



France: Able, willing, and leading?

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Political Will

Supporting Ukraine and deterring Russia has emerged as the cardinal priority in France's foreign and defence policy, as explicitly stated in the recently adopted [2025 National Strategic Review](#). From the bilateral cooperation and security agreement signed in February 2024, to the military and financial aid provided and the diplomatic backing of Ukraine's NATO and EU membership bids, France's support to Kyiv's war effort and long-term security have taken various forms. But where Paris' position has been most distinctive is in its proactive and leadership role around the envisaged deployment of Multinational Force Ukraine (MFU). In February 2024, when President Macron first stated that the option of deploying Western boots on the ground in Ukraine "should not be excluded", most of its partners were taken aback and [rejected](#) the idea.

For Paris, the role of a European force – deployed after a cease-fire and away from the frontline – would be to reassure Ukraine and deter Russia from launching another full-scale attack. France does not regard Russia's acquiescence as a necessary condition for the deployment. The strategic signalling is not only intended for Kyiv and Moscow, but also for Washington. The idea has been both to ensure Europe is included in the US-led negotiation process and to demonstrate Europeans' willingness to do more for their own security. Relatedly, France does not condition its contribution to a "US backstop" – whether in terms of logistical support or

security guarantee – even if it would be considered an asset.

France's activism builds upon its [broader objective](#) of "European strategic autonomy", as well as fostering French leadership on the continent. Paris sees a virtue in having Europeans doing military planning together, even at a limited scale. Still, the CoW should not be seen as a plot to diminish US influence or NATO's central role in the defence of Europe – French policymakers insist that they would have been happy for the operational planning to be conducted through NATO's command structures, if it was not for the opposition of the US. Finally, in the context of severe budgetary crisis and the comparatively small amounts of French bilateral aid to Ukraine, the MFU is an alternative way to do more for Ukraine by putting the emphasis where France has an edge in Europe: risk-acceptance and expeditionary operations.

French domestic context is also more permissive than others when it comes to deploying soldiers abroad. The French president does not need the Parliament's approval, except if the mission exceeds four months. Although public opinion appears [divided](#) on deploying French troops to Ukraine in the context of the MFU (47% in favour, 36% against, 17% undecided), the main opposition parties have chosen not to overly politicise the issue, even though some have [spoken against it](#). Overall, sending French troops far away on a dangerous mission has seldom been controversial politically.

Military Capabilities

Currently [France deploys over 15,000 military personnel across the world](#) including over 2,500 under NATO posture in Europe and 10,000 in French overseas territories. These figures are significantly smaller than in 2020, when almost 7,000 troops were deployed in the Sahel and West Africa. Almost all of them have now been withdrawn, only a few hundreds remain. This reshuffling has freed some margins to enable what the French military programming law identifies as the national requirement for operational contingency – the [Enhanced national emergency echelon \(ENU-R\)](#). It includes a rapidly deployable joint task force (within 72h) across all domains.

Presenting itself as the co-leader of MFU, France should be able to assume military leadership both through an ad hoc Joint Force Command co-headed with the United Kingdom (a dedicated facility has already been established in Paris to this effect) and by taking one or more component commands.

In the event of a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine and ISR and logistical support from the US, France intends to contribute to the four components foreseen in the [CoW plans](#). First, the air component deployed to ensure the end of Russian deep strikes in Western Ukraine, for which France could provide air C2, dispatch 16 combat aircraft, one AWACS, two tankers, and optionally one long range air defence battery. Second, a maritime component is to secure the Black Sea lines of communications. It would ultimately depend on Turkey's approval, but if given, France's ENU-R can deliver two frigates and a support ship within one month.

France has also been one of the rare CoW members to call for a ground component to provide a deterring and if needed a blocking force. Its contribution would

typically be an army brigade, including 2 heavy armoured battlegroups. Finally, the MFU plans for a train-and-equip mission to assist UAF in-country, [as evoked by Emmanuel Macron as early as February 2024](#).

Such a contribution built around the ENU-R construct could be kept in place as long as needed, with a typical 4-months rotation. In peacekeeping, hybrid or low intensity contexts with limited attrition, it would create some pressure on the force model, but can be dealt with. However, should Russia test the coalition's resolve and engage a high intensity combat, France's ability to endure massed enemy fires and substantial attrition is [questionable](#).

If no ceasefire is signed, other options exist. France could theoretically participate to a more limited operation following the SkyShield model, with fighter jets and other countermeasures operating from air bases within the NATO members states, or even in Ukraine itself. Here again, France may generate an air component of 16 combat aircraft with an AWACS, 2 tankers and a long-range air defence battery. If staffed with adequate personnel, such a force could generate about 36 sorties per day with Combat Air Patrols of 2 to 4 fighter jets.

The real question lies with ammunition management. Should the fighters fly with air-to-air missiles, [the high cost and limited available volumes would make the whole undertaking short-lived](#), especially were they to intercept hundreds of low-cost Geran-2. Some options have also been pushed for more affordable interceptors, such as [70 mm laser-guided rockets](#). If Ukraine would ensure air defence against slow-moving targets, SkyShield could focus on cruise missiles, the challenge may be more manageable even though ammunition stockpiles would remain an issue beyond a few weeks or, at best, a few months.

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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.