



Ukraine: Sobered after Four Years of Indecision

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Public Expectations

While the moral support underpinning the Coalition of the Willing (CoW) and its Multinational Force in Ukraine (MFU) initiative is undeniably inspiring, the Ukrainian perspective on it and other initiatives have been profoundly tempered during the four years of full-scale war. Although financial and military aid from key partners was invaluable, any lingering Ukrainian hope that support might coalesce into an effective multinational military enterprise has largely evaporated. This is rooted in a track record of indecision: partners have failed to agree on even such a limited measure as extending a “no-fly zone” over western Ukrainian regions bordering NATO (as a part of the SkyShield initiative), despite the evident legitimacy and mutual security benefits for the Alliance itself given the repeated [incursions](#) of Russian strike drones into the airspace of Poland and Romania. Therefore, current discussions regarding the deployment of multinational forces within or around Ukraine for combat support are viewed domestically as highly unrealistic.

A detailed examination of the “intent versus capability” landscape reinforces this pessimistic outlook. While most CoW nations have formally pledged full support, a web of caveats effectively [nullifies](#) any real action. They range from temporal deferments (“only after the war,” as stated by [Belgium](#) and [Canada](#)) to requirements of US participation or a NATO mandate ([Belgium](#), [Denmark](#), [Finland](#), [Italy](#), [Norway](#), [Sweden](#), [Germany](#)), insisting on

majority engagement ([France](#) and [Estonia](#)). Partners refer to a lack of available troops ([Czech Republic](#), [Estonia](#), [Latvia](#), [Lithuania](#), the [Netherlands](#), [Norway](#), the [UK](#)), or necessary equipment ([Belgium](#), [Canada](#), [Denmark](#)), or both. However, a flicker of optimism remains within the high end of the air domain (AEW&C, IAMD, A2/AD – Strategic Aircraft and Air Defence Systems, to put it simple) – a sector where Ukrainian capabilities are significantly overmatched by the adversary, and the necessity for support is urgent. Here, partners possess both the technical capacity and the moral legitimacy to intervene, in light of the violations of their own airspace.

Leaving aside discussions about potential military presence, Ukraine’s main and most practical expectation is that the CoW shift its focus to prioritising targeted financial, material, and technological support for the Defence Forces of Ukraine.

The military need

The analysis of the CoW partners’ commitments shows they still ignore or merely pretend to grasp a fundamental generational shift in the nature of warfare. The traditional concept of “*boots on the ground*” is not only futile but operationally impossible for coalition nations. This new warfare requires radically new approaches to reconnaissance, logistics, and engagement that rely on remote lethality rather than physical mass. Partner nations currently lack the doctrine, organization, and capability to wage this type of war.

Yet, this capability gap does not negate the need for CoW engagement; rather, it redefines it. Coalition forces should deploy to Ukraine not to lead the fight, but to learn, sustain and support in “twin synergy” with Ukrainian units, providing essential subordinate functions, e.g. demining, rear logistics, medical aid, and technical repair. The most valuable contribution regarding a ground presence could be the establishment of a structured system for the maintenance and service of allied weaponry within Ukraine to relieve overburdened Ukrainian repair units. Poland has wisely secured this niche, [avoiding](#) the complications of combat involvement while providing critical rear-echelon support.

The glaring deficit remains in the air domain - a gap that should [have been](#) closed in 2022 already. For Ukraine, the need is not merely for the older F-16s currently provided – which are appreciated but limited by radar range to missile interception roles – but for 4+ or 5th-generation aircraft, only capable of neutralizing the Russian carriers of guided bombs, currently the primary [factor](#) destroying Ukraine’s forward defenses. In this context, providing a comprehensive air component would be highly commendable.

Conversely, the deployment of naval forces poses significant risks, and is largely theoretical given Turkey’s enforcement of the Montreux Convention. Large frigates and corvettes from Britain or France would likely suffer the same fate as the Russian Black Sea Fleet did at the hands of Ukrainian uncrewed surface vessels. Given that Russia is actively scaling its own naval drone capabilities, coalition partners should first prioritize joint development of sea denial capabilities based on unmanned systems before risking high-value manned

vessels in the Black Sea. Instead, allies could provide immediate value through land-based contributions, such as the counter-mine capacity from ashore that several states are positioned to offer.

A distinct issue is the coalition’s emphasis on “instructor support”. While politically convenient as a non-combat contribution, the question arises: what exactly can NATO instructors now teach Ukrainian soldiers who possess unique, hard-won expertise in next-generation warfare (*aside from instruction on sophisticated Western platforms like the F-16, of course*)? In 2025, unlike in 2022, the notion of Western instruction often elicits awkwardness among Ukrainian veterans.

Finally, the timing of any deployment is critical. The majority (if not all) of coalition partners are going to [wait](#) until “after the war,” yet Ukraine’s Army needs support immediately, as their combat capability is being ground down to a critical limit.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a more sustainable post-war security architecture would rely not on vulnerable foreign platoons - who would serve as tempting targets for Russian drone operators - but on a remote, technologically fortified defense line held by experienced Ukrainian forces. The most effective contribution the coalition can make post-war is financial: targeted funding to maintain an expanded, well-compensated Ukrainian military capable of holding the line via drones and robotics. Therefore, the functional scope of any future mission will likely - and correctly - be limited to strategic non-combat rear support (intelligence, air defense, demining, and logistics).

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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.