



SPECIAL REPORT

European Defense in the Trump Era

Prompted by the Trump administration's threats to NATO cohesion and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, European policymakers are rethinking their approach to defense. Can Europe build its own capabilities to break free of its reliance on the U.S. security umbrella? This report explores that question through a survey of World Politics Review's coverage from April through August 2026.

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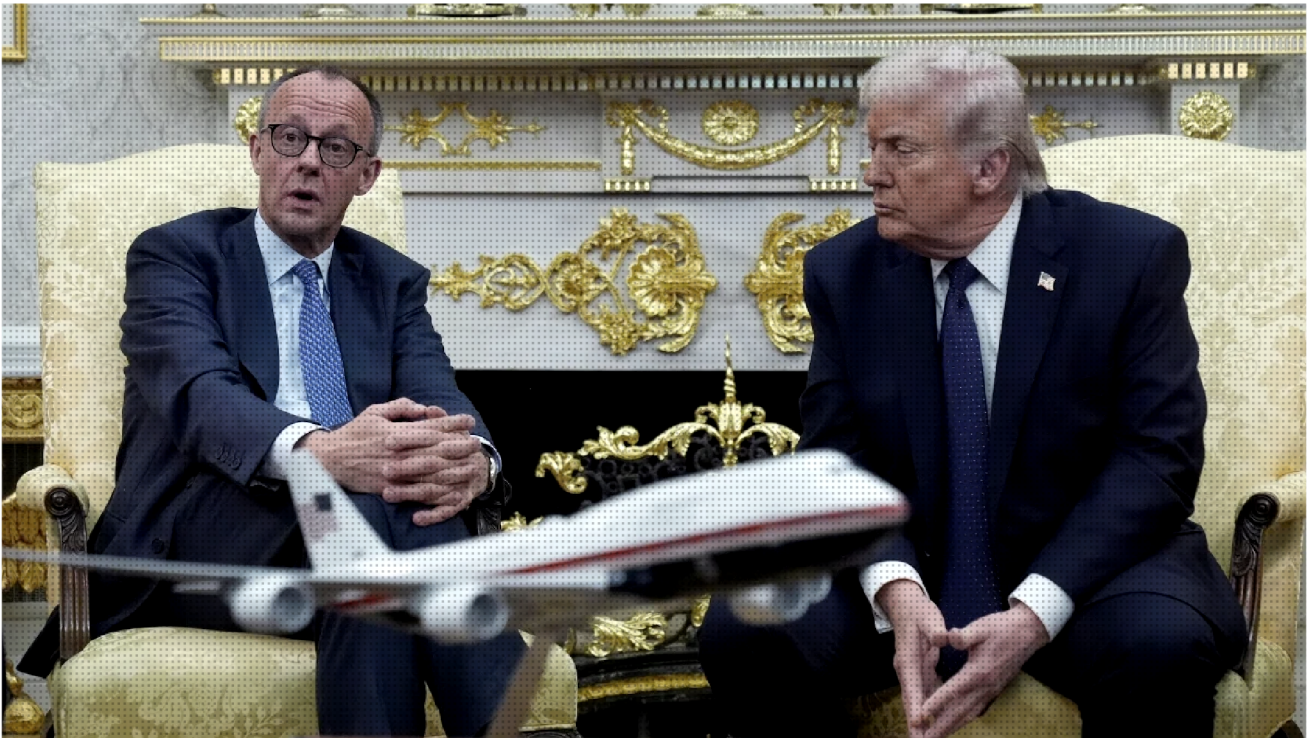
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Trump's NATO Reckoning

Trump's Threats Against NATO Are the Symptom. The Disease Runs Deeper

Candace Rondeaux — May 5, 2026



President Donald Trump meets with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in the Oval Office at the White House, March 3, 2026. (AP photo by Mark Schiefelbein)

If in 2025 the dominant mood in Europe about NATO was that of a jilted lover—wounded, disillusioned and angry at Washington's volatility yet still emotionally attached to the trans-Atlantic relationship—then 2026 feels more like a long, difficult marriage careening toward a final reckoning over money, commitment and diminished expectations. The [latest ugly spat](#) between German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and U.S. President Donald Trump over a proposed drawdown of American troops stationed in the country has the feel of a domestic quarrel gone off the rails.

Merz has been on the defensive since his criticism of Trump's handling of the war in the Middle East, and particularly his comment that Tehran has ["humiliated"](#) Washington, drew retaliatory fire from Trump and a threat to sharply reduce the U.S. military footprint in Europe. Trump's May 1 [announcement](#) that the United States plans to relocate roughly 5,000 troops from Germany—coupled with plans to cancel a deal struck in 2024 under the Biden administration to deploy a special battalion armed with intermediate-range and hypersonic missiles—landed in Europe at an especially raw moment. Washington has also [warned](#) Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and other European allies that deliveries of key weapons systems may be delayed as the Iran conflict strains U.S. stockpiles and logistics pipelines.

Taken individually, each move is manageable. Together, they send a larger signal. U.S. military power remains immense, but it increasingly appears finite, conditional and organized around triage. As the wars in Iran and Ukraine rage on, the temptation to read NATO's troubles as a personality conflict is understandable but costly. Europe and North America constitute an allied bloc of 1.2 billion people and eight decades of institutional memory. What is being renegotiated now will outlast the current occupant of the White House—and neither side has thought clearly about what will come next.

The dawning of that realization helps partly to explain the curious emotional shift now underway in Germany. In the months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a [Zeitenwende](#), a historic turning point that would remake German defense policy. The language was dramatic, even existential. Berlin followed with a [record spending spree](#) that has seen outlays on defense nearly double from about 51 billion euros in 2022 to [108.2 billion euros budgeted](#) for this year. A little more than a year into Trump's second term, another German word increasingly captures the mood surrounding American retrenchment: *absehbar*. Foreseeable.

Trump still must formally certify the announced relocation of forces, and if he decides to shift more than 5,000, it could get tricky. By law, Congress would need to approve any move to lower the number of American troops stationed in Europe below 76,000 for more than 45 days. To drop below that floor, the secretary of defense must [certify to Congress](#) that the move is in the U.S. national security interest and that NATO allies have been consulted.

But those guardrails are hardly reassuring in light of Trump's history of impulsivity. The reaction in Germany and across Europe has, accordingly, oscillated between shock, resignation and flashes of performative independence. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius greeted the news of Trump's latest broadsides with a shrug, saying the reorganization of U.S. forces was ["anticipated."](#) Merz, for his part, appeared to be in damage control mode. In a [post on X](#) only

hours after Trump threatened potential further troop reductions, possibly from Spain and Italy, Merz said the U.S. is Germany's "most important partner" in NATO, adding that Berlin and Washington have "a common goal: Iran must not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons."

As the wars in Iran and Ukraine rage on, the temptation to read NATO's troubles as a personality conflict is understandable but costly.

Trump's fixation with troops in Germany dates back to his first term. In June 2020, he approved a plan to reduce the U.S. presence in Germany from roughly 34,500 troops to 25,000. He cited at the time Germany's failure to meet NATO's defense spending targets as the primary reason. The plan faced immediate bipartisan pushback in Congress, with lawmakers from [both parties](#) expressing concern that it would weaken deterrence against Russia. It was eventually rescinded in 2021; Trump's latest order, which the Pentagon plans to implement over the next six to 12 months, would return the U.S. force structure on the continent to its pre-2022 levels.

The core justification for force realignment in Europe has been taking shape inside Washington for years, and few figures embody it more clearly than [Elbridge Colby](#), now serving as the Pentagon's No. 3 official. In [remarks](#) delivered to the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in April, Colby argued that Europe must assume "primary responsibility" for the continent's conventional defense while the United States focuses on "the most consequential threats to Americans," i.e., China. He warned that support for Ukraine and wider alliance commitments have relied heavily on drawing down "finite U.S. stockpiles."

This view is not new or limited to Colby, even if he is a vocal proponent of it. In a [2022 interview](#) released on the heels of the publication of his influential treatise on his preferred China policy, "Strategy of Denial," Colby was already arguing that alliances should operate less like "love affairs" and more like private business partnerships—personal in texture, transactional in obligation. Europe, in Colby's view, is now receiving the invoice for the slow, painful U.S. pivot to Asia.

Much as the conflict in Ukraine [revealed shortfalls](#) across NATO's 32-nation defense industrial base, the war in Iran has exposed unresolved contradictions on both sides of the Atlantic. Many Europeans see in Washington impulsive escalation, transactional rhetoric and strategic overextension. Many Americans see in Brussels hesitation, fragmented decision-making and chronic dependency.

There is truth in both readings. Western European powers, constrained by bloc politics, domestic skepticism and the memory of Iraq and Afghanistan, have conditioned their support for military operations in the Gulf on U.S. diplomatic movement toward reopening the Strait of Hormuz. The U.S., under Trump, is operating from an entirely different playbook, oscillating between threats of civilizational annihilation and improvised attempts to reset diplomatic terms with Iran.

Meanwhile, Trump has pursued the Iran conflict with scant regard for congressional authorization and with disapproval ratings on his tenure and the war that would have stopped a more institutionally constrained president. The usual brakes are not engaged, and [vocal objections](#) from the Republican chairs of both the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, Sen. Roger Wicker and Rep. Mike Rogers, appear so far to have done little to slow him on the proposed troop shuffle in Europe.

The problem with the Trump administration's rather bloodless formulation of alliance politics is twofold. Europe still has a long way to go before the political appetite for autonomy reconciles with the material reality of [a defense industrial base](#) depleted by underinvestment—and a financial sector that has spent decades avoiding large capital outlays on weapons systems. The core of Europe's defense industrial base was built decades ago for a threat environment that has since scaled in different directions, and the doctrine designed to operate it has been slow to absorb what drone warfare in Ukraine and the Gulf have made plain: that automation and artificial intelligence are not supplements to conventional force but essential components of modern warfighting. Recapitalizing the one while rethinking the other simultaneously, under fiscal and political pressure, is a different order of problem [than simply spending more](#).

The second problem cuts deeper: for the nations sheltering under NATO's U.S.-led nuclear umbrella, collective defense is not a budgetary arrangement. It is psychological ballast. The difference matters when the guarantor starts sending bills with short due dates. Military alliances do not run on operational capabilities alone. They draw their power from emotional commitment, historical memory and a trust that political solidarity will survive crises.

There is no question: the United States [needs Europe](#) because the decisive contests of the next decade will unfold across interdependent systems that no single territorial theater can contain. If the Strait of Hormuz crisis has revealed anything, it is that years of economic warfare coupled with military pressure against adversaries such as Iran and Russia, alongside intensifying strategic competition with China, have accelerated the integration of their interests rather than weakened them.

Tehran and Moscow's oil now [clears in Chinese yuan](#). That is not a coincidence of market forces; it is the balance sheet of more than a decade of pressure that produced alignment rather than isolation. Neither Washington nor Brussels has fully reckoned with what that convergence means for the next decade of alliance management and global stability—but only one of them is currently rewriting the terms of the relationship unilaterally. »»

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Rebuilding After America

Europe's Post-American Security Future Is Now

Ulrike Franke — May 27, 2026



Danish forces participate in a NATO exercise, in Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, Sept. 17, 2025. (AP photo by Ebrahim Noroozi)

There has been warning shot after warning shot since President Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, and so many "wake-up calls" that European policymakers' ears have been ringing constantly. But until last week, the changes in the Trump administration's approach to the trans-Atlantic alliance remained mostly rhetorical, limited to [impolite speeches](#), [hostile strategy documents](#) and threats to annex Greenland that Trump subsequently climbed down from.

Now, European NATO members have finally been confronted in concrete terms with what defending the continent will look like without full buy-in from America.

According to a [report](#) from the German news magazine Der Spiegel, an envoy of Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth met with high-ranking officials from other NATO member states in Brussels on Friday to discuss changes to the alliance's [Force Model](#). The framework, by which each of the allies designates the components of their national forces available to NATO's commanding officer in peacetime as well as those available in case of an attack, is crucial to the alliance's ability to effectively respond to a crisis or conflict.

The current Force Model was agreed upon at NATO's [Madrid summit](#) in 2022 as a response to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. At Friday's meeting, Der Spiegel reported, the U.S. envoy informed the allies that Washington will be significantly reducing its contributions of key military capabilities moving forward.

It is no secret that the Trump administration has been looking to reduce its commitments to European security generally and to NATO specifically. Trump has been critical of NATO [from the very beginning](#) of his first term in 2017, and commentators have been noting the need for Europeans to defend themselves without having to rely on the U.S. [for years](#). But the message passed along in Brussels was considerably more drastic than the Europeans had anticipated and called into question NATO's entire organization of European defense.

According to Der Spiegel, Washington intends to significantly cut its contributions to NATO of strategic bombers, refueling aircraft and fighter jets. It will also provide fewer destroyers and no longer contribute any submarines to NATO's naval forces. The U.S. intends to significantly reduce the number of armed drones it provides, and European NATO members will be responsible for contributing all unarmed reconnaissance drones. And according to a [correspondent](#) for the Polish news outlet TVP World, the U.S. is also planning to halve its deep-strike capabilities in Europe.

The exact details of America's future contributions are of course classified, but the reported information already points to important gaps in NATO's future force structure. For example, Europeans don't have many of the large surveillance drones the U.S. no longer wants to provide. They rely on America for these and other intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities—what defense analysts call "strategic enablers."

After years when the main uncertainty introduced by Trump was on the political level, we are now seeing a real impact on the working level of military capabilities.

As a result, the planned changes go far beyond recent discussions regarding U.S. troop reductions in [Germany](#) and [Poland](#), and outweigh the strategic implications of Washington's recently announced decision to abandon planned deployments of [long-range strike capabilities in Germany](#). If these changes are indeed implemented, they represent a fundamental challenge for NATO, calling into question the alliance's model for European defense.

Because it has no standing army of its own, NATO works by organizing the member state capabilities at its disposal to maintain a credible deterrence and defense posture. Its [regional defense plans](#), which detail the steps and resources needed to protect specific regions from attack, are based on—and depend on—the forces provided by member states. With the U.S. now cutting its contributions so substantially, all of these plans must be re-examined from top to bottom.

The only element of its current European security posture the U.S. is apparently not planning to reduce is nuclear deterrence. The U.S. will continue to provide NATO's "nuclear umbrella" through the alliance's nuclear-sharing system, by which U.S. airborne nuclear weapons are currently stationed in five European NATO member states and can be delivered using aircraft from those states' forces. Despite these assurances, several NATO members are slowly beginning to look for a European alternative for nuclear deterrence, [namely France](#).

The announced changes to the U.S. force posture in Europe are drastic. After years when the main uncertainty introduced by Trump was on the political level—calling into question Washington's support for NATO and the U.S. determination to act in the event of a threat to European security—we are now seeing a real impact on the working level of military capabilities.

The uncertainty is compounded by the changing messages out of Washington. Just a few months ago, at the Munich Security Conference in February, multiple U.S. and NATO representatives assured me and other European security analysts in attendance that "[NATO was stronger than ever](#)," because despite political squabbles, the underlying military foundation was not only sound but more solid than it had been in years. It is now clear that this is simply not the case.

For Europe, the only possible response can and must be to do even more for its own defense. The challenge, however, is that European NATO allies are reaching the limits of what they can do, as [hundreds of billions of euros](#) in increased defense spending are already being invested amid difficult economic contexts.

The big question regarding U.S. commitments moving forward will be the timeline on which the changes will be made—assuming that the Trump administration does indeed follow through with these plans. Given the administration's erratic decision-making to date, with some troop reductions reversed just days after their announcement, some observers might suspect this too is just a scare tactic to put even more pressure on and extract further concessions from European allies.

But the reports filtering out of Friday's meeting have given Europeans a glimpse of what it will mean to be "home alone" when it comes to defending themselves, and it is not pretty. This is a warning they cannot afford to ignore. 🎧

In the Post-American Era, Europe Will Need to Prioritize Unity

Ulrike Franke — June 25, 2026



French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer attend a press conference at the E5 NATO Summit in Berlin, Germany, June 24, 2026. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

In my last column, I wrote about the reality of a [post-American security future](#) for Europe. My argument was that Europeans need to prepare—and fast—for how they can organize their defense without the United States, given Washington's recent announcements that it would reduce its contributions to NATO's Force Model—and thus to European defense more generally.

While some officials still [downplay](#) the extent to which these moves will weaken NATO, the U.S. withdrawal from European defense is gradually becoming the [accepted reality in Europe](#). Defense officials across the continent are [doing a lot](#) to strengthen their military capabilities and [consider options to compensate](#) for U.S. force reductions.

There is, however, a related geopolitical challenge stemming from the reduced U.S. involvement in the trans-Atlantic alliance that is both more serious and more overlooked: the possibility of renewed intra-European competition.

Rivalry between individual European states, subdued in recent decades by U.S. hegemony, may now return as NATO's largest military power withdraws. As a result, the continent's main military powers are likely to jockey for position as they try to fill the power vacuum left by Washington.

To be sure, it is not obvious that any European country actually desires the burden of leading the continent into its post-American future. But each state has its own strategic outlook, defense policies, languages and cultures. And historically, the post-Cold War era of relative unity, with the U.S. playing an organizing role, is an anomaly: European history has more often been characterized by rivalry and one-upmanship, a scenario that now looks likely to return. The key question, one that will determine the continent's future, is how friendly this competition will be.

The challenge is not new, but it is usually framed as "the German question." Germany, the thinking goes, is too large to be just one of the European nations, but too small to be the continent's unquestioned leader. Since its post-Cold War reunification, with the U.S. leading the West and a growing role for the European Union, Germany has successfully walked the line between being too assertive and not decisive enough. So successful, in fact, that in 2011, then-Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski famously declared that he "fear[ed] German power less than German inaction."

But Germany is changing. In [a recent essay](#), the historian Liana Fix discussed German rearmament and how the recent uptick in German defense spending, while necessary, may bring back European competition. In the current context, most Europeans are in favor of more German defense spending, but how long will that last?

"For all the enthusiasm Europeans feel for Germany's defense buildup right now, many are beginning to ask questions about how Berlin plans to embed its military and industrial dominance in Europe," Fix wrote. "Left unchecked, German military dominance might eventually foster divisions within the continent."

Reportedly, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz was so interested in the topic that [he invited Fix](#) to dinner to discuss her article. This is a good sign as it points to German leadership being aware of the risks and taking them seriously.

As NATO's largest military power withdraws, the continent's main military powers are likely to jockey for position as they try to fill the power vacuum left by Washington.

However, we should also be careful not to make this only about Germany, as if it was only one country's responsibility to keep Europe stable. The other two of Europe's "big three" powers, France and the United Kingdom, also have roles to play, as do the continent's smaller nations.

In this context, it is of particular concern that nationalist forces—especially, [though not exclusively](#), on the right—are on the rise in Europe. In France, the candidate of the far-right National Rally looks likely to win next year's presidential election. This would be a watershed event: Even without a parliamentary majority, the French president has an important role on the international scene. Already today, there are [problems in the Franco-German partnership](#) that are likely to get worse under a far-right administration in Paris.

In the United Kingdom, the Labour government is struggling and going through a leadership change, while the right-wing populist Reform UK, led by chief Brexiteer Nigel Farage, is currently the [most popular party](#).

Germany itself is no exception to this trend. The openly ethnonationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD)—a party so extreme that the National Rally refuses to occupy the same grouping with it in the European Parliament—currently leads [in every single national poll](#). Leaders of the AfD have repeatedly used Nazi-era slogans and downplayed the holocaust.

It is generally understood that Europeans need to work together to have a stronger voice in the world. But in the coming years, the focus on the continent will not only need to be on improving cooperation, but equally on keeping competition in check. Real conflict between European nations may seem unlikely today, even impossible, but the potential for such a scenario can't be ruled out. ■■■

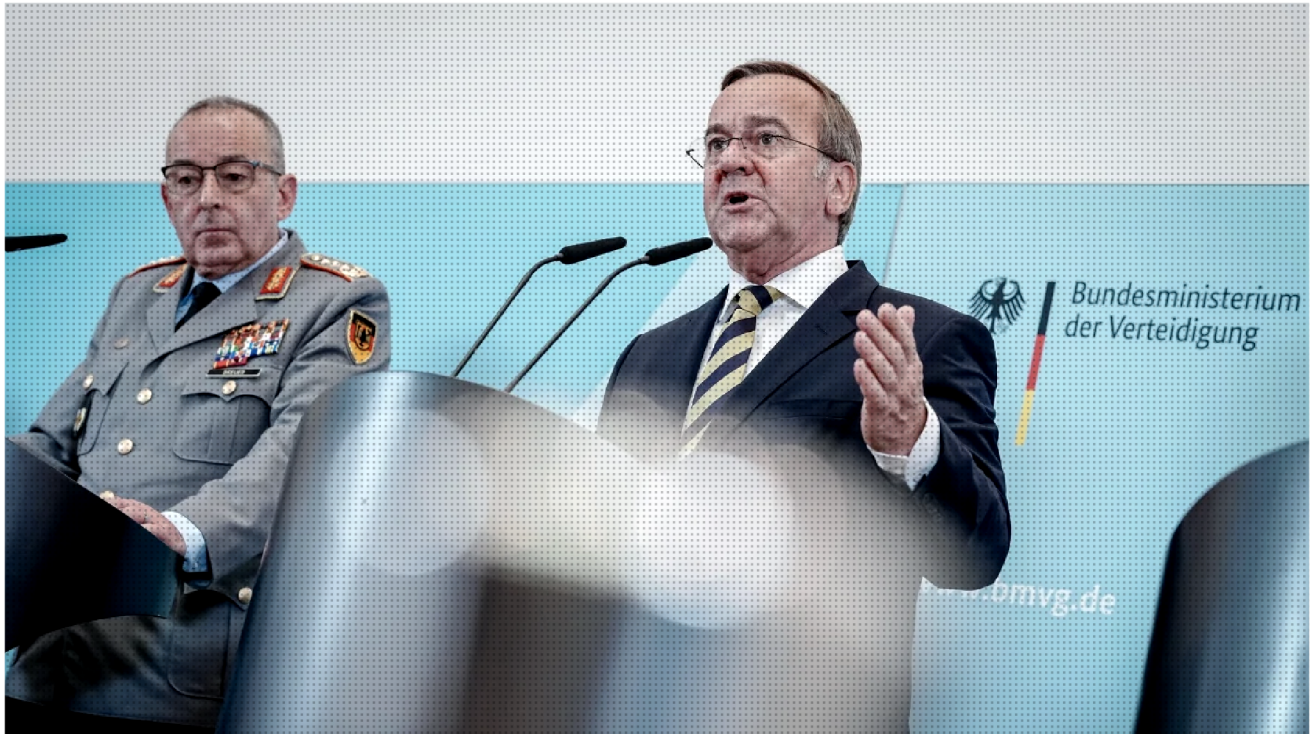
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- [Europe Hesitated on Ukraine. Trump and Putin Moved In](#) — Indecision over frozen Russian assets let Washington and Moscow set the terms.

Germany Rearms

Germany's First-Ever Defense Strategy Underdelivers

Ulrike Franke — April 29, 2026



German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius and Gen. Carsten Breuer present the country's first defense strategy at a press conference, Berlin, Germany, April 22, 2026. (DPA photo by Kay Nietfeld via AP Images)

For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, Berlin published [a military strategy](#) last week. The timing is not coincidental, coming in the midst of a [major German military buildup](#), as well as dramatic disruptions in European security and the trans-Atlantic partnership in which German defense policy has been embedded since the postwar period.

According to [data](#) published by the Swedish SIPRI think tank this week, Germany is now Europe's biggest military spender and the world's fourth-biggest, having boosted its defense spending to \$114 billion in 2025, marking a 24 percent year-on-year increase. Formulating a strategy for what to do with all that money seems like a wise choice, particularly given the shifting outlook for Germany's regional security and core alliance.

Anyone looking for concrete figures on how many [tanks](#) or fighter jets the Bundeswehr—as the German armed forces are known—needs will be disappointed, however. This strategy document is silent on all that, or at least the declassified parts of it are. Instead, it "sets priorities and defines how the Bundeswehr ensures deterrence in the Alliance – and, in particular, how it fights when necessary."

That it might become [necessary to fight](#) is what is worrying many German decision-makers at the moment. At the press conference accompanying the strategy's publication, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius left no doubt as to just how critical the security situation is for Germany, [saying](#), "Rarely has a military strategy been as necessary as it is in this historic phase."

In assessing the threats that lead to this conclusion, the document leaves no room for ambiguity. The relevant section, which is illustrated by a photo of a Russian military parade in Moscow's Red Square, calls Russia "the largest and most direct threat to German, European and transatlantic security for the foreseeable future." Importantly, Russia is characterized not only as a military danger that "exploits conflicts on its periphery and threatens Europe from all directions with long-range weapon systems," but also as a societal menace because of its use of [hybrid warfare against Europe](#) "to challenge all elements of the state."

To answer this challenge, Gen. Carsten Breuer—the country's highest-ranking officer and chief of defense—calls for a "paradigm shift" in his foreword introducing the strategy, saying "Germany must and will assume a leading role within NATO ... at the military level." That highlights the fact that German military planning remains primarily shaped by NATO and the alliance's requirements.

That said, the newly released strategy underscores the degree to which Berlin now also views its priorities through a more national lens. The most important of these priorities is to create "the strongest conventional army in Europe." In fact, this phrase is used so many times throughout the document that it resembles a mantra. Having been informally [announced](#) by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz a few months ago, it has now been codified in the strategy as Germany's official goal. It means a significant expansion of the Bundeswehr to 460,000 soldiers from its current level of under 185,000 by 2035, comprising at least 260,000 active service personnel supplemented by 200,000 reservists who will be available in the event of an emergency. The targets are ambitious: For years, the number of active-duty soldiers has [been stagnating](#) despite [efforts to raise that number](#).

But Pistorius is confident they can be met. "We have the means, we have the political will, and we have the people who take responsibility," he wrote in the strategy's foreword, adding that "the Bundeswehr of tomorrow will not emerge eventually. It is being created right now."

While the document is clear on the threat posed by Russia, it is exceedingly tame when it comes to discussing Germany's and Europe's relationship with the United States.

It notes the longstanding shift of Washington's strategic focus toward the Indo-Pacific and the more recent emphasis on the Western Hemisphere since President Donald Trump returned to the White House, and it draws the conclusion that Europe will need to do more to ensure its own security as a consequence. But Germany's Plan A, and indeed the only plan spelled out in the strategy document, still calls for Europe to contribute more to its own security as a way to convince America to remain involved in regional defense.

As the strategy document puts it, "NATO must become more European in order to remain transatlantic." In this vein, it proposes increasing Europe's force-projection capability in order to "lighten the burden on the United States," while framing Germany's paradigm shift toward assuming greater responsibility within NATO as a way to "increase cohesion between Eastern, Central and Western Europe and maintain ties with North America." Given the tensions within the trans-Atlantic relationship recently, largely due to the Trump administration's hostility to the NATO alliance, one can only hope that behind the scenes there is work being done on a Plan B: a European defense capability with minimal American involvement, and even none at all.

Importantly, the strategy document is equally vague on the role of new technologies in national defense and how the Bundeswehr can [work with the German defense industry](#) to ensure that technological progress is [quickly and effectively integrated](#) into German military systems.

The document boldly proclaims that the Bundeswehr "is set to grow and become more modern at the same time; it will avoid establishing an army of the past for the war of the future," and it announces that innovation will be prioritized "wherever possible," in both weapon systems and training. Indeed, the long-term goal is for the Bundeswehr to establish "technological superiority" over all adversaries.

But the steps to reach this goal remain unclear, and alarmingly little is said about how to work with the defense industry to achieve it. Germany has had a [National Security and Defence Industry Strategy](#) since late 2024, but clearly more needs to be done to link these two efforts.

As a result, the military strategy document published last week signals that Germany will continue on its path to becoming a more capable and responsible military actor, within Europe and NATO, as well as at the national level. The new strategy will certainly contribute to the effort, but unfortunately for anyone hoping for more than that, a "paradigm shift" it is not. 🎧

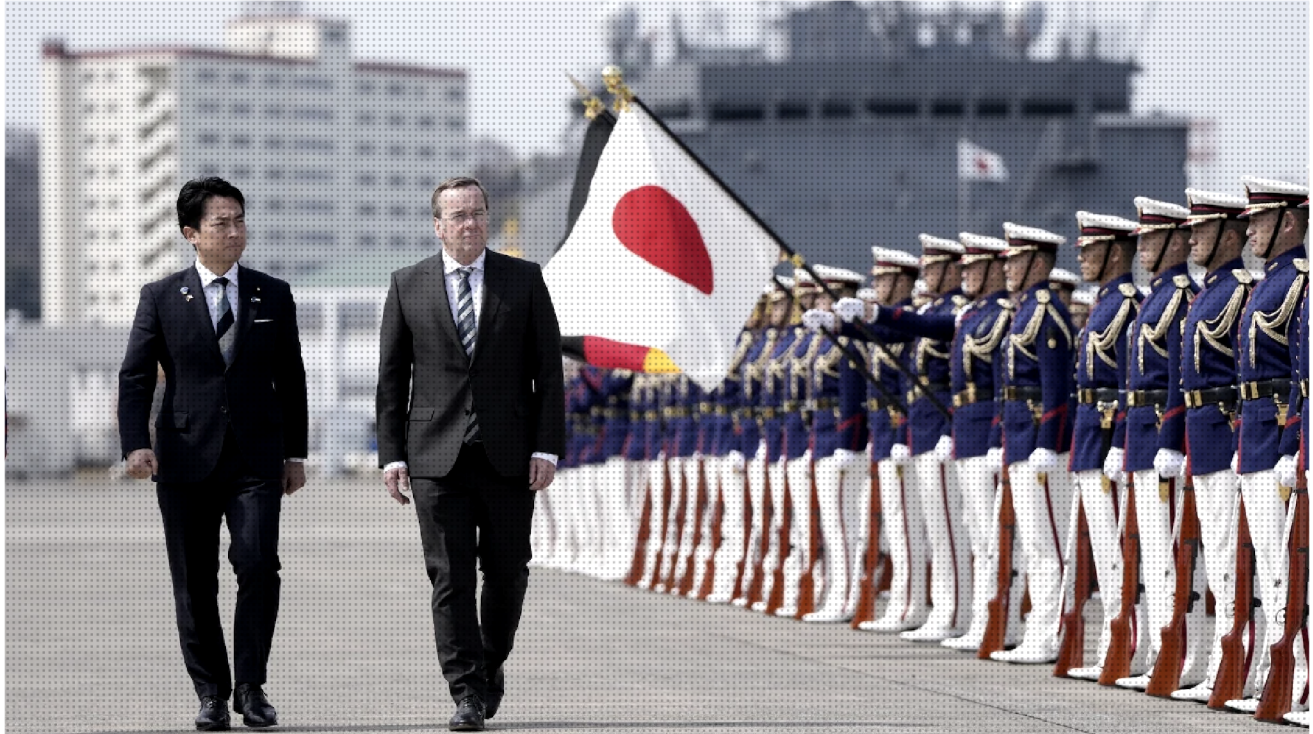
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NATO's Burden-Sharing Test

What's Behind NATO's Expanding Ties With Japan

Elliot Waldman — April 16, 2026



Japanese Defense Minister Koizumi Shinjiro and German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius review an honor guard at the Yokosuka military base, Kanagawa prefecture, Japan, March 22, 2026. (The Yomiuri Shimbun via AP)

A major delegation of NATO envoys is visiting Japan this week to discuss deepening security cooperation amid concerns about whether the United States can be trusted to uphold its alliance commitments.

The size of the delegation is unusual, with 30 of the trans-Atlantic alliance's 32 members attending. The itinerary includes meetings with Japanese Cabinet officials and a tour of the Yokosuka naval base, south of Tokyo. Japanese media outlets [reported](#) that the NATO officials are also interested in learning from Japan's experience in managing ties with the Trump administration.

European powers' have long recognized the importance of the Asia-Pacific and have been quietly building regional partnerships for years, with Japan as an anchor for those efforts. As [I wrote](#) back in 2021, a growing number of Western powers were even then embracing Japan's vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," with France, Germany and the U.K. all stepping up their joint military cooperation with Japan through a range of joint exercises.

For NATO, a closer relationship with Japan makes sense for a few reasons. For starters, the Trump administration has threatened to invade Greenland and is openly threatening to withdraw from the alliance. Technically, the U.S. president can't pull out of NATO without approval from Congress. But as commander-in-chief of the U.S. Armed Forces, there is a lot that Trump can do to make America's exit from NATO a de facto reality, such as withdrawing or reducing the U.S. troop presence in key theaters. In that context, seeking other partners with whom they could potentially share the burden of collective defense is a prudent call for NATO member states.

For Japan's part, it has historically relied on the U.S. security umbrella for its defense. Given Trump's recent behavior, however, officials in Tokyo are also worried about whether they can count on the U.S. to be a steadfast ally in the long term, even if they don't say so publicly.

Another factor driving increased engagement between Europe and Japan is the increased defense spending on both sides. Much like their Japanese counterparts, European officials have realized they can no longer rely solely on the U.S. security umbrella. Jolted into action by Trump's own prodding, and by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, most countries on the continent are sharply increasing their defense spending. Japan is doing the same, aiming to counter threats in its own neighborhood stemming from China and North Korea.

In [an interview](#) with the Japan Times this week, Tokyo's ambassador to NATO pointed to the recent establishment of a bilateral defense industry cooperation dialogue as one of several concrete forms of cooperation that have been formalized between the two sides following last year's NATO Summit in June. Indeed, Japan's sizeable defense industry and its imminent easing of restrictions on arms exports has already [attracted attention](#) from European states like Poland.

To be sure, there will be challenges ahead as Japan and NATO seek to deepen their security ties. "Japan and Europe don't fully align on China," Bryce Barros, a fellow at the Bratislava-based GLOBSEC think tank and WPR contributor, told me. He pointed to Europe's muted support for Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae amid her government's diplomatic crisis with China over comments she made in support of Taiwan. European governments have also been looking to China for trade and investment opportunities in recent months and will be loath to jeopardize those deals.

"At the same time, Japan stands to gain from deeper ties with NATO and from closer engagement with Ukraine's defense innovation ecosystem," particularly its counter-drone technologies, Barros said. Given the mutually beneficial nature of the partnership, the trend of closer cooperation between Europe and Japan looks set to continue into the future.)))

NATO's High-Stakes Summit

Judah Grunstein — July 6, 2026



NATO banners cover buildings near the venue of the NATO Summit in Ankara, Turkey, July 6, 2026. (AP photo by Emrah Gurel)

NATO leaders are on their way to Ankara, where the alliance will hold its [annual summit](#) this week. The gathering is a particularly high-stakes one this year, with European leaders feeling pressure from all sides when it comes to what most observers expect will be the central focus of discussions: [how quickly they are implementing](#) the alliance-wide pledge made last year to boost defense spending to 3.5 percent of GDP per year by 2035, with an additional 1.5 percent dedicated to dual-use and security-related infrastructure.

The primary source of the pressure Europeans feel is U.S. President Donald Trump, who has long pushed the NATO allies to contribute more for their own security, while never hiding his animosity to America's security role on the continent. And since returning to the White House in January 2025, Trump and high-ranking officials from his administration have repeatedly signaled their intention to draw down the U.S. military's presence in Europe and its commitment to European defense.

The NATO allies thought they had bought themselves some time to adjust to a diminished U.S. security role on the continent with last year's spending pledge. But last month, U.S. military leaders confirmed reports of [significant cuts](#) to the weapons platforms America will commit to the alliance in the event of a conflict scenario. And at the same time, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [announced](#) a formal six-month review of the troop numbers deployed to Europe, suggesting a drawdown could be imminent.

That has further raised concerns over the second source of the pressure European NATO members are feeling: Russia. Ever since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, European NATO members, [particularly in the East](#), have warned that President Vladimir Putin's expansionist ambitions are unlikely to stop in the Donbas. To be clear, the Russian military has become increasingly bogged down in Ukraine, demonstrating the limits of its ability to follow through on Putin's revanchist agenda. But it has nevertheless demonstrated its destructive capacities, underscoring the urgent necessity for NATO to maintain deterrence on the alliance's eastern flank.

Until European member states are able to field the capabilities for which they currently depend on the U.S., particularly heavy transport and refueling aircraft, the sine qua non of that deterrence remains alliance cohesion and America's continued commitment to NATO. Since Trump's return, the cost of both has increasingly been a form of obsequious and [self-humiliating flattery](#) of which NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte has become the ultimate practitioner. As recently as last month, when Rutte visited the White House in an effort to soften Trump up before the summit, he appealed to the American president's ego by referring to the increased European defense spending since 2017 as the alliance's "Trump trillion."

In doing so, however, Rutte risks activating the third source of pressure on NATO's European leaders: public opinion at home. The increased defense spending comes against the backdrop of a stubborn cost-of-living crisis and flat economic growth in many parts of Europe. That could provoke a backlash in states that have moved ahead quickest with the new spending pledge, such as Germany, Poland and the Nordic and Baltic states, while providing an added obstacle for those that have been slower to do so, including the U.K. and France. The fact that Rutte is so explicitly linking the increased spending to Trump, who is broadly unpopular across Europe, will likely amplify the blowback.

Worse still, European leaders have yet to shape public opinion among their populations on the new reality of European security: Europe faces a real if manageable threat from Russia, and with America heading toward the exit, it will very soon have to face that threat on its own. To do so, it will need to spend more on defense, whether that spending is called the Trump trillion or not. 🎧

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Britain's Balancing Act

The U.K.'s Next Prime Minister Will Face NATO's Hardest Test

Candace Rondeaux — July 8, 2026



Andy Burnham speaks to supporters after the Makerfield by-election in Ashton in Makerfield, England, Friday, June 19, 2026. (AP Photo by Jon Super)

As NATO leaders gather in Ankara this week, one of the people most likely to shape the alliance's future is not in the room. Within weeks, Labour lawmaker Andy Burnham is expected to become the United Kingdom's next prime minister, inheriting the political, fiscal and industrial challenge of turning NATO's new ambitions for Europe into military capability.

Burnham, a self-identified socialist in the ["soft left"](#) tradition, is widely expected [to continue](#) outgoing Prime Minister Keir Starmer's solid commitment to NATO. But London can't do it alone. And across the English Channel, France is confronting a reckoning, as the far-right NATO-skeptical National Rally [gains ground](#) ahead of next year's presidential election to decide

who will succeed President Emmanuel Macron. The relationship between London and Paris, Europe's two nuclear powers, could become the political center of the continent's security architecture just as the ideological distance between their governments widens.

For all of Europe's political complexity, no elected leader will sit closer to the junction between U.S. military power and European security than the U.K.'s next leader. As custodian of one of Europe's two independent nuclear deterrents and Washington's closest defense partner on the continent, whoever walks through the black door at No. 10 Downing Street will carry responsibilities that extend far beyond Britain's shores.

Burnham will also inherit a daunting domestic agenda shaped by years of [weak economic growth](#) and the legacy of Brexit, which has left Britain more polarized and fueled the rise of an increasingly confident populist right. He has promised to [rewire](#) the country's energy infrastructure, revive domestic manufacturing and [devolve](#) economic power from Westminster to the regions, giving Wales and Scotland more autonomy as part of a broader push to reindustrialize. He has also argued that the U.K. should rely less on foreign capital and imported technology in strategic sectors, including artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure. Those ambitions, however, collide with an unforgiving fiscal reality.

Burnham is expected to take office facing hard budgetary choices on nearly every front, but defense could prove the most unforgiving. The U.K.'s recently unveiled [Defense Investment Plan](#) arrived after months of bruising fights between the Treasury and the Defense Ministry, which resulted in [the resignations](#) last month of the country's top two defense officials, John Healey and Al Carns, both of whom argued that the government's spending did not match its threat assessment.

Their departures exposed the problem Burnham will inherit. Washington is signaling a new phase in NATO burden-sharing, with the U.K., France and Germany expected to carry more of the weight for European security. Yet London is being asked to act as one of Europe's primary security guarantors while still struggling with cost overruns, delayed procurement, recruitment shortfalls and a defense industrial base weakened by years of uncertainty.

The Defense Investment Plan is the country's most ambitious effort in a generation to retool its military for renewed great power competition. Backed by 298 billion pounds (about \$405 billion) over four years, it commits London to raising defense spending to 3 percent of GDP in the next Parliament and, alongside its NATO allies, to 3.5 percent by 2035. More than a spending pledge, it is an attempt to translate the lessons of wars in Ukraine and the Middle East into a new force structure.

For all of Europe's political complexity, no elected leader will sit closer to the junction between U.S. military power and European security than the U.K.'s next leader.

Technology integration is the organizing principle. Drones, AI and autonomous vehicles account for a sizable slice of the spending. The navy is building toward fleets that pair crewed ships with autonomous surface and undersea vessels, while the air force will invest in collaborative combat aircraft to fly alongside piloted fighters. Cyber, space and software receive dedicated funding, and a new [Digital Targeting Web](#) aims to connect sensors, decision-makers and weapons into a single operational network. The largest single increase, more than 20 billion pounds (\$27 billion), is reserved for modernizing Britain's nuclear enterprise. Deterrence remains the foundation on which the rest of the force is being rebuilt.

With the budget numbers set and the transformation plans drafted, Burnham has to answer whether the ["business-friendly socialism"](#) he practiced as [mayor of Greater Manchester](#) can rebuild a hollowed-out military and lift the defense industrial base out of the doldrums. Like every other NATO leader under pressure to meet the new targets, he faces the hard problem of whether to raise taxes, cut welfare spending, borrow more or some combination of the three.

The search for funding has expanded beyond the Treasury. Parliament is [weighing proposals](#) to issue retail defense bonds, potentially raising 10 billion to 20 billion pounds directly from the public while broadening the country's investor base. Long [championed](#) by the Liberal Democrats and some Labour MPs, the idea was derided by Starmer's government as little more than another form of public borrowing. But with Burnham expected to take office amid a projected \$6.2 billion defense funding gap, it could gain traction.

Much will depend on the shape of Burnham's Cabinet. With little time before he formally asks King Charles for permission to lead the government, Burnham has yet to name a senior team. Two appointments stand above the rest: a chancellor of the exchequer who will determine whether Britain's defense ambitions survive first contact with fiscal reality, and a defense secretary who will determine whether those resources become military capability.

On defense, Dan Jarvis, the current defense secretary and a former army officer, represents continuity. Jarvis negotiated the Defense Investment Plan and has urged Burnham to commit to NATO's 3.5 percent target by 2035. A more disruptive choice would be Carns, the former

armed forces minister who resigned over what he viewed as inadequate funding. Carns has [indicated](#) he would consider serving under Burnham but has warned that any prime minister must first present a credible plan to finance Britain's military ambitions.

The contest for the Treasury is equally revealing. Burnham has repeatedly declined to name a preferred chancellor, insisting policy comes before personalities. Yet the names most often mentioned point to competing visions of the country's future. Ed Miliband, a former Labour leader currently serving as energy secretary, would [signal](#) an investment-led approach centered on industrial renewal, infrastructure and clean energy. A figure closer to Treasury orthodoxy, such as current Chancellor Rachel Reeves or Health Secretary James Murray, would reassure markets but constrain the scope of Burnham's agenda. The choice reveals whether he sees rearmament primarily as a fiscal exercise or an industrial project.

A second debate runs underneath the budget fight: What should Britain's armed forces be optimized to do? Some U.K. defense experts, like Philip Shetler-Jones, [argue](#) that London's embrace of a "NATO First" strategy has tilted the balance too far toward defending allies at the expense of the homeland. His critique—that Britain has optimized for deterrence in the Baltics while investing too little in integrated air and missile defense, civil resilience and the protection of critical infrastructure at home—is on point. As the recent rash of [sabotage](#) and [espionage](#) cases in the U.K. makes clear, the capabilities needed to deter Russia near Narva are not identical to those needed to protect London.

The debate in Britain offers an early glimpse of the political economy of NATO's next phase. The alliance can agree on higher spending, stronger deterrence and a larger European role. Turning those aspirations into ships, factories, drones, engineers and trained personnel is a different challenge. That work begins not in Ankara but in national capitals like London, where Britain's next leader will soon discover that the hardest part of NATO's transformation is not its military dimensions, but the political challenge of implementing it. 🎧

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The Russian Threat — Sabotage, Drones and Hybrid War

Europe Is Running Out of Near Misses From Russian Sabotage

Candace Rondeaux — August 19, 2026



Police officers on the grounds of Leipzig Airport, in Schkeuditz, Germany, Aug. 7, 2026. (Sebastian Willnow for dpa via AP)

Eight hundred grams of Semtex. That was roughly how much of the plastic explosive German investigators say was packed into a tin-can-sized device attached to the [drone discovered](#) at Leipzig/Halle airport in Germany on Aug. 4. For perspective, forensic investigators estimated that the bomb that destroyed [Pan Am Flight 103](#) over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, contained roughly 350 to 450 grams of Semtex. All 259 people aboard that flight were killed, along with 11 people on the ground.

No one was killed in Leipzig. The drone's detonator failed, and an airport bus driver managed to [kick](#) the device clear of the Ukrainian cargo plane it was apparently targeting. Part of the heavy-lift pipeline that flies NATO's strategic airlift missions to Ukraine, the Antonov jet was loaded with [ammunition](#). Aviation authorities halted air traffic and diverted several inbound DHL freighters to Hanover after one such flight arriving from Marseille was struck by an object German authorities suspect was a second drone, though it caused only minor damage.

Twice in two years, Leipzig has come close to disaster. The first time was in 2024, when a parcel containing an incendiary device [caught fire](#) shortly before it was loaded onto an aircraft at the airport's DHL hub. Saboteurs linked to Russia are implicated in both cases. Europe cannot afford to bide its time while it decides what deterrence looks like.

From Leipzig to [London](#), sabotage attacks across NATO territory have taken many forms since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: arson, vandalism, bomb plots, drone incursions, assassination attempts and cuts to cable and rail lines. Scattered across a dozen jurisdictions, targets initially seemed as variable as the timing of the incidents, making attribution slow work. Coordinating a response to Moscow's provocations has been even slower, in part because European capitals are still arguing over what constitutes a hybrid attack on critical infrastructure, and what exactly counts as critical.

The campaign's goals are clear: disrupt Western support for Ukraine, deepen divisions within NATO and probe how much violence Russia can sponsor below the threshold of open conflict. The trans-Atlantic alliance has held since 2016 that a hybrid attack could [trigger](#) an Article 5 mutual defense response, while maintaining that answering one is primarily the job of the state that was hit. The label determines whether an incident lands on a prosecutor's desk or in a NATO command center.

To turn the tables, Europe needs to do at least four things: go after the networks that regenerate operatives; harden the logistics Russia is probing; open the public record so the press, researchers and lawmakers can see the totality of Moscow's campaign; and build a credible ladder of consequences for further escalation.

A February 2026 [study](#) by GLOBSEC, a Bratislava-based think tank, identified 172 people named in legal proceedings across Europe, tied to 151 incidents of sabotage and subversion since 2022. None of them have triggered NATO's Article 4, the provision that lets any member call the alliance into consultation when its security is threatened. Poland invoked it in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea; eight allies invoked it together on the day of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022; Poland went back to the North Atlantic Council—the alliance's primary decision-making body—in September 2025 after Russian drones crossed its airspace, some of which were shot down by Polish and Dutch jets.

It would be surprising if Germany did not call for Article 4 consultations in response to the most recent drone incident in Leipzig. It would be even more so if another round of talks in Brussels amounted to much. Intelligence services across NATO territory have learned hard lessons about detecting and disrupting Moscow-directed plots. What they have not learned is how to convert those lessons into deterrence.

Lockerbie underscores the urgency. It took 12 years to convict the only man ever found guilty in the bombing. Now, 38 years later, a new [trial](#) is set to open in Washington this month for the man accused of building the bomb for the Libyan intelligence network behind the plot.

Documents recovered from the files of Libya's former spy chief and [published](#) last year are also said to tie Libyan intelligence operatives to UTA Flight 772, which was blown apart over Niger nine months after Lockerbie, killing all 170 aboard. Scottish detectives are [examining](#) the files now. The lesson is discomfiting: attribution takes years, justice can take decades, but deterrence cannot wait.

While the Lockerbie case crawled toward a verdict, another generation of extremists was preparing a different kind of attack on civilian aviation: the one that brought down the World Trade Center and tore open the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001. Fear and uncertainty then produced rash American decisions, the consequences of which are still reverberating. Europe can still avoid both mistakes: waiting for catastrophe to recognize a campaign, then letting catastrophe dictate the response.

Coverage of the prosecutions of low-level saboteurs on the continent has produced a tidy narrative: a gig economy of covert action, disposable labor hired for a discrete task and discarded upon arrest. This explanation is not wrong so much as it is incomplete.

Attribution takes years, justice can take decades, but deterrence cannot wait.

Consider the case of Roman Lavrynovych, a 22-year-old Ukrainian builder convicted in June of conspiring to burn a house and a car in London linked to then-Prime Minister Keir Starmer. [The BBC reported](#) that Russia was behind the attack, but also that Lavrynovych did not seem to know whose property he was setting alight, and the thousands of pounds he was promised never arrived. His handler's contact information was saved in his phone as EL Money.

The BBC found evidence suggesting EL is Evgeny Lyukshin, 23, trained in information warfare and the son of a senior Russian Foreign Ministry official, though the network could not confirm it and Lyukshin did not respond to questions. [The Insider](#) traced father and son to a Moscow

address used to house staff from Russia's SVR intelligence service. Lavrynovych is headed to prison. As of this writing, Lyukshin's status is unknown.

This points to a discomfiting fact: We are four years into a covert campaign where the only point of consensus is that the people getting caught are disposable while their handlers abscond. This should itself be a warning.

European governments know far more about the shape of the Kremlin's shadow war than the public can see. Much of it sits in national court files across multiple jurisdictions, where indictments arrive as one-paragraph statements with the names redacted, judgments as unwieldy PDFs when they are posted at all, and the whole is governed by privacy rules written for ordinary criminal defendants rather than for state-directed operations.

Sunlight would help. Access to court records, indictments, evidence summaries and declassified attribution would let journalists and researchers connect cases across borders, and would let lawmakers grasp the cumulative threat before a mass-casualty attack forces the argument under crisis conditions.

The Leipzig case is illustrative. German investigators recently recovered a [DNA trace](#) from the drone that matches biological evidence found on the incendiary device that ignited at the airport's DHL logistics center in July 2024. Germany's weekly newspaper Die Zeit [reported](#) last week that the same DNA profile had already been registered in Lithuania. German authorities have not confirmed the match, but a separate news [investigation](#) found that the man who transported and armed the 2024 parcels also brought drone components and SIM cards into Germany that summer, the same type of equipment needed to fly a device like the one discovered at Leipzig in early August.

Lower-level players are already in custody. The clues point past them, indicating that European authorities urgently need to focus on coordinated identification and disruption of the persistent middle layer: the coordinators, recruiters, logisticians, financiers and technical specialists who survive individual arrests and keep supplying new operatives.

Germany is beginning to move in that direction. Earlier this month, its Cabinet [approved](#) legislation that would give intelligence services much broader powers to hack hostile systems, disrupt foreign operations and intervene against sabotage rather than simply watch it unfold. The measures still require parliamentary approval, but the shift from intelligence collection to active disruption is overdue.

Germany also [opened](#) a counter-drone research center this week, which is a reasonable response to the spate of mysterious drone overflights and a welcome step after the most recent drone incident. It is not, however, an answer to the reconnaissance behind it. Whoever sent the drone toward the cargo apron in Leipzig understands how freight moves along the seam between Europe's commercial networks and the strategic airlift that delivers military gear to the Ukrainian frontline.

Freight networks are not only targets to be defended with sensors and jammers. Their daily rhythms give visibility into routes, dwell times, handoffs and vulnerabilities to anyone patient enough to watch. Logistical corridors have to be treated as counterintelligence terrain, which means investing in anomaly detection, access control and more information-sharing between commercial operators and security services. Twice now, Leipzig has been saved by a faulty detonator. No one should count on getting that lucky again. 🚫

Where Is the European Union's Drone Wall?

Ulrike Franke — July 27, 2026



A “no drone zone” sign at Brussels Airport, Belgium, March 20, 2026. (Photo by Jonathan Raa for NurPhoto via AP)

By now, drones flying into Europe from Russia, Belarus or Ukraine have become a persistent threat to Europeans. Readers of [these pages know](#) that drone incursions over Europe's eastern flank are becoming more regular: Just in the past few months, Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, [came to a standstill](#) because of a drone incursion, forcing the president and prime minister to take shelter. In Latvia, the prime minister and defense minister [lost their posts](#) over a deficient response to drone sightings. Finland has reported [multiple drones](#) flying over its territory in recent months. And Romania reported over [40 drone incursions](#) into its airspace during the first half of 2026.

Not only are there more drone flights, but incidents involving injuries and property damage are piling up. In Galati, a town near the Romanian border with Ukraine and Moldova, [a drone crashed](#) into the roof of a 10-story building in late May. A 14-year-old boy and his mother were injured in the ensuing fire, and 70 residents were evacuated. That followed an incident last September, when over 20 drones entered Polish airspace. The roof of a house [was damaged](#) when it was hit by one of the missiles fired from a fighter jet to intercept the drones.

As it happened, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was scheduled to give her [State of the Union](#) address only two days after the incident in Poland. In her speech, she called for the EU to establish a "drone wall" that would be the "foundation of a credible European defense", as well as for the "Eastern Flank Watch" which would provide real-time space surveillance of the eastern border. The following month, the bloc released an [ambitious and expansive blueprint](#) for its counter-drone network, envisioned for purposes ranging from border protection to fighting transnational organized criminal groups.

Out of these deliberations and speeches and policy documents came the European Drone Defence Initiative, which is supposed to reach "initial capacity" by end of 2026, with completion scheduled for the end of 2027. EU defense commissioner Andrius Kubilius noted earlier this month that this effort is ["the first time that Europe is doing pan-European projects."](#)

On first glance, the stars are aligned: There is a clear need for drone defenses on Europe's eastern flank, and the EU has vowed, in speeches and policy documents, to meaningfully counter those drones. The question is: Where is the European drone wall? Because when looking behind the big statements and promises, it becomes clear that the EU's drone defenses are largely missing in action.

Drones coming over the eastern border are still being intercepted by fighter jets—or not at all. As far as can be ascertained, there are no plans for a 4,000-kilometer drone wall from Finland to Romania. Such an effort would admittedly be extremely ambitious, and would [need to be multi-layered](#), with a sensor layer that includes different types of detection technologies and an effector layer with various counter-drone technologies, from kinetic solutions to electronic warfare systems. It would also require a unified command and control node for joint operation visibility. The undertaking would be substantial—but so far, it is not being pursued.

*Behind big statements and promises,
the EU's drone defenses are largely
missing in action.*

Luckily, several member states have begun building up their own national drone defenses. Poland announced the launch of its own ["anti-drone wall,"](#) probably [Europe's largest counter-drone system](#), a few months after the shock of the September 2025 incursion. The cost of the project is estimated at 3.5 billion euros, and will include 18 anti-drone batteries, with 35 mm anti-aircraft guns, 30 mm cannons, and 12.7 mm multi-barrel heavy machine guns. There will be 52 firing platoons, 18 command platoons, 703 military trucks and reconnaissance vehicles,

as well as a sensor layer with short- and medium-range radars, passive electronic detection sensors and electro-optical systems. Initial operational capabilities are scheduled for delivery before the end of 2026, while the drone wall is planned to be fully operational by the end of 2027.

The Baltic states are also pursuing [a counter-drone initiative](#) which was launched by an industry consortium. Romania is investing heavily in its defenses in general, including air defenses which include counter drone systems, though the latter is only one element. These national efforts, however, are not coordinated and are dependent on national ambitions, which results in differing levels of action depending on the country.

The European Union is not directly involved in the national efforts, but it is helping to fund parts of it: the Polish drone wall and Romania's defense efforts are receiving funding through the EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) loan mechanism. A request for funding for the Baltic counter drone effort [was rejected in March](#), but the reason for this decision has not been made public.

SAFE is a newly established financial instrument that gives member states long-maturity loans. While these funding efforts are certainly helpful, if the EU is indeed trying to fulfil the ambitious announcements regarding its counter-drone efforts, more would need to be done. Specifically, it would be useful to have more coordination between the eastern flank countries, to exchange experiences with counter-drone systems.

For now, the countries are largely pursuing their own solutions, thus potentially doubling and tripling work such as assessing new solutions' viability. It is also important for countries to have a joint operating picture via a continuous detection layer along the entirety of the EU's border with Russia. The data from this layer would need to be fed into one system, providing a real-time view of the whole border.

The European drone wall, as announced in EU speeches, is arguably too ambitious and too vague, and using it for border migration and international crime fighting risks misdirecting the project. The EU needs to be careful not to overpromise and underdeliver. It can, however, play a useful role in helping those states that are already undertaking drone defense buildups with funding, and should incentivize those border states which so far are not yet active in the field to do more. By coordinating individual governments' efforts, the EU can play an important role in avoiding redundancy and ensuring the various initiatives are working together. For now, this appears to be the best solution available. 🏢

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