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

Report

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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

1. Strengthen European political agency

- Institutionalise flexible leadership formats (E3/E5/E6) and anchor them within EU and NATO frameworks to combine speed with legitimacy.
- Establish a permanent EU channel for Russia policy (e.g., Special Envoy or EEAS steering group) to reduce fragmentation and ensure continuity across electoral cycles.
- Design sanctions for leverage, preserving conditional relief options in economically meaningful civilian sectors while excluding renewed strategic dependencies.
- Use the wider geopolitical arena strategically by engaging states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia whose sovereignty is shaped by Russian power.

2. Make deterrence more credible and European-led

- Develop a phased roadmap to reduce reliance on key U.S. enablers, prioritising long-range strike, integrated air and missile defence, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), strategic lift, space assets, and command-and-control.
- Anchor leadership in accountable European coalitions to align force development and burden-sharing.
- Integrate European nuclear deterrence more systematically into alliance planning, consultation, and signalling.

3. Build escalation-control capacity

- Compartmentalise deterrence and selective engagement along the border zone.
- Reintroduce structured military-to-military communication for risk reduction.
- Invest in escalation-management infrastructure.
- Promote strategic education to build a durable European strategic culture.

Introduction

More than four years into Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, European states have taken far-reaching political, economic, and military decisions. They have mobilised substantial resources in support of Ukraine, strengthened their deterrence and defence postures, and imposed extensive sanctions on Russia. These actions, however, have not coalesced into a clearly articulated strategy for how Europe[1] intends to manage its long-term relationship with Russia beyond the direct imperatives of the war. Sustained support for Ukraine remains the immediate foundation of European policy, but it does not by itself constitute a long-term strategy for governing relations with Russia. European governments have defined what they seek to prevent, but they have yet to specify how they intend to manage a hostile relationship that is likely to persist.

In practice, European policies have rested on a clear underlying logic. Military and financial assistance to Ukraine, alongside economic pressure on Russia have been paired with the expectation that shifts in the balance of power and cumulative costs over time will constrain Russian ambitions and induce politically relevant adaptation. While this approach has been necessary to address urgent security needs, it ultimately rests on the assumption that such pressure will eventually force Russia to significantly scale back or completely abandon its objectives, an outcome that remains uncertain and increasingly unlikely.

Russia has proven more resilient than many expected and has demonstrated a capacity for military regeneration that European governments initially underestimated.[2] The Russian political leadership has been willing to sacrifice considerable resources, economic opportunity, and even internal stability to pursue its stated goals. As the war has evolved into a longer-term rivalry, the limits of relying on cost imposition alone to structure relations with Russia have become increasingly evident.

On the one hand, major global powers such as China and India have used European sanctions as an opportunity to expand market access and deepen energy cooperation with Russia.[3] At the same time, sanctions circumvention through third countries, particularly in parts of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), has allowed some European goods and technologies to continue reaching the Russian market indirectly.[4]

On the other hand, the second Trump administration has shifted the American approach toward a mixture of pressure and selective outreach. Washington appears willing to accommodate certain Russian interests in order to redirect political and military resources toward East Asia and the broader strategic rivalry with China.

Under these conditions, Europe cannot rely exclusively on systemic isolation or classical containment.[5] In a multipolar system with diversified economic linkages, alternative strategic partnerships for Moscow, and evolving U.S. priorities, containment may constrain Russian capabilities but cannot by itself govern political interaction or escalation dynamics.

Prolonged confrontation between Europe and Russia therefore risks being shaped less by deliberate European choice than by external initiatives, crisis dynamics, and cumulative reactive decision-making.

Sustained support for Ukraine remains the immediate foundation of European policy, but it does not by itself constitute a long-term strategy for governing relations with Russia.

This policy brief starts from the premise that strategic rivalry with Russia is likely to endure and that European security cannot be based on expectations of near-term or radical political change in Moscow. The central challenge, therefore, is not to resolve rivalry, but to govern it through deliberate choice in ways that preserve political control and keep future options open.

For this reason, rather than proposing a single model for relations with Russia, this policy brief approaches European strategy through three interrelated functions that any viable approach must fulfil.

- Deterrence and defence must provide a credible baseline for European security;
- Europe requires sufficient political agency to translate material power into influence;
- Escalation risks must be actively governed to prevent confrontation from becoming unmanaged and increasingly unstable.

Together, these elements define a strategy aimed at deliberately shaping confrontation beyond the Russian war against Ukraine.

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Why confrontation requires strategy

The confrontation between Europe and Russia is not a crisis to be resolved but a long-term condition to be managed. Faced with a steady decline in influence and competitiveness within the prevailing European security order, the Russian leadership has chosen to challenge it through military force in Ukraine. The immediate objective is to subordinate Ukraine and thereby improve Russia's strategic position in Europe, despite lacking a clearly articulated design for a viable alternative order.

However, because Russia lacks the capacity to impose such an order on its own, especially in the face of sustained resistance, its leadership is betting on endurance, Western and particularly U.S. fatigue, and support from other global actors, above all China, to shift the balance gradually in its favour and create opportunities for more fundamental change.

Short of radical elite change or state failure, Moscow will thus continue to pursue three core objectives: political control over Ukraine, the weakening of European agency and transatlantic unity, and the erosion of Western predominance in global politics. For most European states, these objectives are fundamentally incompatible with their interests. The U.S.-backed post-Cold War order in Europe has underpinned their security and prosperity, and they have become status quo powers within it. That environment, however, is changing.

The U.S. strategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific, and active revisionism under President Donald J. Trump, have reduced Europe's strategic latitude.[6] If European states want to preserve the core tenets of the existing order while shaping its evolution, they must build the capacity to act without, and at times in divergence from, the United States. They must also keep Washington engaged in Europe's security. Nonetheless, unlike during the Cold War, they increasingly confront Russian power without a guaranteed U.S. backstop.

In this setting, strategy is not about decisive victories or rapid political change. It is about managing interaction, controlling risk, and preserving political choice over time. For Europe, this challenge is immediate and structural. Rivalry with Russia unfolds primarily on European territory and at Europe's expense. Yet, despite its economic weight and rising defence expenditures, Europe is not a single strategic actor. It remains a collection of states with differing threat perceptions, capabilities, and political constraints.

The central strategic problem Europe faces vis-à-vis Russia is therefore not a lack of ambition or resources, but a deficit of collective agency. European states often act in ways that amount to self-marginalisation, reducing their ability to shape the terms, timing, and direction of confrontation. Political rhetoric has at times outpaced capacity to act, inflating public expectations without the means to sustain them. Fragmentation across national capitals and institutions further constrains Europe's ability to define priorities, signal intent, and sustain coherent policies.

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In responding to Russia, deterrence and defence form a necessary baseline of European policy but they do not constitute a strategy in themselves. Where political guidance is weak, deterrence risks drifting away from political objectives rather than serving them. Sustained confrontation also generates escalation risks that

deterrence alone cannot manage (Figure 1). Without effective communication and crisis-management mechanisms, escalation can result from misperception rather than intent. Limited channels narrow the scope for calibrated responses.

Figure 1: Triangle of managing confrontation

Source: author's own illustration

In this context, Europe's policies toward Russia currently sustain confrontation without fully controlling it. Weak collective agency limits the alignment of political objectives and deterrence practices. Insufficient attention to escalation risks leaves interaction exposed to unintended dynamics. Confrontation does not stabilise itself, nor does it move naturally toward resolution. It risks becoming unmanaged. The following sections show why deterrence alone, even when strengthened, is insufficient; how Europe's political agency falls short; and why active escalation control becomes unavoidable.

Improving deterrence

The future relationship between Russia and other European states will be shaped above all by the balance of military power and the credibility of deterrence – a view that is also widely shared in Moscow.[7] Deterrence and defence therefore constitute the unavoidable baseline of European security policy. However, deterrence is not a static condition that follows automatically from force posture or spending levels. It is a continuous process of signalling, interpretation, and interaction and requires political guidance. Deterrence succeeds not when capabilities are accumulated, but when an adversary is convinced that certain courses of action are too costly, too risky, or unlikely to succeed.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this understanding of deterrence has moved from abstraction to an organising principle. NATO has moved decisively from reassurance toward deterrence by denial, reinforcing the eastern flank through forward deployments, higher readiness levels, and accelerated capability development.[8] European NATO members have committed to sustained increases in defence spending, force posture, resilience, and defence-industrial capacity over the coming decade.[9] Deterrence is no longer conceived as a temporary response to crisis, but as a structural condition intended to shape relations with Russia over time.

In a narrow but critical sense, Western deterrence policies have worked during the war. Russia has avoided direct military confrontation with NATO forces and has refrained from unmistakably deliberate conventional attacks on NATO territory, despite the alliance's extensive support for Ukraine. Nuclear thresholds have not been crossed. While Moscow has engaged in political pressure, hybrid operations, and other sub-threshold provocations against NATO members, it has avoided actions that would clearly trigger direct NATO military involvement. This outcome is neither accidental nor trivial. It reflects the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture, the clarity of alliance commitments, and Russia's continued assessment that escalation into a direct NATO-Russia war would entail unacceptable risks. Preventing such a confrontation remains a central goal of European security policy.

At the same time, the effectiveness of deterrence depends on a shared understanding of what is being deterred and why. Here, Europe's posture toward Russia reflects unresolved political disagreement rather than technical ambiguity. While deterrence against deliberate attacks on NATO territory remains clear, European governments diverge in their assessments of Russia's objectives beyond Ukraine, ranging from more limited coercive aims to broader revisionist ambitions directed at the European security order. This lack of consensus extends to hybrid activities and cyber operations, where thresholds remain politically contested. As a result, deterrence becomes less precise, increasing the risk of misinterpretation on both sides.

In practice, deterrence has increasingly shaped Western behaviour as much as it constrains Russian action. European and allied governments have repeatedly calibrated military support for Ukraine to avoid steps perceived as crossing Russian escalation thresholds, even where those thresholds were ambiguous or strategically contested.[10] This has produced a pattern of restraint driven by persistent concern about unintended escalation.

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Moscow has learned to operate within this environment, using nuclear signalling, rhetorical escalation, and selective risk-taking to influence Western decision-making without triggering direct confrontation. Deterrence has thus generated caution but not control.

From Moscow's perspective, however, European rearmament is not primarily assessed as defensive insurance, but as a strategic effort to constrain Russia's long-term freedom of action. For Russian planners, European defence investments are signalling an increasingly less permissive security environment extending well beyond the war in Ukraine, but related to developments in the Baltic Sea region, long-range strike capabilities, missile defence, and the Arctic. Measures intended by Europe as stabilising are therefore experienced in Moscow as confirmation of long-term containment.[11] The resulting dynamic resembles a security dilemma but without symmetry: European rearmament responds to Russian aggression but reinforces incentives in Moscow to preserve escalation leverage and contest the emerging order.

A further source of instability lies in the mismatch between the long-time horizons required by deterrence and the political volatility within which it must operate. European deterrence is being constructed as a durable condition, with force posture and industrial capacity planned over decades. Yet the political authority underpinning these commitments remains contingent. Leadership changes in the United States, shifting domestic coalitions across Europe, and uncertainty about Russia's longer-term domestic trajectory complicate assumptions of continuity. This tension is most acute in the nuclear domain, where European security ultimately depends on extended deterrence guarantees whose credibility rests as much on visible political resolve as on material capability.

Overall, deterrence policies will continue to stabilise the most dangerous aspects of confrontation with Russia. They help prevent a direct NATO–Russia war, uphold core alliance red lines, and maintain nuclear thresholds. These effects are real and should not be understated. At the same time, deterrence alone cannot govern sustained confrontation under conditions of uncertainty. It cannot manage misperception, clarify intent, or regulate escalation below the threshold of open conflict. In consequence, deterrence increasingly produces political dilemmas that require political agency Europe currently lacks, making the question of how to generate more political control and to improve escalation management unavoidable.

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Translating power into influence

While European states have invested heavily in military capabilities and sustained deterrence policies vis-à-vis Russia, these investments have not translated into commensurate political influence over the conduct or prospective termination of the war. As diplomatic engagement between Moscow and Washington has intensified since early 2025, European responses have remained fragmented, oscillating between deference, rhetorical escalation, and competing national initiatives. Rather than shaping the diplomatic agenda, European states have largely reacted to initiatives defined elsewhere. This gap between material power and political influence reflects not a lack of ambition, but enduring structural constraints on Europe's capacity to act collectively in diplomacy.

In the economic domain, by contrast, Europe has demonstrated a markedly higher degree of agency, reflecting the concentration of authority at the EU level. Since 2022, EU institutions and national administrations have prepared and enacted successive sanctions packages, building on measures introduced after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.[12] These have included restrictions on financial services, export controls, and limits on technology transfers. Most consequentially, European states have frozen Russian central bank assets held abroad, disconnected major Russian banks from the SWIFT messaging network, imposed a price cap on seaborne Russian oil exports, denied insurance coverage for Russian-flagged shipping, and have committed to terminate imports of both Russian LNG and pipeline gas by autumn 2027.[13] As one consequence, direct trade in goods between the EU and Russia has already collapsed to roughly one quarter of the pre-war level, reflecting the rapid decrease of the economic interdependence that once structured EU–Russia relations.[14] Importantly, these measures have been sustained despite divergence among member states over costs, exposure, and strategic outlook on the war.

Russia has adapted to these restrictions, but it has done so at considerable cost. In several sectors, European market share has been replaced by Chinese suppliers, most visibly in automobiles, machinery, and consumer goods, often at lower quality and with limited technology transfer.[15] In other areas, including advanced manufacturing machinery, semiconductor equipment, and civil aviation, substitution has remained incomplete or inefficient.[16] Access to European capital markets, insurance, and high-end technologies therefore continues to carry economic value for Russia. This creates latent leverage. Yet Europe has struggled to convert this leverage into diplomatic influence by linking pressure to conditional incentives and political objectives.

By contrast, the Trump administration has explicitly treated economic inducements and sanctions relief as bargaining instruments, linking geopolitical engagement to prospective national and even private gains. This has included discussions on future economic cooperation with Russia, selective sanctions relief for Belarus, and a trade and investment agreement with Ukraine.[17] While controversial, this approach highlights a willingness to treat economic power as an instrument of negotiation rather than as a fixed, normatively codified commitment. The lesson for Europe is not to emulate transactional diplomacy, but to recognise how rigidities in its own governance system constrain strategic flexibility. Once EU member states agree collectively on sanctions

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or economic policy, it becomes politically very difficult to adjust or repurpose those tools without incurring significant political and symbolic costs.

These constraints have been most visible in Europe's response to U.S. diplomatic efforts to pursue a ceasefire and an end to the war. European governments have strong reasons to doubt Russian intentions, particularly with regard to Ukrainian political sovereignty and Kyiv's freedom to pursue integration with the transatlantic order. Yet they have not articulated a credible alternative theory for how the war could be brought to an acceptable conclusion or transformed from a military into a political contest. While Europe's commitment to Ukraine's self-determined future remains politically strong, there is no corresponding willingness to absorb the additional risks and costs such a course would entail if pursued to its stated end.

As US pressure on Ukraine increased, most visibly following the bilateral meeting between President Trump and President Zelensky in February 2025, France and the United Kingdom initiated the creation of a '"Coalition of the Willing".[18] Initially involving 16 states and later expanding to more than 30 participants, the initiative aimed to demonstrate European unity and regain political momentum. In practice, however, its focus has remained narrow, centred on planning a potential international reassurance force in the event of a ceasefire.[19] The coalition has increased political visibility but did little to shape the diplomatic parameters of negotiations, highlighting Europe's difficulty in converting collective signalling into bargaining power.

More broadly, these patterns reflect a structural mismatch between Europe's diplomatic machinery and the form of diplomacy shaping confrontation. EU foreign policy remains consensus-based and procedurally dense, ill-suited to rapid, personalised negotiation formats. Initiative has therefore rested with a small group of states, primarily Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, whose influence derives from economic power and individual leadership rather than institutional design. Even this core group, however, has struggled to operate effectively in an environment dominated by transactional diplomacy. Europe's agency problem is thus not one of resources, but of translation: converting economic and military power into purposeful interaction with Russia, including the capacity to manage escalation risks rather than merely react to them.

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Governing escalation

Escalation is not an accidental failure of policy or a breakdown of deterrence, but an inherent feature of sustained rivalry with Russia. Under conditions of enduring confrontation, military, political, and hybrid interactions unfold continuously across multiple domains. As European deterrence hardens and rivalry becomes more durable, escalation risks do not disappear; they multiply and become harder to manage. Treating escalation as an exceptional breakdown rather than as a structural condition therefore produces a blind spot: it leaves Europe ill-prepared to manage the interaction with Russia that mutual deterrence policies actively generate and sustain.

This challenge has been intensified by the erosion of communication channels. Since 2022, most military-to-military contacts between European NATO members and Russia have been suspended, while political dialogue has collapsed.[20] Intelligence assessments, public signalling, and worst-case assumptions have replaced routine interaction. Deterrence now operates with few shared reference points for intent or restraint. At the same time, the disappearance of routine channels has raised the political cost of initiating contact. Even limited exploratory engagement risks being framed as concessions and ridiculed by Moscow. Rather than reinforcing deterrence, the absence of communication has narrowed Europe's room for manoeuvre and reduced its capacity to manage escalation deliberately.

A central weakness in Europe's current approach is the tendency to treat communication as a single political act rather than as a set of differentiated instruments. Military-to-military contacts, diplomatic exchanges, and informal channels serve distinct functions and carry different signalling costs. Routine military communication can reduce risks of accident and miscalculation without implying political accommodation. Backchannel exchanges can clarify intentions and test limits without public commitment. Informal formats can sustain shared analytical reference points when formal dialogue is suspended. By collapsing these layers into a binary choice between 'engagement' and 'non-engagement', Europe has left itself with only high-cost political moves that are difficult to initiate and easy to exploit.

As Europe's deterrence landscape itself is changing, escalation control is becoming more demanding. For the first time in many decades, Russia is confronting a more diverse and capable set of European actors, including states such as Poland and Germany, whose military roles are expanding rapidly.[21] While NATO remains the central framework, the balance between US leadership and European responsibility is increasingly fluid. New national capabilities and regional defence initiatives are emerging faster than shared practices for signalling and coordination. This raises uncertainty for Moscow about thresholds and responses, but it also presents Europe with the challenge of communicating with Russia in a more complex environment without having developed the habits or institutions to do so reliably.

These dynamics are already visible in debates about whether Russia wants to attack additional European states. Assessments of military capability are increasingly treated as indicators of intent, allowing worst-case planning to harden into assumed trajectories. In several European countries, projected Russian force

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development is discussed as evidence of imminent aggression; in Moscow, European rearmament is framed in similar terms. This mutual slippage from capability to intent reinforces pre-emptive logics on both sides. Escalation control is therefore not about predicting Russian behaviour with confidence, but about preventing uncertainty from solidifying into self-fulfilling assumptions that narrow political choice and increase risk-taking.

Persistent uncertainty transforms escalation control from a narrow crisis-management function into a core instrument for shaping long-term competition under conditions of mutual vulnerability. A unified Europe possesses far greater economic power, technological capacity, and aggregate military potential than Russia. This reality is well understood in Moscow and one reason why Russian strategy has consistently sought to fragment European unity. Because military force cannot decisively overturn this balance, sustained confrontation tends to generate rising costs without resolving the underlying rivalry. When deterrence is credible and unity is maintained, effective escalation management can create political conditions under which questions of mutual restraint can be explored without undermining core security interests.

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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.[22] Without this “software”, expanding capabilities risk outpacing Europe’s ability to manage them responsibly.

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1 In this report, "Europe" is used as shorthand for European states and institutions other than Russia. The term is used for analytical convenience and does not imply that Russia lies outside the European continent or its historical and cultural space.

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