

## Russia and Eurasia Programme Conference Summary

# Safeguarding Europe

## How to defeat and deter Russia

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## Introduction

Three years into Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the security picture for Europe remains fragile. European states' resilience and ability to counter Russia and support Ukraine is uncertain. So what must they do? The Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme conference, 'Safeguarding Europe: how to defeat and deter Russia', brought together experts and policymakers from across the UK and EU, and drew upon the expertise of Russian analysts in exile, to offer insight and ways forward.

This document summarizes the analysis and recommendations from the conference. For a more detailed record of the discussions, as well as the conference agenda, please refer to the video recordings available via the [conference page](#).

## Recent history, future ambition

To understand Russia's intentions, we must stop thinking of it as a conventional state governed by international law. Russia is a kleptocracy – a collection of individuals who have seized power. Treating it as a rational actor willing to engage in win-win negotiations is a miscalculation when it operates on zero-sum principles. The weak response to Russian aggression sends a dangerous message: violations of sovereignty yield rewards.

Russia's ambition remains unchanged: reassert dominance, subjugate Ukrainian statehood and be the primary security threat to Europe and the US through a mix of nationalist exceptionalism, anti-Western ideology, and cultural revisionism. The strategy feeds on fear, real and imagined.

## Hybrid measures

Hybrid tactics are growing in sophistication. The war has revealed a dangerous "new normal", where hybrid warfare and grey-zone operation are 'accepted' while eroding stability. The absence of war does not mean peace – the Kremlin views itself as already at war with the West.

Tanks and missiles are not the first tools of aggression. Battles are first fought in economic and institutional arenas. Illicit funds, cryptocurrencies and proxy investments are tools. Moldova's election saw huge volumes of money flowing in to destabilize its political system.

Nuclear intimidation, disinformation and political sabotage are all designed to divide and weaken Western societies. This also includes dismantling Ukraine's military capabilities, introducing constitutional amendments for neutrality, and enforcing laws to 'protect' the Russian language and Orthodox Church.

Such outcomes would render Ukraine a subordinate state, not a sovereign one.

## Future threat assessment

Some argue the war has been a wake-up call for the whole of Europe. Others see a less direct threat from Russia's next actions. Concern among defence and intelligence chiefs across Europe and the US revolves around such possibilities. Some intelligence suggest Russia is preparing for an attack against NATO members, although Britain's Chief of Defence has downplayed this risk, raising questions about why there is such a divergence in assessments.

But there is every reason to believe that aggression and militarism will intensify in the coming years. The war has radicalized the regime and transformed Russian society. The militarization and recruitment of young Russians into further confrontation with the West will continue. Russia is investing 32.5% of its government expenditure into defence next year, amounting to \$126 billion USD. Its ambitions remain clear, even as its economic capacity diminishes.

There is also a clear understanding in Moscow of the severe consequences of even a limited use of nuclear weapons. A so-called tactical nuclear strike on Ukraine would provoke a strong response from China too. Early in the war, in March 2022, these potential consequences were communicated explicitly to Moscow.

The one thing many Western capitals fear more than the fall of Kyiv is the fall of Moscow. Yet, a Russian victory – even a partial one – would be catastrophic for European stability. The European response must not be reactive, rather it should invest in stability that serves both Ukraine and the broader European security framework. As long as Putin's regime remains, trade, dialogue, and engagement will give Russia money, legitimacy, and technologies to use against us. The best possible outcome for Europe lies in a stable and secure borderland.

## Possible ends to the war/current trajectory

When Russia first invaded Ukraine, there was pressure from Western partners to pursue a diplomatic solution. However, these efforts revealed the futility of appeasing an aggressor. This illusion is still entrenched in many Western European capitals and undermines meaningful action. A ceasefire without addressing loss of territory or providing an answer to Ukraine's security should be a non-starter; 64% of Ukrainians oppose negotiations with Russia without security guarantees; 59% believe that the withdrawal of Russian troops is a prerequisite for negotiations. Given that there is consensus among most US and EU intelligence communities that Russia is preparing for future offensives, a ceasefire is not a sustainable solution. Ukraine's defeat would lead to further long-term instability, and a massive influx of refugees.

Where we stand now reflects three factors: Ukrainian resilience, Russian incompetence and Western indecisiveness. Russia is not winning, but the West is losing. Divisions within Western nations, political crises in Europe and diminished US engagement have undermined cohesion. Sanctions, while significant, have not halted Russia's war machine. We see this in the failure of post-WWII institutions: UN, OSCE, ICC. Implementation often lags behind

rhetoric. The era of “no money” persists; the West still feels the aftershocks of the financial crash, and defence spending is constrained. Yet there is a consensus among military experts who believe if we provide Ukraine with the necessary tools, it can still win.

## NATO

Europe’s NATO members are not yet ready for large-scale combat operations. Across Europe, there are profound mismatches between rhetoric and readiness: some NATO militaries, including the British Army, could only sustain frontline combat for a few weeks under conditions similar to Ukraine’s. While NATO’s current plans focus on defence and deterrence, the alliance lacks a strategy to defeat Russia outright.

## The EU

Ukraine has put EU enlargement back on the map. The decision in June to re-energize the process came after three decades of marginalization. Now, the EU faces not only prospective new states, but a backlog of pre-existing candidate countries. Bosnia & Herzegovina and Moldova could be accepted into the EU today without major adjustments. Ukraine’s integration into the EU would be transformative and have strategic significance, strengthening the eastern flank and reinforcing collective security. Supporting Ukraine now through financial assistance, reforms, and accelerated negotiations costs less in the long run than prolonged instability. Yet, Ukraine’s accession would require significant changes to EU institutions and policies – most notably the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which takes up one-third of EU resources. The question is whether Ukraine can persuade member states that security trumps economics.

## Sanctions and energy

Despite claims to the contrary, sanctions have worked. They have slowed Russia’s ability to regenerate its military by disrupting supply chains and complicating financial transactions. The ban on using SWIFT excluded key institutions, such as Gazprombank. Freezing Russian central bank assets was necessary but insufficient – seizing and repurposing those assets will deliver results. But their impact has been limited: Sanctions were regarded as a ‘fire and forget’ missile. But to be effective, they require continuous ‘maintenance’ to track the target. However, unanimity requirements in EU voting procedures make this hard. Additionally, better enforcement and secondary sanctions would increase the impact of the sanctions regime.

Sanctions alone cannot compensate for decades of flawed geopolitical decisions – particularly Europe’s reliance on Russian energy. Over the past three years, dependency on Russian gas has significantly reduced, though vulnerabilities persist. While the transition away from Russian energy has entailed costs, the opportunities are clear. High-voltage energy lines under construction with EU and Romanian support reflect a growing effort to build alternatives.

## Global impact

Moscow calls for an end to ‘Western hegemony’. Supposedly – though not really – it advocates a new multipolar world based on ‘civilizational’ differences). It exploits conflicts in Africa and the Middle East to stretch Western capacities, creating interconnections between conflict zones, dilutes Western responses and fosters instability to gain leverage.

Meanwhile, China studies Russia’s example of circumventing sanctions for its own actions toward Taiwan. It watches how the war in Ukraine unravels. Ukraine constitutes part of China’s strategy against the West, as it ties up Western resources. President Xi still thinks he can ‘win’ without fighting. For him, the economic and political costs of war are greater than the gains.

## Western responses

Deep divisions have emerged over how to respond effectively. Note the difference:

- “Whatever victory takes” – eastern European and Nordic nations, acutely aware of the threat from Moscow, advocate an ambitious strategy aimed at securing Ukraine’s complete victory and restoring its territorial integrity.
- “As long as it takes” – western European states frequently default to this approach to mask their reluctance to take bold actions necessary for decisive outcomes.
- “Whatever it takes” – middle-ground perspective to balance determination with pragmatism, but falls short of delivering clear and actionable solutions.

## Recommendations

### Mindset/strategy

- No longer think of security *with* Russia, instead focus on security *against* Russia.
- Recognise the seriousness of Russia’s ambitions and the interconnectedness of its efforts, not just in Europe but globally.
- Rediscover strategic imagination. There has not yet been an attempt to formulate the best outcome *for the West*, which is defeat and a change of regime in Russia, rather than maintaining Ukraine to simply survive.
- The Russian leadership must understand *why* something is being done.

- Adopt a war-time mindset: acknowledge that Europe is already at war. Policies must reflect the urgency of this reality and address different warfare techniques.
- See resilience as a national security priority through preparing populations for trade-offs, emphasizing that security enables prosperity, not the other way around.
- Support democratic movements, independent media, and civil society in and outside Russia.
- The principle of calibration, communication, and consequence ensures clarity, avoids miscalculation, and aligns actions with values.

### NATO

- Limit dependence on the US where dependence for hard security is untenable. With Washington pivoting its focus toward China, Europe must take responsibility.
- Strengthen NATO's European pillar with the US demand for burden-sharing.
- Deepen partnerships with other democracies – Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and allies in the Global South.
- A "coalition of the willing" with troops to support reconstruction and security. Such arrangements may enable progress where NATO is unable to act collectively.
- Accelerate decision-making procedures. Cut through bureaucratic red tape to reduce legislative and logistical delays. European countries must spend faster and deliver quicker (also applies to the EU).
- NATO membership for Ukraine should be a decision between Ukraine and its allies – it is not for Russia to dictate. Interim measures, such as security guarantees or coalitions of the willing, may bridge the gap until full NATO integration is achieved.

### Defence procurement

- Strengthen Europe's hard power and self-reliance/resilience through expanding its defence-industrial base to ensure domestic production of ammunition, drones, weapons, and ensure interoperability across NATO forces. Scale up production and expand Europe's defence-industrial base to outpace Russia's war economy.
- Address critical gaps in air defence, force readiness, and production capacity. This includes partial procurement from US defence companies.

- Deliver solutions at scale, not just individual weapons systems: training troops, supplying ammunition, maintaining supply chains, and ensuring Ukraine has the means to outlast Russia. Focusing on individual ‘totemic’ weapons systems risks splitting the coalition, exposing divisions, and creating unrealistic expectations.

### Economic

- Fully enforce the sanctions regime, particularly with smaller states in the Eurasian Economic Union. Expand secondary sanctions to circumventing countries, such as China, Kazakhstan and Turkey.
- Public-private collaboration with financial institutions is essential to track and enforce sanctions; governments must impose clear penalties on evaders.
- Abandon unanimity for sanctions decisions, adopting qualified majority voting to enable decisive action against evolving Russian tactics.
- Develop more robust financial and institutional defences, including mechanisms to tackle illicit funds and foreign interference in elections.
- Accelerate investments in cross-border energy infrastructure.
- Investment in infrastructure, energy independence, and regional trade partnerships tangible economic opportunities to countries at risk of Russian influence.
- Intercept Russian oil tankers in the Baltic Sea.
- Confiscate Russian sovereign assets, reinvesting funds into Ukraine’s defence.
- Recognize enlargement as a necessity and streamline procedures such as the Common Agricultural Policy to accommodate new member states without delays.