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Managing long-term confrontation with Russia: Elements of a European strategy

Policy recommendations

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March 2026

About the Author



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His research and policy work focuses on Russian foreign and military policy, European security, NATO–Russia relations, and arms control, as well as the role of knowledge and expert networks in policymaking. He is a former fellow of the Arms Control Negotiation Academy (ACONA), hosted by the Negotiation Task Force at Harvard University’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and participates in the Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group (EASLG).

Executive summary

The evolving confrontation between Europe and Russia is not a temporary crisis but a long-term condition that must be managed. More than four years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, European governments have mobilised substantial military, economic, and political resources. Yet these measures have not coalesced into a coherent strategy for governing a prolonged and adversarial relationship with Moscow beyond the war.

European policy has largely relied on cost imposition: military support for Ukraine, economic sanctions, and strengthened deterrence. While necessary, this approach rests on uncertain assumptions about Russia's responsiveness to sustained pressure. Moscow has demonstrated resilience, military regeneration capacity, and a willingness to absorb significant costs. At the same time, a multipolar environment and shifting U.S. priorities limit Europe's ability to rely on systemic isolation or classical containment alone.

This brief argues that managing sustained rivalry with Russia requires three interdependent elements:

1. Deterrence and defence must provide a credible and increasingly Europeanised security baseline.
2. Europe must strengthen its political agency; so far, despite substantial material power, fragmentation and procedural rigidity have limited Europe's ability to translate capabilities into diplomatic influence.
3. Escalation risks must be actively governed. As deterrence hardens and military proximity increases, escalation dynamics become a structural feature of rivalry. Effective management requires communication channels, institutionalised risk-reduction mechanisms, and a broader European strategic culture.

The central task is not to resolve rivalry in the near term, but to shape it deliberately – preserving political control, managing escalation, and sustaining European unity over time.

Policy recommendations

Europe's enduring confrontation with Russia over the next decades will not be resolved through military deterrence, sanctions, or diplomacy alone. Rather, it must be managed through a combination of those instruments. The analysis above points to three interdependent requirements: greater political agency, more credible and Europeanised deterrence and defence efforts, and the systematic management of escalation risks. All of them require political leadership and sustained investment in both the material hardware and political software of confrontation.

Strengthening European agency

Any expectations that the EU will rapidly become a federal actor or exhibit the characteristics of a unified nation-state are unrealistic, yet the pressure to act more coherently will persist and intensify in the future. The task, therefore, is not full institutional redesign, but structured flexibility: enabling agency by capable states while anchoring it within European frameworks.

- **Institutionalise leadership formats**

Minilateral constellations such as the E3, and potentially expanded E5 or E6 formats, have demonstrated practical utility during the Russian war against Ukraine. Rather than treating them as exceptional arrangements, they should be formally recognised, resourced, and systematically connected to EU and NATO decision-making. This would preserve diplomatic speed and credibility while reducing legitimacy gaps and fragmentation.

- **Establish a permanent EU channel for Russia policy**

Discussions about appointing an EU envoy for negotiations related to the war against Ukraine are already underway. These efforts should be broadened and institutionalised. The EU requires a recognisable and continuous interlocutor for managing relations with Russia beyond the immediate ceasefire context. This could take the form of a Special EU Envoy with strong backing from key member states, or a small steering group embedded in the EEAS and linked to the Council. The objective would not be to replace national diplomacy, but to reduce fragmentation, ensure message discipline, and provide political continuity across electoral cycles.

- **Design sanctions for leverage**

European governments should preserve flexibility in their economic instruments to generate political leverage. Sanctions serve not only to punish and constrain, but also to create conditional incentives for behavioural change. Any potential future relief strategy should focus on measures that are economically meaningful for Russia while generating tangible commercial benefits for EU companies, without providing direct military advantages or undermining structural policies such as the European Green Deal. This effectively excludes reversing decisions on Russian oil and gas imports. More viable options lie in calibrated civilian sectors such as aircraft leasing, maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) services, and indirect links to European aerospace supply chains.

- **Use the widened geopolitical arena strategically**
Russia's war against Ukraine has reshaped power relations across Eurasia and increased the relevance of regional actors in the Caucasus and Central Asia. European states should design targeted outreach strategies toward states whose sovereignty and autonomy are directly affected by Russian policy. Such engagement is not peripheral diplomacy; it is a means of shaping the broader environment in which Europe's rivalry with Russia unfolds and of expanding Europe's instruments of influence.

Making deterrence credible and European-led

Diplomatic engagement alone will not make Europe a respected interlocutor in Moscow. Deterrence credibility remains essential, and over the coming decade it will increasingly depend on capabilities that Europeans can themselves provide. The United States has made clear that Europe must assume greater responsibility for deterring Russia and managing the consequences of the war against Ukraine. This trend will not reverse, irrespective of leadership changes in Washington.

- **Develop a roadmap for substituting key U.S. military functions**
European NATO members should propose a phased strategy for reducing structural dependence on U.S. enablers. Rather than pursuing rapid autonomy, governments should prioritise key capability gaps where European shortfalls are most consequential: long-range precision strike, integrated air and missile defence, intelligence and ISR, strategic lift, space-based assets, and command-and-control architecture. Existing bilateral and multinational initiatives provide a foundation, but they remain fragmented and still assume extensive U.S. backstopping. A coordinated roadmap with a clear timeline would clarify sequencing, burden-sharing, and industrial investment over a realistic timeframe.
- **Anchor leadership in accountable European coalitions**
European deterrence will rest disproportionately on a limited number of states. Germany, France, and the United Kingdom already account for roughly half of European NATO defence expenditure, with Germany poised to become the largest conventional spender. This concentration of resources requires structured political coordination. The E3 should institutionalise regular strategic planning consultations, link national force development more closely, and assume explicit responsibility for aligning investments with NATO capability priorities. Leadership must be paired with accountability toward smaller allies whose security depends on coherent collective action.
- **Integrate European nuclear deterrence into strategic planning**
Extended nuclear deterrence remains central to European security for both military and political reasons. However, simply asserting that French and British nuclear forces protect Europe is insufficient. European nuclear deterrence must be embedded more systematically in alliance consultations, force planning, and signalling practices. This requires structured political dialogue on nuclear doctrine, burden-sharing implications, and the relationship between conventional precision-strike capabilities and sub-strategic nuclear weapons. Over time, greater European

ownership of nuclear deterrence will also create the political conditions necessary for renewed arms-control engagement with Russia.

Building Escalation Control Capacity

Effective escalation control between European states and Russia requires more than restoring communication; it requires a deliberate and structured European approach to managing sustained interaction under conditions of rivalry. Historical Cold War experiences can provide guidance; not as models to replicate, but as reminders that deterrence and selective engagement can coexist in promoting security interests.

- **Compartmentalise rivalry along the border zone**
From the Arctic to the Black Sea, sustained military proximity with Russia will remain a structural feature of European security. European states should separate deterrence from selective operational engagement, maintaining firmness where core interests are at stake while enabling communication and practical coordination where forces operate.
- **Reintroduce structured military-to-military communication**
Limited and clearly defined military contacts with Russia should be restored with the narrow objective of preventing incidents and miscalculation. Different institutional formats, the NATO–Russia Council, the EU Military Committee or ad hoc formats among frontline states, should be assessed pragmatically. The aim is not political normalisation, but operational risk reduction along an expanding NATO Europe–Russia contact zone.
- **Invest in escalation-management infrastructure**
Europe should institutionalise expertise on escalation dynamics. This could include EU-level coordination mechanisms, structured frameworks among frontline states, or a NATO Centre of Excellence focused specifically on escalation management and crisis control. Such structures would shape doctrine, training, and shared analytical standards rather than day-to-day policy.
- **Promote a European strategic culture**
Effective deterrence policies and escalation control requires broader professional competence. Europe must invest in strategic education, nuclear literacy, cross-national expert communities, and structured debate on deterrence and defence practice.¹ Without this “software”, expanding capabilities risk outpacing Europe’s ability to manage them responsibly.

1 For examples of how this idea could be implemented see Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli and Niccolò Petrelli, “Strategic Readiness 2030: European Security Through Strategic Thinking”, IEP@BU Policy Brief No. 46, September 2025, available at: www.iep.unibocconi.eu/sites/default/files/media/attach/PB46_Strategic%20Readiness%202030%20European%20Security%20through%20Strategic%20Thinking%20-%20Copy_2.pdf.

The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European network of over 450 past, present and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the experts and practitioners who participated in discussion groups and workshops as part of this project for their valuable insights and contributions.

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Published by the European Leadership Network, March 2026

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