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Multinational Force Ukraine Series

UK: Leading politically but militarily questionable

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Political Will

The UK, under Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, has enthusiastically and publicly lead the charge to establish the Coalition of the Willing (CotW – the political entity) and Multinational Force Ukraine (MFU-the military entity). Alongside France, these two European security heavyweights have become the nucleus of the continents effort to increase support for Ukraine as US interest wanes. The UK has a long and deep history of support to Ukraine from the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, through to Operation Orbital – the military assistance package following the 2014 annexation of Crimea - to early support to Ukraine's defence ahead of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. Moreover, there is strong cross-party advocacy within the UK Parliament and public opinion remains high in support of Ukraine. However, polling suggests that support narrows when respondents are asked about providing long-term support 'until Ukraine wins', providing political legitimacy to the government to take steps to enable a quicker end to the war. There is no legal requirement for the Prime Minister to allow the UK Parliament to vote on the deployment of a MFU. However, there will be significant political pressure to do so given the monumental decision to deploy the force.

The drivers behind the UK position are fourfold. First, to demonstrate European leadership to President Trump as evidence of burden shifting in support of Ukraine and an example of Europeans stepping up for providing their own security. Second, to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine and show that Europeans will continue to support its defence against Russia with declining US support. Indeed, the political development of the CotW was a direct reaction to the February 2025 Oval Office incident and a desire to support President Zelenskyy to get a fair hearing in Washington. Third, to push Russia to agree to a ceasefire to stabilize the front lines and open negotiations in good faith. Finally, the PM and his Labour Party face multiple political problems at home, including significant budgetary pressures which leading the MFU would add to, with very worrying polling figures at this point in the election cycle.

However, Starmer is credited with being effective at foreign policy – particularly when it comes to Ukraine – and public planning sessions in London and Paris have become an opportunity to build political support. Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron is facing political deadlock and is already on his seventh PM so foreign policy provides a domestic respite. However, there is real risk to developing the CotW so publicly. Trump could make a breakthrough with Putin and then call on Europeans to deploy the MFU before it and its contributing states are ready. In addition, if the MFU never deploys because political and military conditions are not met – which is likely – then Putin learns a great deal about Europe – that it still cannot organise and provide for its own security.

Military capabilities

The military domain is where the UK and France can add the most value. The UK and France remain the only true expeditionary powers in Europe. The UK has deployed Divisional (Iraq) and Brigade (Afghanistan) headquarters, with France deploying a Brigade in the Sahel. Therefore, they are the only two countries with the command maturity and experience to lead the operation which is why they are jointly taking the lead and have already established a permanent multinational headquarters in Paris, which will rotate to London in summer 2026.

Until there is a ceasefire in place the exact nature and requirement of the deployment cannot be known, but potential options range from a small 'tripwire' force, to a multinational Division, initially of 20,000 troops, a 30,000-40,000 strong 'reassurance force', or at the top end a 100,000 plus 'traditional peacekeeping force'. The expectation and ambition for the MFU has been dialled down since February. However, UK Defence Secretary John Healey recently declared that '200 military planners from more than 30 nations developing detailed plans, that in the event of a ceasefire we can send…to help secure the skies, secure the seas, a force to help train Ukrainian forces to defend their nation'. For context, a Division would have approximately 40 defence planners in total (including engineers) and so the MFU has a significant amount of planning heft, for a potentially limited deployment, which would rival NATO's own military headquarters. Thus far, too much effort has been placed on planning for deployment, despite not having a mission to plan for.

Regardless of the eventual size of force, considering the leadership role that the UK is positioning for, the likely minimum contribution for the British military would be a Brigade (5,000), alongside a lion's share of the command and control, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance assets and logistics enablers. Due to the risks involved, the UK would have to focus effort on the land component, with air and naval contributions limited as it would detract from the UK's NATO role in Northern Europe. However, to sustain this force indefinitely it would require 15,000 (one in theatre, one recovering and one training) or 20% of the total British Army strength or 27 per cent when considering that only 77 per cent of the army's soldiers (54,695 troops) are currently considered medically deployable) and approximately 50% of the Field Army.

Committing this force to an open-ended operation would effectively be permanently removing these troops from the British Army order of battle. As such, it would put a UK 'NATO first' strategy and deployments in jeopardy and the commitment to be the Alliance's strategic reserve. Moreover, it is not just a question of numbers – this force are not peacekeepers. They need to have the full heavy suite of military equipment available to deter Russian attacks, and – if required – to fight and fix Russian forces in Ukraine if a wider war between NATO and Russia originated in the Nordic or Baltic states, which would further impact British military modernisation plans. Therefore, the UK must argue for and gain agreement for very flexible and permissive rules of engagement to provide adequate protections and deterrence for the MFU.

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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.