 2.68 per cent of gross domestic product by 2030 would compel him to take decisions which reduced the readiness of the armed forces and increased the risk to personnel on operations. These events occurred whilst the United Kingdom was leading a multinational mission in the Strait of Hormuz and contributing to NATO's Arctic Sentry mission in the High North. Whilst Andy Burnham's appointment of the former Defence Secretary as Chancellor of the Exchequer upon becoming Prime Minister is a positive indication of his commitment to the UK's defence capabilities, it remains to be seen how this will play out over the coming months.³⁵

32. The Conservative response has been to commit to three per cent of gross domestic product by 2030, funded by reform of welfare, and to warn that the United Kingdom

³³HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World* (CP 811, March 2023).

³⁴Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/2244 of 14 November 2022 on the participation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the PESCO project Military Mobility; see also Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of participating Member States [2017] OJ L331/57, and Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1639 of 5 November 2020 establishing the general conditions under which third States could exceptionally be invited to participate in individual PESCO projects.

³⁵Letter of resignation from the Rt Hon John Healey MP to the Prime Minister, 11 June 2026, published by the author on X the same day.

could find itself at war with Russia within four years.³⁶ Neither proposition is open to serious objection, although much depends on how these welfare savings might be found. But it must then be asked what the money is for, and how it will be utilised effectively.

³⁶Badenoch (n 11).

3. THE LIMITS OF EXISTING ARRANGEMENTS

33. It must first be noted that the arrangements described in this section represent a substantial body of achievement, much of it constructed at speed and under pressure since February 2022, and several elements of it are the direct result of British initiative. The criticism advanced here is that these arrangements do not, individually or cumulatively, constitute a formal architecture for European defence. Each was designed for a particular purpose, and each has its own limits.

3.1. Bilateral Defence Agreements

3.1.1. France

34. The Franco-British defence relationship is the deepest which either country maintains with any European partner. Its modern foundations were laid at Saint-Malo in 1998 and given treaty form in the Lancaster House Treaties of 2010, which established the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force and, through the Teutates programme, joint facilities for the stewardship of nuclear warheads. The Northwood Declaration of 10 July 2025 stated for the first time that the deterrents of the two countries, whilst remaining independent, may be co-ordinated, and that there is no extreme threat to Europe which would not prompt a response by both nations; it further established a Nuclear Steering Group covering nuclear policy, capabilities and operations.³⁷ Ministers agreed alongside it a reboot of the Lancaster House Treaties extending co-operation to conventional mass, munitions, air and missile defence and industrial resilience.³⁸

35. The significance of the Declaration extends beyond its bilateral effect, since its point of reference is Europe rather than the Alliance, which brings UK foreign policy closer to the long-standing French conception of a collective European deterrence. It remains, however, a declaration between two governments. It confers no rights and imposes no

³⁷'Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 (UK-France joint nuclear statement)' (Prime Minister's Office, 10 July 2025).

³⁸Ministry of Defence, 'Lancaster House 2.0', Written Ministerial Statement HLWS812 (11 July 2025).

obligations on any other European state, and it is silent as to the circumstances in which the co-ordination which it contemplates would be exercised on the behalf of others.

3.1.2. Germany

36. The defence and security relationship with Germany has developed at pace in recent years. The Trinity House Agreement of 23 October 2024 committed the two countries to structured co-operation on deep precision strike, maritime patrol, armoured vehicles, the protection of undersea infrastructure and defence artificial intelligence. It constituted a political commitment rather than a treaty, and it established a Defence Ministerial Council which first met in Berlin in May 2025. Nine months later it was absorbed into an instrument of a different order.

37. The Treaty on Friendship and Bilateral Cooperation, signed in London on 17 July 2025 and known as the Kensington Treaty, is the first comprehensive bilateral treaty between the United Kingdom and Germany since 1945. It obliges each party to come to the aid of the other, including by military means, should either be subject to armed attack, and records the view of both that neither could face a strategic threat which did not bear equally upon the other. The provision amounts to a bilateral defence obligation additional to the commitments which both countries owe under Article 5.³⁹

38. The Kensington Treaty is evidence that a treaty based European defence obligation concluded outside the EU framework is politically achievable in the short to medium term. It must be recognised that the Treaty is not accompanied by any significant integration of forces and that no standing binational formation has been created of the sort which France maintains with Germany, or which we ourselves maintain with France.⁴⁰ There is now a mutual obligation but there remains the question of how it would be given effect.

3.1.3. The Netherlands

39. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands have operated a combined amphibious force for several decades, and the relationship has recently been reinforced by joint investment in new amphibious vessels. It is a model of what deep bilateral integration is

³⁹Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Federal Republic of Germany on Friendship and Bilateral Cooperation (London, 17 July 2025).

⁴⁰Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 'The Germany-UK treaty: a historic agreement for difficult times' (24 July 2025).

capable of achieving, in common doctrine, common training and interchangeable units, and it is equally a reminder of the length of time which such integration requires and of the narrowness of the scope which it can command.

3.2. The Joint Expeditionary Force

40. The Joint Expeditionary Force is the most instructive of the existing arrangements and the closest thing which Europe possesses to the framework proposed in this paper. Established at the Wales Summit in 2014 and led by the United Kingdom from Standing Joint Force Headquarters at Northwood, it comprises ten northern European nations and is focused on the High North, the North Atlantic and the Baltic.

41. The Force's most important feature is its opt-in basis, such that provided two or more members agree to act together an activity may proceed, with the practicalities settled subsequently. No member is able to prevent the others from acting, and no member is obliged to participate. The principle has been vindicated in practice. Response Options were activated in December 2023 and in June 2024, the latter employing twenty-eight ships and six aircraft, and the Nordic Warden system was activated within thirteen days of the severing of Estlink 2, in advance of NATO's own response.

42. The Force demonstrates that the model proposed in this paper is workable, albeit on a regional basis, only covering the northern approaches and not the Black Sea, the Mediterranean or the eastern flank to the south of the Baltic states. It excludes France, Germany, Poland and Italy. It has no industrial or procurement dimension and no relationship with either the European Union or Ukraine. It rests on a political framework rather than on a treaty. This has sufficed for reassurance activity and for the protection of infrastructure but would be strained by anything approaching combat operations.

3.3. Political Formats: the E3, Weimar+ and the E5

43. Alongside these military arrangements a series of political formats has emerged. The E3 relationship between the United Kingdom, France and Germany continued to function throughout the Brexit negotiations. Since February 2022 it has been supplemented by wider groupings. The Weimar+ format, comprising France, Germany, Poland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom together with the EU's High Representative and the Commission, met for the first time in Paris on 12 February 2025, having been convened

at short notice in response to the American President's telephone conversation with President Putin earlier that day, and it has met repeatedly since at foreign minister level.⁴¹ The E5, which brings together the defence ministers of the five largest European defence spenders, was inaugurated in November 2024 and had met seven times by the middle of 2026. At the end of June 2026 the German Chancellor convened E5 leaders in Berlin for the first time, in order to establish a common position in advance of the Ankara Summit.

44. This represents a significant step forward in European defence and security co-operation. When I sat around the Council table the smaller European states carefully guarded their prerogatives and resisted anything which resembled a *directoire* of the larger powers. The position has since altered, and the smaller states now accept, with a good grace which was not always evident a decade ago, that they lack the capability to act at the pace which present circumstances demand, and that a lead from the larger countries will prove mutually beneficial.

45. These formats are subject to three weaknesses which no amount of goodwill can overcome. They depend on personal relationships between a particular set of leaders, and are consequently vulnerable to elections, to a leader who does not get on with another, and to other pressing domestic matters. The most immediate test will arise in France, where the presidential election of April and May 2027 may return a candidate of the National Rally. Polling throughout 2026 has consistently shown such a candidate leading the first round, and the reduction on appeal in July 2026 of Mme Le Pen's period of ineligibility has widened the field of possibilities.⁴² The evidence suggests that the National Rally has moved on Russia, that Bardella has gone further than Le Pen in describing Russia as an offensive threat to Europe, and that the party is acutely conscious of the electoral cost of being identified with the Kremlin. The party nonetheless continues to oppose the deployment of French troops and the provision of weapons capable of striking Russian territory.⁴³ Even on the most optimistic assumptions, the instinctive trust which has existed between the British, French and

⁴¹Federal Foreign Office, 'Weimar+ Statement' (Paris, 12 February 2025); for a later meeting of the format, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Weimar+ Joint Statement on Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic security' (12 May 2025).

⁴²European Council on Foreign Relations, *If Bardella wins: Scenarios for a far-right presidency in France* (9 July 2026); European Council on Foreign Relations, *If Marine Le Pen wins: A European guide to a far-right France* (2nd edn, 2026).

⁴³ECFR, *If Bardella wins* (n 42).

German governments, whether of the centre-left or of the centre-right, could not be relied upon in the same way.

46. These formats possess, secondly, no legal personality, no permanent secretariat, no agreed decision procedure and no capacity to bind their participants. They are, thirdly, proliferating and beginning to compete with one another: Italy and Poland have pressed to shift weight from the E3 to the E5, on the reasonable ground that the E3 excludes them, and Spain participates in Weimar+ but not in the E5. Each additional format dilutes the authority of the others and leads to situations where some party is offended by its exclusion.

3.4. The Coalition of the Willing

47. The Coalition of the Willing, convened by then Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer in London on 2 March 2025, is the most ambitious of the improvised arrangements. It now comprises thirty-four countries, being twenty-eight members of NATO together with Australia, Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, Japan and New Zealand. At Paris on 6 January 2026 its members adopted a declaration providing for a Multinational Force for Ukraine, for co-ordinated military planning for reassurance measures in the air, at sea and on land, and for binding commitments to support Ukraine in the event of a future armed attack.⁴⁴ A headquarters has been established at Fort Mont-Valérien near Paris and a forward command in Kyiv under a British officer, with command anticipated to rotate to the United Kingdom after a year. On 13 July 2026 the co-chairs recorded that the Force was ready to operate at Ukraine's request once a credible cessation of hostilities was in place.⁴⁵

48. It also demonstrates how a group of European states, joined by partners from outside Europe, has been able to generate forces, agree command arrangements and set up a headquarters, in the absence of American leadership and without recourse to either NATO or European Union bodies. Yet its weakness lies in the fact that it operates only for a single contingency, and was established from first principles on this basis. The status of forces arrangements have had to be improvised by analogy with the NATO Status of Forces Agreement of 1951, with the membership having been assembled by invitation,

⁴⁴'Robust Security Guarantees for a Solid and Lasting Peace in Ukraine', Statement of the Coalition of the Willing issued by France (Paris, 6 January 2026).

⁴⁵'Statement of the co-chairs of the Coalition of the Willing: 13 July 2026' (GOV.UK, 13 July 2026).

and the command rotation was negotiated bilaterally. The undertakings rest upon a political declaration rather than on a treaty and are not enforceable. Should a further contingency arise, whether an attack on undersea infrastructure in the North Sea, a crisis in the Western Balkans or a threat to Moldova, the same infrastructure would have to be set up again from the beginning, and, in all probability, in a shorter time-frame.

3.5. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

49. The Alliance remains the foundation of European collective defence, providing the command structure, the planning apparatus, the standards, the interoperability and the training upon which every European force depends, and it retains the participation of the United States, Canada and Türkiye.

50. The main challenge is that NATO is unable to act if the United States does not wish it to do so, and that the Alliance contains no mechanism by which a subset of allies may act under its aegis where Washington declines to intervene. The Ankara Summit Declaration of 8 July 2026 reaffirmed the ironclad commitment to Article 5 and recorded that European allies and Canada, working with the United States, are assuming greater responsibility for the defence of the Alliance.⁴⁶ It also ran to six paragraphs, named neither host nor date for a further summit, and expressed no ambition for a future capacity to act on European initiative.

3.6. The European Union

3.6.1. Competences Relevant to Defence and Security

51. The European Union is doing considerably more on defence than it did when I represented the United Kingdom at its Councils, partly in consequence of the UK's departure and the removal of the British veto, but principally because of Russian aggression and American disengagement. The White Paper for European Defence published jointly by the Commission and the High Representative in March 2025 established the objective of defence readiness by 2030. The Readiness Roadmap of October 2025 identified four flagship projects, being the European Drone Defence Initiative, Eastern Flank Watch, the European Air Shield and the European Space Shield, together with nine priority capability areas, capability coalitions under lead nations, and

⁴⁶The Ankara Summit Declaration (n 26) paras 1, 3.

targets both for joint procurement and for procurement from the European defence technological and industrial base.⁴⁷ The Security Action for Europe instrument, considered at Section 5, makes €150 billion available in loans.

52. Quite apart from finance and capability, the European Union holds competences which bear directly on the character of the threat described at Section 2. Sanctions, restrictions on trade and controls on the export of technology are Union competences, as is a growing body of work on standards and on emerging technology. Where the aggression to be deterred takes the form of sabotage, cyber operations and the exploitation of a shadow fleet, instruments of that kind must be central to any defence strategy.

3.6.2. Membership

53. The EU cannot supply the framework for collective European defence. The Union excludes the United Kingdom, Norway and Iceland, and so excludes the whole of the northern approaches: the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom gap, the Norwegian Sea, the North Atlantic sea lines of communication upon which the reinforcement of the continent depends, and the greater part of the European Arctic seaboard. The establishment by NATO of the Arctic Sentry mission in February 2026, to which the United Kingdom contributes and to which it has committed a Carrier Strike Group, is a recognition of this.⁴⁸

54. The exclusion of Ukraine is more serious still. Ukraine maintains the largest army in Europe, at approximately 900,000 active personnel, and by a considerable margin the most combat-experienced. It is also the principal source of military innovation on the continent and the quickest at translating innovation into capabilities in the field.

3.6.3. Decision-Making

55. The third objection relates to the institutional limits of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council, which is not, and was never designed to be, an operational decision-making body. It proceeds by unanimity in matters of common foreign and security policy, and no French president will accept a move to qualified majority voting in that forum with the

⁴⁷European Commission, *Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030* (October 2025); European Commission and High Representative, *Joint White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030* (JOIN(2025) 120 final, 19 March 2025).

⁴⁸NATO Allied Air Command, 'NATO announces Arctic Sentry' (11 February 2026); House of Commons Library, *UK defence: Renewed interest in the Arctic* (CBP-10262, 2026).

attendant risk that France might be outvoted. Neither would Germany, and the Polish position would at best be cautious.

56. The Treaties do contain a mechanism designed for this purpose. Article 42(5) of the Treaty on European Union permits the Council to entrust the execution of a task to a group of member states, and Article 44 provides that the Council may:

*entrust the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task. Those Member States, in association with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, shall agree among themselves on the management of the task.*⁴⁹

57. Article 44 has never been used. It entered into force with the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009 and has been the subject of studies by the European Union Institute for Security Studies and of a contribution from the Council Legal Service, but no operation has at any time been established under it.⁵⁰ Part of the explanation is that an operation under Article 44 still requires a unanimous decision of the Council. The mutual assistance clause at Article 42(7) has been invoked on a single occasion, by France following the attacks of 13 November 2015.⁵¹ This undermines the effectiveness of the mechanism for rapid response in a crisis situation, and in any event was not designed to form the architecture for wider collective European defence.

⁴⁹Treaty on European Union (n 5) arts 42(5), 44(1).

⁵⁰European Union Institute for Security Studies, *Groups we trust: implementing Article 44 of the Lisbon Treaty* (Brief 27, October 2014); Council of the European Union, 'Legal Service contribution on the conditions and modalities of recourse to Article 44 TEU' (5225/15, 13 January 2015).

⁵¹Treaty on European Union (n 5) art 42(7); European External Action Service, *Article 42(7) TEU – The EU's mutual assistance clause* (October 2022).

4. A TREATY FRAMEWORK FOR EUROPEAN DEFENCE

58. The proposal advanced in this section is that the democracies of Europe should conclude a new treaty establishing a standing legal and institutional framework for defence co-operation; that the framework should be anchored within NATO; that membership should be open to every European democracy in principle eligible for membership of NATO or of the European Union, including Ukraine; that the European Union should accede to the treaty as a party alongside its member states; and that the principal function of the framework should be to enable coalitions of the willing to be assembled and to operate, mission by mission, drawing as appropriate on the assets of both NATO and the EU.

4.1. The Precedent of the Western European Union

59. The Brussels Treaty of 17 March 1948, concluded between Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom as an extension of the Treaty of Dunkirk of the previous year, was amended by the Protocol signed at Paris on 23 October 1954, which brought in the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy and renamed the organisation the Western European Union. The Modified Brussels Treaty contained a mutual defence obligation in terms which remain, on their face, more absolute than those of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty:

If any of the High Contracting Parties should be the object of an armed attack in Europe, the other High Contracting Parties will, in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, afford the Party so attacked all the military and other aid and assistance in their power.⁵²

60. Article IV of the amended treaty also addressed the relationship with NATO directly, and should be the model for any new treaty:

In the execution of the Treaty, the High Contracting Parties and any Organs established by Them under the Treaty shall work in close co-operation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Recognising the undesirability of duplicating the military staffs of NATO, the

⁵²Modified Brussels Treaty (n 6) art V.

Council and its Agency will rely on the appropriate military authorities of NATO for information and advice on military matters.⁵³

61. The Western European Union was reactivated by the Rome Declaration of 1984 and was described in successive NATO handbooks as the European pillar of the Alliance. It was thereafter progressively hollowed out as its functions passed to the European Union, and on 31 March 2010 the Presidency of its Permanent Council announced, on behalf of the ten High Contracting Parties, the termination of the Modified Brussels Treaty, the United Kingdom having given notice on the previous day. The organisation ceased to exist on 30 June 2011.⁵⁴

62. The reason given for that decision was that the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, and in particular of the mutual assistance clause at Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union, had rendered the Western European Union redundant. In 2010 the reasoning was defensible, but this no longer holds. Article 42(7) binds the member states of the EU and no other party. It does not reach the United Kingdom, Norway or Iceland, and it does not reach Ukraine. It is qualified both by a saving for the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain member states and by its subordination to commitments under NATO, and it has been invoked once. The instrument for which the Western European Union was wound up has not, in the event, supplied the protection which the Western European Union supplied.

63. It is suggested that an equivalent legal form of this institution should be revived, in the shape of a short treaty setting out a mutual commitment to collective European security and defence, with an express undertaking not to duplicate NATO functions, and a light institutional apparatus.

4.2. Relationship with NATO

64. The new framework should be anchored within NATO, for two main reasons:

65. The first is that we should wish to retain the engagement of the United States in European security to the greatest extent which American domestic politics permits, and we should avoid causing a situation where those in Washington accuse Europe of having

⁵³ibid art IV.

⁵⁴Statement of the Presidency of the Permanent Council of WEU (n 7); Written Ministerial Statement of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 30 March 2010.

established a rival organisation. A framework which is expressly subordinate to the Alliance in matters of collective defence, which draws on Alliance command arrangements, and which reports its activities to the North Atlantic Council constitutes a framework which strengthens the European pillar of NATO. Such was the settled purpose of Article IV of the Modified Brussels Treaty, and it should be the settled purpose of its successor.

66. The second reason is that NATO possesses an established command structure, a defence planning process, a body of standardisation agreements, a system of certification and a tradition of combined training which have taken seventy years to construct. To build European equivalents would take a generation and would consume resources which ought to be devoted to improving our collective capability. Operations conducted under the new framework should accordingly employ NATO command arrangements, standards, communications and information systems and planning products, also as the Modified Brussels Treaty contemplated.
67. At this point, it is necessary to address a likely objection, namely that to anchor a European framework within an alliance whose principal member has threatened tariffs and other measures against allies over the territory of another ally is an exercise in wishful thinking. It is submitted that the Greenland crisis supports an argument for the framework rather than against it. It is precisely because American conduct can no longer be predicted that Europeans require a structure of their own which does not require American consent in order to function; and such a structure is far more likely to survive contact with American politics if it is constituted as a strengthening of the Alliance rather than as an alternative. Binding the treaty to NATO would provide means by which it may be ensured that when the United States wishes to participate it can do so without renegotiation, and that when it does not, Europe is able to act in its own collective interest without US support.

4.3. Membership and Accession

4.3.1. European Democracies and Ukraine

68. Membership should be open to any democratic European state which would in principle be eligible for membership of NATO or of the European Union. The

formulation has the advantage of resting on criteria which already exist and are already applied, and of avoiding the creation of a new and contestable test.

69. Ukraine should be a founding party, for the reasons set out at paragraph 54. It should be added only that Ukrainian membership of this framework neither presupposes nor substitutes for Ukrainian membership of NATO or of the EU, which is a separate question.

4.3.2. The Position of Türkiye

70. Türkiye is both a member of NATO and a participant in the Coalition of the Willing. It is also indispensable to any serious European posture in the Black Sea and the subject of a long-running dispute concerning its relationship with the EU which has repeatedly obstructed European defence initiatives. It would be dishonest to pretend that Turkish participation raises no difficulties. The sensible course is simply to apply the criterion of eligibility set out above, but with the expectation of some resistance amongst other states.

4.3.3. The European Union as a Contracting Party

71. The European Union should accede to the treaty as a party in its own right, alongside its member states, on the basis that the subject matter falls within mixed competence. The EU would participate in respect of matters falling within its competence and where there was an agreed EU position. That might include sanctions, export controls, restrictions on trade, defence industrial finance and the co-ordination of technology policy. The member states would participate in respect of their national forces and their sovereign decisions on deployment, bearing in mind also the reservation of national security as member state competence, a principle acknowledged explicitly in the EU Treaties.

72. Three arguments support the proposal. The substantive argument is that the competences described at paragraph 52 are essential to any serious response to hybrid aggression, and a framework devoid of these would be useful for conventional operations only. Further, participation by the EU constitutes the natural assurance for the smaller European states with the lead in any operation to be taken by the larger powers. Accession by the EU itself to the treaty would also serve to resolve a good deal of internal dispute, since if the bloc and its member states are all parties to the same

instrument, the recurring quarrel as to where the boundary lies between what is done by the EU and what is done by third countries loses much of its force.

73. It is relevant that the relationship between NATO and the European Union is very much less prickly than it was when I served in government. The war in Ukraine has concentrated minds, and successive Secretaries General have invested considerable effort in the relationship with the President of the Commission. The institutional conditions for an arrangement of this kind are more favourable now than at any time in the past twenty years.

4.4. Coalitions of the Willing

74. The central function of the framework should be to provide the legal and operational basis on which coalitions of the willing can be assembled and operations conducted.

75. Critical to this is a recognition that European states will not accept, and none should be asked to accept, that its armed forces be committed to operations by majority vote. Equally, opposing states should not be empowered by means of a veto to prevent others, who are willing and able, from acting.

76. Enforcing this should comprise, at a minimum: pre-agreed command and control arrangements, drawing on NATO structures, with provision for a European operational commander; a standing status of forces agreement amongst the parties, so that the improvisation which has attended the Multinational Force for Ukraine need not be repeated; agreed force generation procedures; agreed arrangements for the funding of common costs; standing rules governing the use of Alliance assets and capabilities by a coalition of the parties, on the model of, but going beyond, the Berlin Plus arrangements; and standing arrangements for the use of EU assets and instruments in support of an operation. A mission should be able to draw on NATO or EU capabilities, or both, according to what the particular mission requires.

77. The practical test for the success of this treaty is that when the next crisis arises, the parties should be able to proceed directly to the questions of what is to be done and who will contribute, without first having to settle questions of who commands, under what legal cover forces will deploy, how common costs are to be shared and whose satellites and tankers may be used.

4.5. Institutional Provision

78. The institutional apparatus should be as minimal and as flexible as possible. The framework would require a Council meeting at ministerial level and, between ministerial meetings, at the level of permanent representatives; a small permanent secretariat; and a planning centre co-located with an existing NATO command rather than housed in a new headquarters. The Modified Brussels Treaty provided at Article IX for an annual report to an assembly of parliamentarians. It is suggested that an equivalent provision for parliamentary scrutiny should be made, whether through the NATO Parliamentary Assembly or otherwise.

4.6. Partnership with Third Countries

79. The treaty should provide for partnerships with states outside Europe, modelled either on the existing partnership arrangements of NATO or the third-country agreements contemplated by the Treaty on European Union, so as to permit joint training, common procurement and the exchange of classified material without renegotiation of the legal basis on each occasion.

80. Canada is the obvious first partner and it is suggested would likely welcome the invitation with some warmth. Beyond Canada, the opening of the Arctic sea routes gives Japan and the Republic of Korea a direct interest in the security of the northern approaches, and Australia is already bound to us through AUKUS. There is no contradiction between a bolstered European framework and the maintenance of global partnerships. Indeed, it would be a considerable diplomatic asset to be able to offer partners in the Indo-Pacific a single European interlocutor in place of twenty-odd national ones.

5. CAPABILITY, INDUSTRY AND PROCUREMENT

81. The proposed framework must be accompanied by sufficient domestic and collective resources to ensure it is effective at deterring threats. This section addresses the industrial and procurement questions on which this depends.

5.1. The UK–EU Security and Defence Partnership

82. At the summit of 19 May 2025 the United Kingdom and the European Union agreed three documents, comprising a joint statement establishing a strategic partnership, a Common Understanding setting out a programme of work, and a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) adopted as a non-binding political framework.⁵⁵ Of the three, the Security and Defence Partnership was by a considerable margin the most detailed, contemplating regular exchanges across the range of Union security and defence instruments, and the Common Understanding recorded that co-operation under the Security Action for Europe instrument would be swiftly explored. Sixteen months later there has been very little progress. For any proposed treaty to be effective, bilateral frameworks, such as the SDP, must be simultaneously utilised productively.

5.2. The Security Action for Europe Instrument

83. The Security Action for Europe instrument was established by a Council Regulation of 27 May 2025 and makes €150 billion available to member states in competitively priced long-maturity loans, preferably for joint procurement.⁵⁶ It was, by the standards of EU defence instruments, deliberately left open, in that acceding countries, candidate countries and third countries which have signed a Security and Defence Partnership with the EU may join common procurements, and thereby Ukraine and the states of the

⁵⁵UK-EU Summit 2025: Joint Statement' (19 May 2025); 'A renewed agenda for European Union–United Kingdom cooperation: Common Understanding' (19 May 2025); Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Ministry of Defence, 'Security and Defence Partnership between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' (19 May 2025).

⁵⁶Council Regulation (EU) 2025/1106 of 27 May 2025 establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument [2025] OJ L2025/1106.

European Economic Area are treated on the same terms as member states. This contrasted with previous EU defence industrial instruments, which were open only to member states or to countries in the single market. The Security Action for Europe instrument is a significant step forward in this regard.

84. On 18 September 2025 the Council authorised the Commission to open negotiations with both the United Kingdom and Canada on the terms of their participation. Canada concluded an agreement. The negotiations with the United Kingdom collapsed on 28 November 2025 due to financing concerns. Third country suppliers from countries without a bilateral agreement may account for no more than thirty-five per cent of the value of a funded contract; the Commission offered to raise the ceiling to fifty per cent in return for a contribution initially set as high as €6.7 billion and subsequently reduced to approximately €2 billion. The then Minister for European Union Relations stated that the negotiations had been conducted in good faith but that the Government would sign only agreements which were in the national interest and which offered value for money, and observed that British industry would in any event be able to participate on third-country terms.⁵⁷ In December 2025 ministers confirmed that efforts would not be resumed in 2026. It is suggested that the UK Government should now reopen the question, and the EU should show greater flexibility.

5.3. Industrial Consolidation

85. The wider problem, as can be seen through the issues relating to the Security Action for Europe initiative, is that Europe will not adequately bolster its defence capability, or make more efficient use of the additional expenditure now being committed, in the absence of some consolidation of its defence industries.

86. Every government understandably wishes to protect employment and skills domestically. Yet it is unsustainable for France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy each to design and to build their own aircraft carrier, their own tank, or their own combat aircraft without co-operation on the allocation of resources and procurement. Nor is the answer simply to permit the market to decide. On this basis, we should buy American, because in many categories American equipment is cheaper, available sooner and produced at greater scale. The honest position is that there exists a tension between

⁵⁷Council of the European Union, 'Defence investment: Council authorises negotiations with UK and Canada on their participation in SAFE' (18 September 2025); *Associated Press* (n 8).

value for money on any single procurement and the maintenance and expansion of a European industrial base capable of reliably supplying us in a crisis, in which other suppliers might turn out to be unreliable. The new framework should provide the forum in which these issues are discussed and addressed.

5.4. Sovereign Capability

87. Striving towards greater European sovereign capability is pivotal, but this is not to be equated with European Union sovereign capability. The objective should be the capacity of the democracies of Europe, collectively, to defend themselves. It does not require us to cease purchasing US equipment where this is desirable, nor to cease collaboration with Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea or Australia. On the contrary, it ought to be pursued alongside such collaboration. It requires only that we should cease to be wholly dependent on the United States for capabilities in the absence of which we cannot conduct operations at all.

5.5. Strategic Enablers

88. The substance of this objective entails the replacement of what the Alliance terms strategic enablers. Four dependencies stand out on the Alliance's own assessment, as the European Council on Foreign Relations has summarised it. The first is the capacity to see, which is to say intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, whether gathered from space, from crewed aircraft or from unmanned systems. The second is the capacity to shield, in the form of integrated air and missile defence. The third is the capacity to strike accurately at long range. The fourth is the capacity to move and to sustain a force, which turns on strategic airlift and air-to-air refuelling.⁵⁸

89. European members of NATO operate some forty-nine military satellites, compared with approximately two hundred and forty-six operated by the United States. In aerial intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, European allies field a few dozen relevant aircraft as against around one hundred and fifty American, and in airborne tactical command and control some thirty-five platforms as against more than one hundred and twenty.⁵⁹ Independent assessments suggest that Europe is comparatively better placed

⁵⁸Camille Grand, *Defending Europe with less America* (European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2024).

⁵⁹Max Bergmann and others, *Getting Out: How Europe Can Defend Itself with Less America* (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, September 2025).

on strategic airlift and air-to-air refuelling, where the gap might be closed within a few years, but that robust integrated air and missile defence may require between five and ten years.⁶⁰ Work to address this disparity has begun, with Ankara marking the start of negotiations for airborne early warning aircraft to replace the ageing AWACS fleet, whilst four nations contracted for maritime surveillance drones.

90. Equally, there are capabilities which Europe will simply not replicate. It is not possible to match the intelligence collection and analysis capacity of the United States, and we will not, and should not seek to, match the US strategic nuclear deterrent.

5.6. Nuclear Deterrence

91. The Northwood Declaration of July 2025 established that the British and French deterrents, whilst remaining independent, may be co-ordinated. It stated that there is no extreme threat to Europe which would not prompt a response by both nations, its frame of reference being Europe rather than the Alliance.

92. If this language is to mean anything, there will have to be a serious discussion between the United Kingdom and France, and thereafter between the United Kingdom, France and other European allies, as to what European deterrence amounts to in practice. Such a discussion opens questions of great difficulty. Does an assurance extended to Europe extend to every member of the Alliance? Does it extend to states within the new framework which are not members of the Alliance? Does it extend to Ukraine? What would be required in order to lend it credibility, and what would the effect be on the United States' nuclear guarantee and on the nuclear planning arrangements of NATO?

93. No attempt is made to answer those questions here. It should briefly be mentioned that the Nuclear Steering Group established at Northwood is the best starting point. The framework proposed in this paper would be equipped to provide the forum in which the wider European conversation on this issue might eventually be held.

⁶⁰The good, the bad and the ugly — Inside Europe's race to supplant US defense enablers' *Defense News* (27 February 2026).

6. CONCLUSION

94. The threat to the security of the United Kingdom and of democratic Europe is once again under threat. This has been established by the findings of our own courts, by the decisions of allied governments and by the record of the North Atlantic Council. The reorientation of the United States away from Europe only serves to compound this threat.

95. Europe has begun to respond but the arrangements to date remain woefully insufficient. Should the next crisis arise in a form which does not resemble the last, we shall find ourselves left vulnerable to new and fast evolving threats.

96. The answer is a European Defence Treaty, anchored within the NATO and should be open to every European democracy in principle eligible for membership of NATO or of the European Union, and Ukraine should be amongst its founders. The European Union should accede to it as a party in respect of the competences which it holds. Its institutions should be minimal. Its purpose should be to provide the standing legal and operational basis on which coalitions of the willing may assemble and act, drawing on NATO and EU assets as each mission requires, without any state being compelled to participate and without any state being able to prevent others from doing so.

97. In 1948 and again in 1954 British ministers took the lead in constructing the institutions upon which the security of western Europe rested for two generations. It falls to us now to take the lead again, and to put in place an architecture capable of guaranteeing the collective security of Europe for years to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rt Hon Sir David Lidington KCB CBE was the Member of Parliament for Aylesbury from 1992 to 2019. He served as Minister of State for Europe at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 2010 to 2016, the longest tenure in that office of any Minister, representing the United Kingdom at the European Union, NATO, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the United Nations Security Council.

He was subsequently Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, in which capacity he was also deputy to Prime Minister May and a member of the National Security Council. He was Chair of the Royal United Services Institute from 2020 to 2025. He is UK Co-Chair of the Königswinter Conference and of the Aurora Forum, a trustee of the Institute for Government, a member of the Advisory Council of the Centre for European Reform, and President of the Conservative European Forum.

ABOUT CEF

The Conservative European Forum (CEF) was launched in January 2021 by Rt Hon. Sir David Lidington KCB CBE and Stephen Hammond MP. CEF is committed to strengthening political, economic, social, environmental and security cooperation between the UK and the democracies of Europe. Closer strategic cooperation, to tackle shared challenges, will make all parties safer, more prosperous and more influential on the world stage.



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