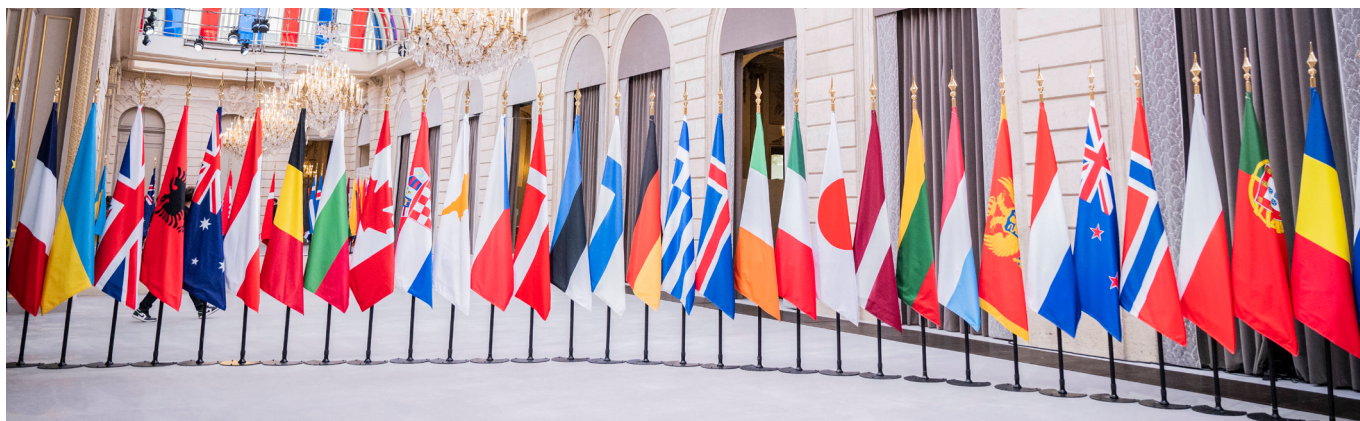




United States: Europe with Eyes Wide Shut

Max Bergmann

Washington has had a lukewarm reaction to the “Coalition of the Willing” concept. Initiated by the UK and France as Donald Trump assumed the presidency, the coalition has proposed creating a multinational force to reassure Ukraine and act as a guarantor of any peace agreement.

On the one hand, the initiative is seen as a positive by Washington. It is an example of “burden shifting,” as Europe is taking initiative and responsibility for Ukraine, and to a lesser extent, its own security in the wake of Donald Trump’s election. The proposal was also seen as an endorsement by the UK and France of Trump’s efforts to end the war. It was therefore appreciated by the Trump White House. Furthermore, the American defense policy community has treated this as a serious military effort.

Yet, the initiative has also been greeted with skepticism. The force proposal could be seen as a diplomatic play from London and Paris to achieve several objectives that have little to do with resolving the conflict. First, the initiative helped ingratiate themselves with the new Administration by demonstrating a belief in Trump’s deal-making prowess. Second, it enabled the UK and France to demonstrate leadership and support for Ukraine, all the while shifting the diplomatic conversation and energy away from war financing and military aid, where neither country has budgetary space to lead. This proposal has therefore put London and Paris at the center of transatlantic and European security discussions, where both always seek to be, on the grounds where they can contrib-

ute. Yet it also means the coalition may have served as a diplomatic time-suck, distracting from the much more urgent pan-European task of financing Ukraine’s war effort.

Overall, Washington has not thought deeply about the concept. But if it did it would likely raise significant concerns both from within the Trump administration and from the broader Washington policy community. The key unanswered question is what is this force supposed to achieve? That foundational political question has not been satisfactorily answered at least from Washington’s vantage point. There is a danger while attempting to demonstrate Europe’s seriousness that the Coalition of the Willing in fact does the opposite.

A Coalition to do what now?

A lot of questions remain over how the force would work in practice. In general, the force is premised on the [UK](#) and [France](#), the two European military powers with an ability to relatively rapidly deploy an expeditionary force, injecting troops into Ukraine to help enforce any ceasefire. Whether this would be a small tripwire force, a larger force to monitor the frontlines, or more of a reassurance force located far away from the frontlines, would be determined by the outcome of ceasefire negotiations. Yet with this vague concept a flurry of activity has been unleashed, with hundreds of military planners from 30 nations working on a force that could deploy to Ukraine to help provide security.

This is likely a sensible use of time, as most military planning is devoted to preparing for low probability events. Having military planners think hard about the issues and challenges of deploying a force to Ukraine is a useful task, especially if engaging with Ukrainians who can provide practical lessons learned. Yet the amount of political and diplomatic energy around this initiative raises a number of issues to which there do not appear to be clear answers.

First, would this force deploy without Russian approval? The answer to this question [appears to be no](#). This then begs the question why would Russia ever accept such a force. Given Moscow's fervent opposition to Ukraine joining NATO, the injection of forces from NATO countries into Ukraine, even if not strictly an official "NATO mission" would mean that Ukraine would in fact be receiving a de facto Article 5 guarantee, even if not explicitly in NATO. If the force is to "reassure" Ukraine that reassurance surely means that should Russia re-invade Ukraine these countries would act to defend Ukraine. It is in that sense a backdoor Article 5 commitment. And while that may be fantastic for Ukraine it is almost impossible to see this acceptable to Russia. That means it is incredibly hard to see such a force as being involved in any negotiated settlement to the war, short of the military balance shifting dramatically in Ukraine's favor.

Second, what is the United States role? The question has been posed to the US whether it would provide critical enabling support and serve as a "backstop" for the force. The answer has not been clear. There has been no commitment from Trump whether the US would serve as the backstop. The term "backstop" also sounds anodyne but it in fact would involve the United States going to war with Russia because Russia has attacked the coalition.

Yet this conflicts with the one clear overriding priority of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations when it comes to Ukraine: avoid a US-Russia war. Hence, a NATO-like force injected into Ukraine, against the wishes of Russia, raises the prospect of NATO-Russia war and therefore US-Russia war. That will not be viewed favorably in Trump's Washington.

Third, assume that Russia did accept the multinational force but only on the condition there is no US involvement or backstop, would it make sense for the coalition to proceed? The danger in this scenario is that Russia may see this as an opportunity to fight NATO on its terms, without the risk of US involvement and triggering a broader Article 5 conflict. While Ukraine's would welcome Europeans fighting alongside them, European capitals would need to consider whether it makes sense to stumble into a war with a nuclear armed power.

In conclusion, there is no clear US position toward the coalition of the willing because it is a European initiative and a European discussion. It is also peripheral to the Trump administration's disjointed and confused peace negotiations. There was, for instance, [no mention](#) of such a force in the 28 point peace plan.

The danger for Europe is that a proposal intended to show European seriousness and resolve may demonstrate the opposite. Presently, the efforts of the coalition appear to have limited relevance to the current course of the war. Rather than spend precious time and political capital on a reassurance force, Europeans should focus the coalition on more tangible tasks (such as air defense for western Ukraine) and leveraging their massive economic advantages vis-a-vis Russia to back Ukraine and turbocharge pan-European procurement and rearmament efforts.

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In the *Multinational Force Ukraine* series of policy briefs leading experts from allied countries assess key factors for participation in the Multinational Force Ukraine. This includes the political willingness of allies to deploy troops—on the ground, in the air, or at sea—to establish a military presence in or around Ukraine. They also examine the conditions for such deployments to occur (before, during, or after peace negotiations), the roles these forces would be expected to perform (defensive or offensive), the red lines imposed by national governments, and the specific capabilities each country could realistically contribute.

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