

# Crunch time for Europe

*Robert Ellis*

(Turkey analyst and commentator and an international advisor at the Research Institute for European and American Studies in Athens)

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[The joint UK-France proposal](#) to form “a coalition of the willing” to provide a peacekeeping force for Ukraine was more like a meeting of the mice, who agreed to bell the cat. It was panned as “[political theatre](#)” and [dismissed](#) by Azeem Ibrahim from the Strategic Studies Institute as “heavy on symbolism and dangerously light on credibility”. Accordingly, NATO’s two-day summit at The Hague, which begins on 24 June, will be pivotal.

Time is not on our side. [According to former British defence minister Ben Wallace](#) some very senior people in the White House and the Pentagon believe Trump may leave Nato in two years.

In February Bruegel, the Brussels think tank, published [an estimate](#), “Defending Europe without the US”, which concluded Europe could need 300,000 more troops and an annual defence spending hike of at least €250 billion in the short term to deter Russian aggression. This translates to roughly 50 new European brigades.

[The difficulties](#) Denmark, as the gatekeeper to the Baltic, had in mustering a brigade of 4,000 men in 2024 demonstrates the formidable task some European countries face. Now [the agreement](#) is for a heavy combat-ready brigade of 6,000 men to meet NATO requirements latest 2032 but that can be deployed by 2028.

Assessments by NATO, Germany, Poland, Denmark and the Baltic states put Russia as ready to attack within three to ten years. Bruno Kahl, head of Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service, [believes](#) Russia is determined to test the resolve of the NATO alliance and that Ukraine is only a step on the journey westward.

[Sergei Ryabkov](#), Russia’s deputy foreign minister, has stated that the Ukraine war won’t end until NATO reduces its military footprint in eastern Europe. The Baltic

states, for example, Estonia, could be the next target for Russian expansion, with the excuse to protect Russian minorities.

This is a repeat of Hitler's [Heim ins Reich](#) policy, which led to the annexation of Austria and then the Sudetenland. In [a long-winded essay](#) in July 2021, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", Putin used this as justification for the invasion of Ukraine. Russia has already annexed areas of Moldova and Georgia as well as the Crimea.

Six years ago French president Emmanuel Macron [warned Europe](#) of "the brain death of NATO" and said it was high time for Europe to wake up and start thinking and acting as a strategic power.

### **Pay your fair share**

Both [in his first term of office](#) and [this year](#) President Trump has called on NATO allies to pay their fair share of defence spending. At the Munich Security Conference in February his vice president J.D. Vance [told participants](#) there was a new sheriff in town and that he believes our European friends must play a bigger role in the future of the continent.

The Trump administration's friendship with Europe is questionable, and President Trump's antipathy is [well known](#), also because of trade deficits and antitrust investigations into US tech groups.

In March The Atlantic's editor-in-chief Jeffrey Goldberg was [inadvertently invited](#) to a meeting planning an attack on the Houthi rebels in the Yemen, who threatened shipping in the Red Sea to and from the Suez Canal. Only three percent of US trade passes through the Canal but 40 percent of Europe's.

J.D. Vance remarked, "I just hate bailing out Europe again", and defence secretary Pete Hegseth replied, "I fully share your loathing of European free-loading. It's PATHETIC."

But it is Russia's invasion of Ukraine that has galvanized Europe into action. In March the European Commission presented its plan [Readiness 2030](#) (redubbed from ReArm Europe) to increase defence spending by nearly €650 billion and provide an additional €150 billion in loans ([SAFE](#)).

Although NATO members [agreed](#) in 2014 to commit 2 percent of their GDP to defence spending, there are still [some](#) who have failed to do so. Poland is a notable front runner and with its [Piast doctrine](#) aims to be the strongest army and economy in the region.

At a NATO defence ministers meeting on June 5, NATO's secretary-general Mark Rutte [upped the ante](#) with a two-tiered plan to increase spending to 5 percent of GDP, 3.5 percent on defense capabilities and 1.5 percent on security-related investments. Pete Hegseth noted "there are a few countries that are not quite there yet", including [the UK](#), which intends to reach 3 percent by 2034.

### **SAFE and Turkey**

The SAFE (Security Action for Europe) instrument requires that [65 percent](#) needs to be spent in the EU, Norway and Ukraine but the remainder could be spent on products from third countries that have signed a security pact. Cash-strapped Turkey, because of its defence industry, which includes drone production, [sees an opportunity](#). However, this would be subject to majority approval by EU member states.

As Fatih Yurtsever, a former Turkish naval officer, in an [analysis](#) concludes, for the EU the challenge will be balancing strategic objectives with its commitment to democratic values.

Turkey has already been [excluded](#) from the US F-35 fighter program because of buying the Russian S-400 missile defence system, so it is now intent on acquiring 40 Eurofighter Typhoon jets from the consortium (UK, Germany, Italy and Spain). Germany has reportedly blocked the deal because of the arrest of Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, President Erdogan's political rival, but [no decision](#) has yet been made.

Therefore Turkey [pins its hope](#) on the UK's goodwill, particularly as its foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, was invited to the initial meeting of the "coalition of the willing" in London. Britain has been Turkey's staunch ally in Europe, but since Brexit their alliance has been reduced to trade relations. Nevertheless, as Turkey is now on the verge of becoming a fully fledged autocracy, Britain could intervene.

In the meantime, the Middle East is going up in smoke. The US has [despatched a carrier group](#) with the USS Nimitz and President Trump has [walked out early](#) from the G7 summit. He has also signed a trade deal with the UK in [the mistaken belief](#) it was with the EU. *Plus ça change ....*