



# The Hard Security of EU Enlargement

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## Executive Summary

The EU's decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova is a geostrategic investment that could strengthen the EU's security and prevent Russia from achieving its ambition to undermine the European security order. As prospects for Ukrainian NATO membership currently remain distant, however, the EU must seriously consider how it can secure an eastward EU enlargement without security guarantees under NATO's Article 5. Providing hard security assurances to Ukraine would require the EU to take bold actions and break old taboos. However, such shifts might be feasible given the external forces at work in today's geopolitical environment, which include pressure from the United States and the prospect of some form of ceasefire settlement in Russia's war against Ukraine.

There is therefore reason to take a closer look at some of the steps that could be taken by Europe to deliver on the hard security of EU enlargement. One step could be to move to qualified majority voting in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and to immediately integrate Ukraine and Moldova into CFSP decision-making forums and initiatives. Another step might involve ambitious solutions for funding Europe's defence infrastructure, including joint financing through defence bonds. A third step could involve communication efforts targeted at EU citizens to improve understanding of the security dimensions of enlargement and to change the strategic culture across Europe. Fourth, EU and NATO cooperation could be further developed, for example by sealing an EU-NATO partnership under which the EU would use its financial and regulatory tools to help member states fulfil NATO capability requirements. Fifth and finally, the time may have come to revisit the idea of creating European cells within NATO, allowing Europe to take the main responsibility for its own security while maintaining critical US support in logistics, airlift and strategic intelligence.

## Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine is not only about Ukraine's freedom and existence, but also about the concrete future of Europe's hard security. **Russia wants to replace the cooperative and democratic security order in Europe**, the principles of which were outlined 50 years ago in the [Helsinki Final Act](#), with one where might makes right and Russia is an empire that dominates large swathes of Europe. This would pose an existential security threat to the EU and its member states.

**The EU's decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova is a geostrategic investment that could strengthen the European security order and prevent Russia from achieving its ambitions.** It does so not only by defending Ukraine's and Moldova's sovereign right to pursue a European path, but also by securing military capabilities and strategic resources for the EU. However, even though Ukraine and Moldova could contribute to the EU's security in the long term as full members, it is Europe primarily that must ensure their security.

In a scenario where there is a settlement or ceasefire in Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU may – given its commitment to Ukraine through the EU accession process, as well as US pressure on Europe to take care of its own security – find itself entangled in the issue of Ukraine's security. **Ensuring the long-term hard security of Ukraine (winning the peace) would require the EU to depart from the status quo and break old taboos. However, such a tectonic shift could be feasible given the forces at work in today's geopolitical environment.**

The EU has shown in the past that major external events, such as the reunification of Germany, or more recently the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, can make the impossible possible. **Developments in European cooperation do not come so much out of political vision as out of necessity.** For example, if US President Donald Trump were to demand that Europe should take care of Ukraine's security as a precondition for continuing US security guarantees to NATO, the EU might be forced to make painful reassessments. There is therefore reason to take a closer look at the steps that could be taken by European policymakers to provide credible security assurances to Ukraine and to ensure the hard security of an eastward EU enlargement.

## An eastward EU enlargement is a geostrategic investment

The EU's [statement](#) on opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in 2024 describes enlargement as a geostrategic investment. Four security-related reasons why this is the case are worth highlighting. First, a scenario in which Ukraine is forced to give up on its ambition to become fully integrated with the EU, and thus have its sovereignty limited, would mean that Russia is allowed to benefit from its aggression and nuclear blackmail. That is also the case for Moldova, which confirmed its ambition to join the EU in a national referendum amid intensive Russian [hybrid warfare](#). **A failure to respect the sovereign right of Ukraine and Moldova to pursue the European path would pave the way for a security order divided into spheres of interest, where competition for territory, resources and influence is settled by force.** Such an order would pose an existential threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of smaller countries and undermine the principles of the European security order that were outlined in the Helsinki Final Act in 1975,

including respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, prohibition of the use of force or the threat of the use of force, as well as the fulfilment of obligations under international law. Successful outcomes in Ukraine's and Moldova's EU accession processes would prevent such a development, thereby strengthening the European security order and international law.

Second, if Ukraine and Moldova were to remain in a grey zone between the EU/NATO and Russia, this would entail significant security risks for the whole of Europe, since Russia would be able to use these countries as arenas for continuing its conventional and hybrid acts of aggression. Moreover, a delayed or failed EU enlargement would allow geopolitical actors other than Russia, not least China, to increase their influence in the region. In today's geopolitical situation, characterised by interstate tensions, rivalry and insecurity, there is no status quo ante to return to: **either the EU exports stability to the east or it imports instability from the east.**

Third, Ukraine has one of Europe's largest, strongest and most experienced standing armies, and its officers and soldiers have direct combat experience in a war against an aggressor in Europe. Ukraine has developed expertise in areas such as mine clearance, intelligence and drone combat. Both Ukraine and Moldova have experience of resisting and combating Russian cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. Therefore, **both candidate countries could contribute to the EU's common military capabilities as full members.** Moreover, integrating Ukraine's innovative defence industry with its European counterpart could provide a much-needed boost to the EU's productivity.

Fourth, **an eastward enlargement would strengthen the EU's prosperity and competitiveness**, and hence contribute to its security. By enlarging eastward, the EU would gain access to [raw materials](#) that are critical for its strategic autonomy. Ukraine is a major producer of titanium and graphite, and it has rich copper and lithium deposits that could be included in the value chains of battery production in the EU. Ukraine could also contribute to European energy security through its [natural gas reserves](#), nuclear power plants, and experience of resisting attacks on critical infrastructure. Furthermore, with Ukraine as a member, the EU would increase its [arable land](#) by about one-third. Ukraine's agricultural industry could reduce Europe's dependence on imports of agricultural products and thus strengthen the EU's food security. Failure to fully integrate Ukraine into the EU would entail lost opportunities to strengthen EU military capabilities, strategic autonomy and economic competitiveness. Furthermore, unless Ukraine is reasonably safe and prosperous, there is a risk that a new wave of millions of Ukrainian refugees would seek to settle in the EU.

## EU eastward enlargement needs security

**NATO is the only actor currently able to provide Ukraine and Moldova with credible security guarantees.** It is no coincidence that 23 of the EU's 27 member states are also members of NATO, and that the previous EU eastward enlargements were preceded by NATO enlargements. Sweden's and Finland's decisions to join NATO following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine provide further examples of how EU membership is not considered a sufficient security guarantee. That political agreements with security assurances are conceptually distinct from hard security guarantees is something that Ukraine has learned the hard way from the Budapest Memorandum.

NATO membership remains Ukraine's goal – it is enshrined in the Constitution and supported by a clear majority of Ukrainian citizens. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky is open to the country's [gradual integration](#) into NATO, with the mutual defence guarantees under Article 5 initially applying only to the territories controlled by the Ukrainian government. However, even though NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has repeatedly [emphasised](#) that Ukraine should become a member of NATO, there is currently no consensus within the Alliance on extending an invitation to Ukraine. This could change quickly, and European countries are right to insist that Ukrainian NATO membership would be the best and cheapest option for ensuring security in the North Atlantic area. Nonetheless, **the prospects for Ukrainian NATO membership remain distant, so the EU must seriously consider how it can secure its geostrategic investment – an EU eastward enlargement – without security guarantees under NATO's Article 5.**

One reason why the EU needs to ensure Ukraine's security is that any other scenario would be worse for the security of the EU member states. An independent Ukraine that needs security guarantees to deal with future threats from Russia but lacks NATO prospects might look inwards and seek to acquire its own nuclear weapons. Alternatively, Ukraine could seek out alternative security partners that might have security agendas that run counter to the interests of the EU. Both these scenarios would exacerbate the security situation in Europe and require even higher defence spending by EU member states. **The most [pessimistic scenario](#) is that Ukraine receives no security guarantees and loses territory and sovereignty. This would mean that Ukraine ceased to exist as an independent nation, allowing Russia to cement its regime and move closer to the EU.** The Russian regime's outlook and methods could pose a threat to other European countries.

A second reason why the EU needs to consider steps to deliver hard security is that it has already taken a stand on Ukraine's and Moldova's territorial integrity and European future by granting them candidate status and opening formal accession negotiations. This is a **geopolitical commitment on behalf of the EU**, which brings the importance of the EU's mutual assistance and solidarity clauses to the fore. [Article 42\(7\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union stipulates that if a member state is the victim of an armed attack on its territory, the other member states are obliged to support and assist the attacked member state by all available means. If the EU's commitments to the candidate countries through the accession process are not matched by security assurances (in a scenario where Ukraine remains outside NATO), the EU risks losing credibility in its enlargement agenda and more broadly in its external relations. It would also pose a threat to the credibility of the EU as a whole, since **a situation in which Russia tests the EU's ability and willingness to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the candidate countries, both during the accession period and after possible full membership, cannot be excluded.** Should the EU prove unable to defend the security of one of its member states, this would jeopardise the whole European project.

However, the EU of today is not a defence alliance. It is not constructed to provide hard military security guarantees and it lacks the institutional mechanisms, military resources and (nuclear) deterrence capabilities to do so. If the EU were to be able to provide some form of credible security assurances to its current and prospective members – which it might deem necessary for the reasons outlined above – this would require the EU to become a different kind of organisation. It is therefore timely to discuss the concrete steps by which the EU's eastward enlargement can be secured without NATO.

## The need for hard security is urgent

The EU may also face fundamentally new and urgent military challenges in the light of President Trump's expressed ambition to reach a ceasefire deal in Russia's war. While the form of such a deal and the prospects for reaching it are far from certain, it is obvious that **any form of ceasefire settlement would need to be followed by credible security assurances to Ukraine**, since the country would otherwise be defenceless against renewed Russian aggression, as happened following the conclusion of the Minsk agreements.

**Although it is premature to claim that European countries would have to deploy troops on Ukrainian territory in the case of a ceasefire deal, such a possibility cannot be ruled out.** The purpose of such a troop presence would not be to fight, but to deter renewed Russian aggression. Deterrence is successful when its capability is not tested. Unsuccessful deterrence would mean that Western countries could end up at war with a nuclear power. If tested, however, the operation must have sufficient genuine capability and underlying political will to repel an attack by Russia. If the troops were to flee or leave Ukraine in the face of a Russian attack, the credibility of the West's defence willingness and deterrence capability would be undermined. Evidently, both of these scenarios – a war between NATO countries and Russia or an undermining of the West's deterrence capability – would be negative scenarios for European security.

It is therefore crucial that a troop deployment to Ukraine after a potential ceasefire provides a credible deterrence, and this in turn would require the operation to be sufficiently large scale – the demarcation line would be well over 1,000 kilometres long and the demilitarised zone several kilometres wide. For such a large area, more than 100,000 soldiers – perhaps up to 200,000, as President Zelensky has [said](#) – would be required. The participants in the operation would need to define a clear mandate for their forces in advance, and there would also need to be arrangements for the deployment of reinforcement troops in case of Russian aggression. Even though the United States has stated that US troops will not participate in an operation on the territory of Ukraine, the operation would probably need to depend on US support for heavy airlift, logistics and intelligence. Nonetheless, EU member states and countries such as the UK and Norway would together need to provide manpower, organisation and leadership. Against this backdrop, **the need to step up the EU's hard security is not a distant task that needs to be realised in practice only after Ukraine has joined the EU.**

## Recommended steps for ensuring European hard security

To secure an eastward EU enlargement and be ready to face up to potentially immediate military challenges, the EU thus needs to deliver on its ambition to become a geostrategic actor, both on its own and in close cooperation with NATO. It needs to show through deeds that it has both the political resolve and the capabilities to defend itself and its core interests. Some of the measures needed to deliver on that ambition will demand deviations from the status quo and reassessments of the role of the EU. The feasibility of implementing the required steps to ensure the EU's hard security need not stem from political desire in European capitals. Rather, it is external circumstances and pressure from the US that may provide a sense of necessity that, as in the past, could enable EU member states to unite, shape, and re-shape European cooperation.

**First, European policymakers should consider implementing key institutional reforms in the sphere of foreign and security policy.** Today, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) remains intergovernmental; since decisions require consensus among member states, EU action can suffer from a lack of timeliness and effectiveness. A move to [qualified majority voting](#) (QMV) in the CFSP would enhance the EU's policymaking efficiency, and could arguably be done without Treaty change. All the member states need to agree for such an institutional shift to come about, however, which is likely to require diplomatic efforts and political bargaining. QMV has been repeatedly discussed in the past but today's geopolitical challenges could provide the impetus to move ahead with it in the field of foreign and security policy. The CFSP is also an area that Ukraine and Moldova could be integrated into immediately, for example, by allowing them to participate in key CFSP decision-making forums and by integrating them into EU security initiatives such as the European Defence Agency (EDA) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

**Second, the EU's enhanced geostrategic role will require large-scale investments and efforts in the field of security and defence.** Defence spending in member states would need to exceed at least three percent of GDP, a significant part of which would be devoted to military assistance to Ukraine and to investments in the Ukrainian defence industry. Recently, 19 EU member states sent a [letter](#) to the European Investment Bank (EIB) asking it to play an even stronger role in providing investment funding and leveraging private funding for the security and defence sector. The ideas proposed, such as re-evaluating the EIB list of excluded activities, making more money available for security and defence funding and examining issuing debt for defence, would all be essential initiatives. Taking on EU common debt through [defence bonds](#) could also offer financial firepower for closing capability gaps and strengthening Europe's defence infrastructure. For such a step to be viable, countries that have traditionally opposed joint debt would need to change their frugal positions.

**Third, if the EU is to succeed in taking on a new role in world politics, European leaders will need to improve their strategic communication with their citizens.** A change in strategic culture in Europe, based on an understanding among citizens of, for example, why enlargement is a geostrategic investment, why enlargement needs security and the urgent military challenges that the EU might face will be needed to ensure domestic support for investments in security and defence. The public debate about defence spending could be framed as an investment in deterrence and thus in peace, as well as an investment in Europe's technological advancement, competitiveness and prosperity. Strategic communication with the citizens of EU member states about the concrete contributions that the candidate countries can make to the EU's security and economic prosperity as full member states would also play an important role to this end.

**Fourth, greater and closer cooperation between the EU and NATO** will be needed to ensure effective complementarity and intelligence sharing between the two organisations. One step could be to seal **a new [partnership between the EU and NATO, under which the EU would use its financial and regulatory tools to help member states fulfil NATO capability requirements](#)** and enforce more strictly defined NATO standardisation agreements for equipment and ammunition to enhance interoperability. Trilateral exchanges between the EU, NATO and groups of EU member states on creating military mobility corridors and consolidating multinational military logistics would further strengthen cooperation. Such exchanges could be **proactively suggested to the US by European states**, in ways that make clear that Europe would be taking on the main responsibility for its own security while support from the US is needed to provide some key capabilities.

**Fifth, bearing in mind the possibility of a military operation on the territory of Ukraine, European states should now ensure they create the structures necessary for its implementation.** There is a need to establish a joint military command, as well as different staff structures, responsible for planning both the operation itself and a possible reinforcement of the deployed troops in the event of a crisis. In addition, logistics and intelligence structures will need to be established, and the military units that could take part need to be identified. Ideally, these would be multinational formations already established within the framework of the joint command of the NATO armed forces in Europe, such as the [Multinational Corps Northeast](#). The question of possible independent military operations by European members of NATO, without the participation of the United States, has arisen several times in NATO's history. These ideas have traditionally been rejected by Washington, partly because of concerns that an increasingly autonomous Europe would undermine US authority in NATO, duplicate NATO resources, and pose a threat to NATO cohesion. **It is possible that now is the time, if Washington is changing its approach to its role in Europe's security, to return to the idea of establishing European cells within NATO.** This would make it possible for Europe to take on the main responsibility for ensuring Ukraine's (and Europe's own) security, while maintaining critical US support within NATO with logistics, airlift and strategic reconnaissance.





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