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THE UKRAINE EFFECT: SECURITY GUARANTEES AND THE RISE OF MINILATERALISM IN EUROPE'S NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has turned out to be a defining moment for European security, exposing both the strengths and limitations of existing security arrangements. Beyond its immediate military and geopolitical consequences, the war has reignited debates over the credibility of security guarantees and has accelerated the search for alternative forms of security cooperation. This article examines how the "Ukraine effect" is reshaping Europe's emerging security architecture through the growing prominence of minilateral alliances and flexible coalition-building. The author argues that the failure of previous security assurances to deter aggression against Ukraine has generated renewed interest in security mechanisms that extend beyond traditional multilateral frameworks.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has fundamentally altered Europe's strategic landscape. More than any other regional conflict, the war has exposed structural weaknesses in the post-Cold War security order, and challenged long-standing assumptions: that major interstate war had become unlikely in Europe, that economic interdependence would constrain revisionist behaviour, that existing multilateral institutions and the rules-based international order were sufficient to preserve regional stability, and

that political security assurances short of binding defence commitments could provide credible deterrence. These developments have prompted a fundamental reassessment of European security, including a growing reliance on more flexible and purpose-driven minilateral security arrangements. While NATO has demonstrated unprecedented political cohesion in supporting Ukraine and reinforcing its eastern flank¹, the conflict has simultaneously revealed the limitations of existing institutional arrangements in responding to rapidly evolving security threats. The result has not been simply a reassessment of European defence policy

1 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29.06.2022, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>, pp.1-13; NATO, Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 11.07.2023; NATO, Washington Summit Declaration, 10.07.2024.

but a broader transformation in the way European states conceptualise security cooperation.²

The “Ukraine effect” extends well beyond the battlefield. It has reshaped national security strategies, accelerated defence modernisation, revived military planning across Europe, and prompted governments to reconsider how security commitments are organised and implemented. Perhaps most importantly, it has renewed attention to a central question that had gradually faded after the Cold War: what makes security guarantees credible? Ukraine’s experience has demonstrated that political assurances, diplomatic declarations, and even extensive international partnerships may prove insufficient when they are not supported by clearly defined military commitments, operational planning, and political willingness to employ force. The gap between political solidarity and legally binding defence obligations became one of the defining lessons of the war.

This lesson has had profound implications across Europe. States situated along NATO’s eastern flank, as well as countries with growing concerns regarding Russian revisionism, increasingly recognise that relying exclusively on broad multilateral institutions may not always provide the level of responsiveness required by an increasingly volatile security environment. Although NATO remains the indispensable bedrock of Euro-Atlantic defence, contemporary security challenges demand additional mechanisms capable of responding more rapidly to emerging crises, coordinating military capabilities among like-minded partners, and addressing region-specific threats.

Consequently, Europe is witnessing the rapid expansion of what has become known as *minilateralism*³ – security cooperation involving a limited number of states united by common strategic interests, geographical proximity, or shared threat perceptions. Unlike traditional multilateral organisations, minilateral arrangements emphasise flexibility, operational effectiveness, and political cohesion, rather than universal membership or comprehensive institutionalisation. Their growing importance reflects not dissatisfaction with NATO itself but recognition that collective defence increasingly requires complementary layers of cooperation capable of filling strategic and operational gaps.



The “Ukraine effect” extends well beyond the battlefield.

It has reshaped national security strategies, accelerated defence modernisation, revived military planning across Europe, and prompted governments to reconsider how security commitments are organised and implemented

The proliferation of these initiatives is already reshaping Europe’s security landscape. The Joint Expeditionary Force has evolved into an increasingly important framework for Northern European security. The United Kingdom has strengthened bilateral and trilateral defence cooperation across Northern and Eastern Europe. The Nordic states have accelerated military integration following Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO. Poland has expanded regional security cooperation,

2 *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, Council of the European Union, March 2022, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/strategic-compass/.

3 Moises Naim, “Minilateralism,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 173 (2009), pp. 135–136, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/>; William Tow, “Minilateral Security’s Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific”, in Kai He (ed.) *Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Asian security dynamics*, Routledge, 2020.

while simultaneously investing heavily in national military capabilities. The Weimar Triangle alliance between France, Germany, and Poland has gained renewed strategic significance, while various regional defence initiatives around the Baltic and Black Seas have become increasingly relevant for deterrence and military planning. These developments collectively indicate that European security is becoming more layered, networked, and adaptive, than at any time since the end of the Cold War.



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minilateralism also raises
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flexible coalitions provide meaningful
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weakening broader alliance cohesion?***

Several interconnected factors explain this transformation. First, the strategic environment has become significantly more unpredictable. Russia's willingness to employ large-scale military force against neighbouring states has fundamentally altered European threat assessments. Second, uncertainty regarding the future trajectory of transatlantic relations — particularly debates surrounding long-term American engagement in European security — has encouraged European governments to diversify security partnerships, without seeking to replace NATO. Third, contemporary security challenges increasingly require coalitions capable of acting quickly, integrating specialised military capabilities, and coordinating responses across multiple domains, including cyber defence, intelligence, critical infrastructure protection, maritime security, and emerging technologies.

These developments challenge conventional understandings of European security architecture. Traditionally, European defence has been viewed primarily through the

institutional framework of NATO and, to a lesser extent, the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Yet the emerging security landscape suggests that this binary perspective is becoming insufficient. Rather than evolving towards either greater institutional centralisation or fragmentation, Europe appears to be developing a multi-layered security system, in which formal alliances coexist with overlapping networks of flexible partnerships. Such arrangements do not necessarily undermine collective defence; instead, they often enhance it by strengthening regional deterrence, improving military interoperability, and enabling faster political decision-making among states sharing similar strategic priorities.

Nevertheless, the growing prominence of minilateralism also raises important policy questions. Can flexible coalitions provide meaningful security guarantees without weakening broader alliance cohesion? Do overlapping defence initiatives improve resilience, or do they create duplication of effort and strategic fragmentation? How should NATO and the EU incorporate increasingly autonomous regional security arrangements into a coherent deterrence strategy? Most importantly, what lessons does Ukraine's experience offer regarding the relationship between formal security guarantees and practical defence cooperation?

This article argues that the rise of European minilateralism represents one of the most significant strategic consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Rather than constituting an alternative to NATO, minilateral cooperation has emerged as an adaptive response to heightened geopolitical uncertainty and the evolving requirements of deterrence in the twenty-first century. The failure of previous security assurances to prevent Russian aggression has reinforced the importance of smaller, politically cohesive security groupings capable of translating shared threat perceptions into practical military

cooperation. Their growing role reflects not institutional competition but functional complementarity within an increasingly complex European security environment.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. The first section examines how Ukraine's experience has transformed perceptions of security guarantees and deterrence across Europe. The second explores the strategic logic behind the rapid expansion of minilateral security cooperation and identifies the principal drivers behind its growing importance. The third assesses the relationship between minilateral arrangements and NATO, evaluating whether these initiatives reinforce or complicate the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Finally, the article outlines the policy implications of Europe's increasingly multi-layered security order and considers how flexible security coalitions can contribute to long-term strategic stability while preserving alliance cohesion.

The central argument is straightforward. Europe's future security architecture will not be defined by a choice between NATO and minilateralism. Instead, it will increasingly depend on their interaction. The Ukraine effect has demonstrated that credible deterrence requires both strong collective defence institutions and agile regional coalitions capable of adapting to rapidly changing security conditions. Understanding this evolving relationship is essential for shaping a more resilient European security order in the years ahead.

The Ukraine Effect: Why Existing Security Guarantees Failed

The most enduring strategic lesson of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not simply that interstate war has returned to Europe. Rather, it is that the credibility of security guarantees depends less on political declarations than on the

demonstrated willingness and capability of states to act collectively under conditions of extreme risk. Ukraine's experience has fundamentally altered European thinking about deterrence, exposing the limitations of security assurances that lack enforceable military commitments and reinforcing the importance of practical defence cooperation. This reassessment has become one of the principal drivers behind the emergence of a more flexible and multi-layered European security architecture.

For more than three decades after the end of the Cold War, European security rested on several interconnected assumptions. The first was that economic interdependence would reduce the likelihood of major interstate conflict. The second assumed that international institutions and international law would significantly constrain revisionist behaviour. The third held that broad multilateral organisations, particularly NATO and the EU, would gradually expand the zone of stability across the continent. Although these assumptions were repeatedly challenged – by the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Russia's intervention in Georgia (2008), and the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 – they nevertheless continued to shape strategic thinking throughout much of Europe.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) effectively invalidated these assumptions. The scale of the military operation demonstrated that revisionist powers remained prepared to use overwhelming conventional force to alter borders, despite the imposition of severe diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions. Equally significant, the conflict revealed that international norms and political commitments, while important for mobilising diplomatic and economic responses, are insufficient to prevent aggression in the absence of credible military deterrence.

This distinction lies at the heart of what may be termed the “Ukraine effect.” The war has shifted attention away from declaratory security towards operational security. European policymakers increasingly recognise that deterrence depends not merely on formal commitments but on the existence of integrated military planning, deployable forces, prepositioned equipment, intelligence sharing, logistical infrastructure, and established political mechanisms capable of making rapid decisions during crises. In other words, security guarantees have become credible only when they are backed by visible military capability and institutional preparedness.



***The war has shifted attention
away from declaratory security
towards operational security***

Ukraine’s own security experience illustrates this reality with particular clarity. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited one of the world’s largest nuclear arsenals. In return for joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear state, Kyiv received political assurances regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity through the 1994 Budapest Memorandum signed by Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and the UK.⁴ Although the memorandum represented an important diplomatic achievement in the context of nuclear non-proliferation, it did not establish legally binding collective defence obligations comparable to Article 5 of the North Atlantic

Treaty. The distinction between security assurances and security guarantees would later become strategically decisive.⁵

The 2014 occupation of Crimea exposed the practical limitations of such assurances.⁶ While Ukraine received significant diplomatic support and economic assistance, although the West introduced sanctions against Russia, no external military intervention occurred to restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity. The full-scale invasion in 2022 reinforced this lesson even more dramatically. Despite unprecedented military assistance from NATO members, Ukraine continued to defend itself without the direct protection afforded to alliance members. This outcome demonstrated that extensive political support, however substantial, does not automatically translate into collective military defence.

The implications extend well beyond Ukraine. Across Europe, governments began reassessing the practical meaning of deterrence. States located on NATO’s eastern flank interpreted the war not only as evidence of Russia’s revisionist ambitions but also as a reminder that national security cannot rely exclusively on political expectations regarding future allied responses. Instead, deterrence increasingly requires forward military presence, regional operational planning, resilient supply chains, integrated command structures, and the ability to fortify vulnerable regions rapidly. These are precisely the areas where smaller and more flexible security arrangements can often generate added value alongside larger alliance structures.

4 Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Budapest Memorandum), signed 5 December 1994, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>.

5 Steven Pifer, *The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons*, Brookings Institution, Arms Control Series No. 6, 2011, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/05_trilateral_process_pifer.pdf.

6 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262, *Territorial Integrity of Ukraine*, 27.03.2014.

Another important consequence of the war has been the renewed emphasis on preparedness rather than reaction. For many years, European security planning focused primarily on crisis management, stabilisation missions, and expeditionary operations outside NATO territory. Russia's invasion redirected attention towards territorial defence, high-intensity conventional warfare, military mobilisation, and industrial capacity for sustained conflict. The war demonstrated that deterrence begins long before the outbreak of hostilities. It depends on continuous military readiness, robust defence industries, secure energy infrastructure, cyber resilience, and effective civil preparedness.



Another important consequence of the war has been the renewed emphasis on preparedness rather than reaction

This broader understanding of security has encouraged governments to seek cooperation formats capable of addressing highly specific operational requirements. Unlike universal institutions that must accommodate diverse strategic priorities, smaller coalitions can concentrate resources on common regional challenges. Countries sharing similar threat perceptions often find it easier to coordinate procurement, conduct joint exercises, harmonise military doctrines, and establish standing operational frameworks. Such cooperation strengthens deterrence not by replacing larger alliances but by enhancing practical readiness where it matters most.

The war has also transformed perceptions of strategic uncertainty. During the immediate post-Cold War period, many European governments assumed that the overall

trajectory of transatlantic security would remain relatively stable. Although political disagreements occasionally emerged within NATO, the long-term commitment of the United States to European defence was generally taken for granted. Today, this assumption is considerably questionable. Successive debates within the United States regarding burden sharing, strategic competition with China, domestic political polarisation, and future military priorities have generated uncertainty among European allies about the future distribution of security responsibilities.

Importantly, this uncertainty should not be interpreted as a loss of confidence in NATO itself. Rather, it reflects the recognition that European security can no longer depend exclusively on a single institutional framework or a single external guarantor. The objective is therefore not strategic autonomy in the sense of replacing NATO, but strategic resilience — the ability of European states to strengthen their own capacity for collective defence, while remaining firmly anchored within the transatlantic alliance.



this uncertainty should not be interpreted as a loss of confidence in NATO itself

The Ukraine effect has accelerated this shift from dependence to resilience. Governments are investing unprecedented resources in defence modernisation⁷, expanding ammunition production, rebuilding military stockpiles, increasing defence budgets, and strengthening domestic defence industries. These investments are increasingly accompanied by new forms of regional cooperation designed to maximise

⁷ *Trends in World Military Expenditure 2024*, SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), April 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2024>.

interoperability and reduce duplication. Joint procurement initiatives, multinational capability development, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and coordinated force planning all reflect a broader effort to translate political solidarity into operational effectiveness.



The credibility of deterrence is therefore becoming cumulative rather than singular. It emerges from the interaction of multiple security mechanisms operating simultaneously at different levels

The changing understanding of the meaning of deterrence is equally evident in military planning. Traditional concepts of deterrence focused primarily on preventing large-scale invasion through the threat of collective retaliation.⁸ Contemporary deterrence has become considerably more multidimensional. It encompasses cyber defence, protection of critical infrastructure, maritime security, counter-disinformation efforts, space capabilities, energy resilience, and technological innovation. Many of these challenges require cooperation among relatively small groups of states possessing similar capabilities or facing comparable vulnerabilities. Flexible partnerships often prove better suited than larger organisations to developing specialised responses in these areas.

Furthermore, Russia's war has demonstrated that security today is increasingly regional in its operational requirements, while remaining global in its strategic consequences. The defence of the Baltic region, the security of the High North, the

stability of the Black Sea, and the protection of critical undersea infrastructure each involve distinct geographical realities, military balances, and political dynamics. A uniform approach is therefore neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, Europe requires differentiated security mechanisms capable of addressing regional contingencies without undermining the coherence of collective defence.

This evolution represents a significant departure from earlier debates concerning European security institutions. Previous discussions often framed policy choices as alternatives between NATO and the European Union, between transatlanticism and European strategic autonomy, or between bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The experience of Ukraine suggests that such binary thinking has become increasingly obsolete. Contemporary security is being organised through overlapping layers of cooperation rather than mutually exclusive institutional models.

The credibility of deterrence is therefore becoming cumulative rather than singular. It emerges from the interaction of multiple security mechanisms operating simultaneously at different levels. NATO continues to provide the indispensable framework for collective defence and nuclear deterrence. The EU contributes to economic resilience, defence-industrial cooperation, sanctions policy, and regulatory instruments. Minilateral coalitions strengthen regional preparedness, operational flexibility, and military interoperability. Bilateral defence agreements reinforce political commitments among key partners. Together, these mechanisms generate a more resilient deterrence architecture than any individual institution could achieve independently.

8 Snyder, Glenn H. (1961). *Deterrence and Defense*. Princeton University Press; Schelling, Thomas C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. Yale University Press.

From a policy perspective, this transformation carries two important implications. First, future security guarantees will increasingly be evaluated by their operational credibility rather than by their legal formulation alone. Political declarations remain necessary, but they must be accompanied by concrete military capabilities, established planning mechanisms, and demonstrated readiness to act. Second, European governments are likely to continue diversifying their security partnerships, not because existing institutions have failed, but because the strategic environment has become too complex to rely upon a single institutional framework.



Unlike what happens within universal or highly institutionalised organisations, minilateral arrangements prioritise practical outcomes over formal procedures

The Ukraine effect has therefore redefined the relationship between deterrence and cooperation. The central lesson is not that traditional alliances are obsolete. Rather, it is that alliances require complementary mechanisms capable of adapting rapidly to evolving threats, strengthening regional defence, and enhancing practical military cooperation. This realisation has created favourable conditions for the rapid expansion of minilateralism across Europe, a development that represents one of the most significant structural changes in the continent's security architecture since the end of the Cold War.

The Rise of European Minilateralism: Drivers, Forms, and Strategic Logic

The growing prominence of minilateral security cooperation represents the most significant institutional development in European security⁹ since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although cooperation among small groups of states is not a new phenomenon, the strategic context has fundamentally changed. What were previously viewed as supplementary initiatives have increasingly become integral components of Europe's broader deterrence architecture. Their expansion reflects less a rejection of existing institutions than an effort to address challenges that large multilateral organisations cannot always manage with sufficient speed or flexibility.

Minilateralism can be understood as structured cooperation among a limited number of states that share common strategic interests, geographic proximity, or similar threat perceptions.¹⁰ Unlike what happens within universal or highly institutionalised organisations, minilateral arrangements prioritise practical outcomes over formal procedures. Their value lies in political cohesion, rapid decision-making, and operational effectiveness rather than broad representation. For European governments confronting an increasingly volatile security environment, these characteristics have become particularly attractive. Three interrelated factors explain the growing appeal of minilateral security arrangements.

The first is the convergence of threat perceptions. Russia's war against Ukraine has reduced many of the strategic differences that previously existed among

9 Besch Sophia and Tara Varma, "Alliance of Revisionists: A New Era for the Transatlantic Relationship", *Survival* 67 (2), 2025, pp.7-38.

10 William Tow, "Minilateral Security's Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", in Kai He (ed.) *Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Asian Security Dynamics*, Routledge, 2020.

states located along NATO's northern and eastern flanks. Countries that once differed in their assessment of Russian intentions now largely agree that Moscow represents a long-term security challenge, requiring sustained military preparedness.¹¹ This shared strategic outlook has facilitated closer cooperation among governments with similar geographic exposure and comparable defence priorities.



Modern deterrence extends beyond conventional military capabilities to include cyber defence, intelligence sharing, protection of critical infrastructure, maritime domain awareness, space assets, and defence innovation

Second, multilateral formats enable faster political coordination. NATO's consensus-based decision-making remains one of the Alliance's greatest strengths, ensuring political legitimacy and collective ownership. However, consensus among thirty-two allies inevitably requires time. Smaller coalitions are often better positioned to coordinate immediate responses, organise military assistance, conduct joint exercises, or develop common procurement initiatives, without extensive institutional procedures. In an era where crises tend to unfold rapidly across multiple domains, political agility has become an increasingly valuable strategic asset.

Third, technological and operational changes in warfare favour more specialised forms of cooperation. Modern deterrence extends beyond conventional military

capabilities to include cyber defence, intelligence sharing, protection of critical infrastructure, maritime domain awareness, space assets, and defence innovation. These areas frequently involve states possessing comparable capabilities or facing similar operational challenges. Smaller partnerships can therefore generate greater efficiency by concentrating resources on clearly defined objectives.

Recent developments illustrate these dynamics. The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)¹², led by the UK and comprising ten Northern European countries, has evolved into one of the most operationally flexible security frameworks in Europe. Although it is not a collective defence organisation, the JEF strengthens regional deterrence through joint planning, high-readiness forces, maritime security cooperation, and regular multinational exercises. Its geographic focus on the Baltic Sea, North Atlantic, and High North (Arctic region) complements NATO's broader strategic posture, while enabling participating states to coordinate responses below the threshold of formal alliance activation.

The transformation of Nordic security cooperation provides another important example. Finland's¹³ and Sweden's¹⁴ accession to NATO has fundamentally altered the strategic geography of Northern Europe. Rather than reducing the relevance of regional cooperation, NATO enlargement has strengthened incentives for deeper military integration among Nordic states. Shared operational planning, coordinated air defence, intelligence cooperation, and integrated logistics increasingly reinforce both regional resilience and Alliance

11 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29.06.2022, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>, pp.1-13;

12 The Joint Expeditionary Force, "About the JEF," <https://www.jefnations.org>.

13 "Finland joins NATO as 31st ally," NATO, 4.04.2023.

14 "Sweden joins NATO as war in Ukraine prompts security rethink," *Reuters*, 7.03.2024.

capabilities. In this context, minilateral cooperation functions as a force multiplier rather than as an institutional alternative.

Similar developments are evident elsewhere in Europe. Poland has pursued increasingly active regional defence partnerships, while simultaneously undertaking one of the continent's most ambitious military modernisation programmes. The Baltic states continue to deepen defence cooperation, based on common security interests and shared assessments of regional risks. Meanwhile, the renewed political relevance of formats such as the Weimar Triangle reflects growing recognition that Europe's security challenges require closer coordination among key regional actors capable of translating political consensus into practical initiatives.



The proliferation of minilateral initiatives also reflects changing approaches to burden sharing

Importantly, these arrangements differ significantly in their institutional design, membership, and objectives. Some emphasise operational readiness, while others focus on defence-industrial cooperation, capability development, or political consultation. Their diversity should not be viewed as evidence of fragmentation. Rather, it reflects the increasingly multidimensional nature of contemporary security. Different challenges require different coalitions, and flexibility has become an essential characteristic of effective security governance.

The proliferation of minilateral initiatives also reflects changing approaches to burden sharing. For decades, debates concerning European defence concentrated primarily on the distribution of responsibilities between Europe and the United States. Today, burden

sharing increasingly occurs within Europe itself. States possessing similar capabilities and strategic priorities are assuming greater responsibility for regional security while remaining firmly embedded within NATO's collective defence framework. This trend enhances the resilience of the Alliance by strengthening regional preparedness and reducing dependence on centralised responses.



Security is increasingly understood as a network rather than a hierarchy

Nevertheless, the continued expansion of minilateralism also presents policy challenges. The multiplication of security formats risks creating institutional overlap, duplication of capabilities, and competition for limited defence resources. Divergent regional priorities could complicate broader Alliance planning if coordination mechanisms remain weak. Maintaining coherence, therefore, requires careful integration between regional initiatives and NATO's command structures, capability planning, and deterrence strategy. The objective should not be to maximise the number of security arrangements, but to ensure that each contributes distinct operational value within the wider Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

Ultimately, the rise of European minilateralism reflects a broader transformation in strategic thinking. Security is increasingly understood as a network rather than a hierarchy. Flexible coalitions do not replace formal alliances; they reinforce them by providing additional layers of deterrence, improving military interoperability, and enabling faster responses to emerging crises. The Ukraine effect has accelerated this transition by demonstrating that resilience depends

on the interaction of multiple security mechanisms operating simultaneously at the national, regional, and transatlantic levels.

The challenge for European policymakers is therefore not whether minilateralism should continue to expand, but how its growing role can be integrated into a coherent strategic framework that strengthens, rather than complicates, collective defence. That question lies at the centre of Europe's evolving security architecture.

Minilateralism and NATO: Reinforcing the Euro-Atlantic Security Order

The expansion of minilateral security cooperation inevitably raises questions about this arrangement's relationship with NATO. At first glance, the growing number of regional initiatives, bilateral defence agreements, and flexible coalitions could be interpreted as evidence of institutional fragmentation. Such an interpretation, however, overlooks the strategic logic driving these developments. The rise of minilateralism is best understood not as an alternative to NATO but as an adaptation to a more demanding security environment in which deterrence requires multiple, mutually reinforcing layers of cooperation.

NATO remains the only organisation capable of providing comprehensive collective defence in Europe.¹⁵ Its integrated military command, established planning mechanisms, interoperability standards, experience of nuclear deterrence, and legally binding mutual defence commitment remain without equivalent. The Alliance has demonstrated remarkable unity since

2022¹⁶ through the reinforcement of its eastern flank, the accession of Finland and Sweden, and sustained military support for Ukraine. None of the emerging minilateral arrangements possess either the political legitimacy or the military capacity to replace these core functions.

Yet NATO's comparative advantage also defines its limitations. As a large alliance composed of thirty-two members with diverse strategic priorities, decision-making inevitably requires extensive consultation and political consensus. This institutional design ensures legitimacy, but may reduce flexibility in responding to rapidly evolving regional contingencies. Minilateral arrangements help bridge this gap by allowing groups of like-minded states to develop capabilities, coordinate policy, and prepare joint responses without waiting for the go-ahead for Alliance-wide initiatives. Their effectiveness, therefore, derives from complementarity rather than competition.

The relationship between NATO and minilateralism can be understood as a division of strategic labour. NATO provides the overarching framework for deterrence and collective defence, while minilateral coalitions strengthen regional preparedness, accelerate capability development, and improve operational readiness. In practice, these functions are increasingly interconnected. Joint exercises conducted within regional formats enhance NATO interoperability; common procurement initiatives strengthen Alliance capabilities; and intelligence sharing among smaller groups contributes to the broader situational awareness of the Euro-Atlantic community.

15 The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington, D.C., 4 April 1949, Article 5; "Collective Defense and Article 5", *NATO*, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/collective-defence-and-article-5>.

16 *NATO Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2024/07/10/washington-summit-declaration>.

From a policy perspective, the challenge is not to limit the growth of minilateralism but to ensure that it remains embedded within NATO's overall strategic planning. This requires closer coordination between regional initiatives and Alliance defence planning, greater transparency regarding capability development, and regular mechanisms for political consultation. Properly integrated, minilateral arrangements can reduce, rather than increase, the burden on NATO, by strengthening deterrence at the regional level and enabling faster responses in the initial stages of a crisis.

The "Ukraine effect" therefore points towards a European security architecture that is neither centralised nor fragmented, but networked. Its resilience will depend on the ability of institutions operating at different levels — national, regional, European, and transatlantic — to complement one another. In this emerging model, NATO remains the indispensable cornerstone of European security, while minilateral coalitions provide the flexibility and operational adaptability required by an increasingly uncertain strategic environment. The success of this architecture will ultimately depend not on the number of new initiatives that emerge, but on how effectively they are connected into a coherent system of collective deterrence.

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become a watershed in the evolution of European security. Beyond transforming the military balance on the continent, the war has fundamentally reshaped how European governments understand deterrence, alliance commitments, and the credibility of security guarantees. The central lesson of the "Ukraine effect" is that political assurances alone are insufficient to prevent aggression. Credible security increasingly depends on military readiness, operational

integration, resilient institutions, and the demonstrated willingness of partners to act collectively under conditions of crisis.

This changing strategic environment has accelerated the emergence of minilateralism as a defining feature of Europe's evolving security architecture. Smaller, flexible coalitions have proven capable of responding more rapidly to regional challenges, strengthening military interoperability, coordinating capability development, and complementing broader Alliance efforts. Their growing role reflects neither dissatisfaction with NATO nor a broader shift away from transatlantic security. Instead, it illustrates an adaptive response to a security environment characterised by greater uncertainty, regional differentiation, and the need for faster political and military coordination.



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At the same time, the expansion of minilateral cooperation should not be viewed as an end in itself. A proliferation of overlapping initiatives without strategic coordination could weaken coherence, duplicate capabilities, and complicate defence planning. The effectiveness of Europe's emerging security architecture will therefore depend on ensuring that regional frameworks remain closely aligned with NATO's strategic objectives, force planning, and command structures. The challenge for policymakers is to institutionalise complementarity rather than allow fragmentation to emerge through uncoordinated initiatives.

For Ukraine, these developments carry particular significance. Although NATO membership remains the most credible long-term security guarantee, the experience of the current war demonstrates that security can also be strengthened through deeper participation in regional defence networks, bilateral security agreements, joint capability development, and long-term defence-industrial cooperation with European partners. As Europe continues to build a more resilient security order, Ukraine should be regarded not merely as a recipient of security assistance but as an increasingly important contributor to regional deterrence. The experience acquired by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the country's rapidly expanding defence industry, and its crucial position on Europe's eastern flank make Ukraine a strategic asset whose integration into future security arrangements will enhance, rather than burden, Euro-Atlantic security.

Looking ahead, European security is unlikely to return to the institutional model that characterised the post-Cold War era. Instead, it is evolving into a multilayered system in which collective defence institutions coexist with flexible regional coalitions, bilateral partnerships, and issue-specific security networks. This transformation does not signal the decline of NATO but rather its adaptation to a more complex strategic environment. In this context, the future of European security will be determined not by choosing between multilateralism and unilateralism, but by combining both in ways that reinforce

deterrence, enhance resilience, and preserve the political cohesion of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Ultimately, the "Ukraine effect" is not simply a consequence of war, but it is a catalyst for strategic innovation. By exposing the limitations of traditional security assumptions, Russia's aggression has accelerated the development of a more flexible and resilient European security architecture. Whether this architecture succeeds will depend on the ability of European and transatlantic partners to translate the lessons of Ukraine into enduring institutional reforms that strengthen both collective defence and regional security cooperation. Such a system is likely to define the next phase of Europe's security order and shape the continent's response to future geopolitical challenges.

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