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EUROPEAN TROOPS FOR UKRAINE? EVOLVING PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIC DEBATES ON THE DEPLOYMENT OF EUROPEAN GROUND TROOPS TO UKRAINE

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Introduction

The Western bloc rapidly united after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, and worked together to develop a common response across multiple fronts—first to halt the Russian blitzkrieg and later to provide Ukraine with the means to resist and sustain a prolonged war. While the condemnation of the 'special military operation' ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin was unanimous among Western countries (United Nations, 2022), some relevant divergencies soon emerged regarding the kind of aid to supply Ukraine and the extent of the response to Russian aggression. Motivated by a high dependence on Russian exports, concerns about declining approval ratings or a feared nuclear escalation, many Western governments delayed their arms supplies to Ukraine, delaying the supply of certain weaponry until it became unavoidable (Tocci, 2022). At the outset, several European countries provided Ukraine only with small arms and non-lethal weapons or military equipment. After the first stages of the conflict and the failed Russian attempt to overthrow the Ukrainian government and occupy Kyiv, a bulk of countries started improving the quality of weapons and vehicles sent (Francis, 2024). From helmets, rifles and light-armoured vehicles, Ukraine's partners switched to supplying main battle tanks, fighter jets and advanced anti-missile systems (Debusmann et al., 2023; Balmforth, 2024). However, sending European or American troops to Ukraine has always been considered beyond the realm of possibility. Officials and policymakers have long believed such an action would escalate the existing tensions and amplify the risk of a broader conflict (Crowther et al., 2024).

In this context, President Emmanuel Macron's statement sparked a strong reaction from other European leaders (McElvoy & Chiappa, 2024). On February 26th, 2024, at a meeting in Paris, Macron stated that Western allies should exclude no options to avert a Russian victory in Ukraine. He intended his comments to rally support for Kyiv and highlight the need to address the shortages of ammunition and manpower on the Ukrainian side (Rinke & Faulconbridge, 2024). Intending to clarify the President's remarks, then-French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne said Macron thought about troops performing specific tasks, such as mine clearance, weapons production and cyber defence (McLaughlin, 2024). These troops would avoid fighting against Russian soldiers to prevent such a move from being interpreted as an act of war against the Russian Federation. President Macron also stressed that excluding this possibility would reflect the same approach adopted in the previous months with the provision of tanks, planes and long-range missiles (McLaughlin, 2024). He stated that the discussion aimed to make clear that everything is possible if it is useful to pursue European interests and to convince Russia that Europe is a credible interlocutor with high stakes in the war (Rose & Irish, 2024). He added that "nothing should be ruled out" and emphasised doing everything possible to prevent Russia from winning the war (Irish, 2024,

para. 3). French officials and diplomats had to specify that there was no concrete proposal for sending troops to the front, but their participation was no longer taboo for France (Zakharchenko, 2024).

This article aims to categorise European leaders' different stances on this project, evaluate its feasibility and implications and highlight the increased relevance of the debate surrounding the crucial role Europe needs to play in the upcoming stages of the conflict. Section 2 will begin with an analysis of European and NATO allies' initial reactions to President Macron's words in February 2024 and then follow the development of the discussion during the year. Section 3 will address the second climax of the debate at the end of November, when several states demonstrated less resistance to the proposal, starting to elaborate concrete scenarios for sending troops to Ukraine. Drawing from these suggestions, section 4 will examine the likelihood of European troops' deployment, its potential advantages and serious risks, concluding with an assessment of the strategic purpose of shaping the discourse and its consequences on the perceived role of the European bloc in the conflict.

1. Europe's Unease: Shattered Reactions to President Macron's Suggestion

Despite the immediate downsizing, European and US political representatives rushed to distance themselves from President Macron's suggestion (Rinke & Faulconbridge, 2024). Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, an opponent of military aid to Ukraine, revealed details of the debate, citing a restricted document, and firmly rejected the prospect (Kayali & Chiappa, 2024). Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó took a similar stance (NL Times, 2024). Moreover, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that no European country or NATO state would send soldiers on Ukrainian soil, with the German Defence Minister confirming the position, wary of drawing the NATO alliance into direct conflict with Russia (Pelham & Newton, 2024). The White House reiterated that, despite their commitment to providing military aid to Ukraine, they did not plan to send ground troops (Rinke & Faulconbridge, 2024). At the same time, then-British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak claimed that the United Kingdom had no plans for large-scale deployment beyond the small number of personnel already supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces (MacAskill & Piper, 2024), and then-Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, now NATO Secretary General, also added that the issue of sending troops to Ukraine was not the central one at the Paris meeting, keeping a low profile (Rose & Irish, 2024). Alongside these countries, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the Czech Republic rejected Macron's statement, contextually underlining the urgency of providing Ukraine with the right weapons and ammunition to continue its fight (Kayali & Chiappa, 2024; Landauro, 2024; Lopatka et al., 2024). Even then-NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg denied considering whether troops would be sent to Ukraine in a hypothetical

future (Pelham & Newton, 2024).

The initiative also sparked a reaction inside the Kremlin. Spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that if NATO Members deployed troops to fight in Ukraine, a direct conflict would be inevitable (Pelham & Newton, 2024), while Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that the consequences of such a decision would be 'tragic,' reminding European States that Russia has long-range weapons that could hit targets around Europe and warning that Russia's strategic nuclear forces are in a "state of full readiness" (Gozzi, 2024, para. 12). Furthermore, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament discouraged Macron from sending troops to Ukraine not to "meet the same fate as Napoleon's army" and accused him of wanting to trigger a Third World War (Caulcutt, 2024, para. 6). On the other hand, some Ukrainian officials welcomed the decision to shape this debate (Polityuk, 2024). Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said that Macron's statement showed awareness of the risks a militaristic, aggressive Russia poses to Europe (Kramarenko & Shekina, 2024).

Inside France, opposition parties widely criticised this prospect, while French officials downplayed Macron's comments. Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right party Rassemblement National, accused the President of playing 'war leader' (Chiappa, 2024, para. 5). Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a prominent French left-wing politician, warned that such a move would make France belligerent and referred to the verbal escalation as an irresponsible act, calling for a negotiated peace. The Socialist Party leader, Olivier Faure, said Macron's remarks were "totally counterproductive" and had only served to divide the EU (Firstpost, 2024, para. 14). However, the Élysée chief clarified that his comments were "weighed, thought through and measured" (Caulcutt, 2024, para. 3).

President Macron claimed from the beginning that there was no consensus on the matter, and only very few voices supported his statement (Corbet, 2024). The Lithuanian Foreign Minister expressed gratitude for the debate initiated, and Kaja Kallas, then-Estonian Prime Minister, agreed on the importance of sending a signal to Russia (McElvoy & Chiappa, 2024). The then-Lithuanian Defence Minister, Arvydas Anušauskas, spoke about the possibility of NATO troops going to Ukraine for training purposes, stating that there are many nuances about what could happen and under what conditions (Stankevičius, 2024). Despite the initial distancing, Petr Pavel, President of the Czech Republic, noted that there should be no limit regarding the possibilities of supporting Ukraine and that sending troops in the form of non-combat participation could be a prospect. He asserted that it made no difference whether Western instructors trained Ukrainian soldiers abroad or directly in Western Ukraine, adding that a possible training mission would not violate any international rules (Ukrainska Pravda, 2024). A similar statement came from Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen, who referred to a longer-term, hypothetical choice in case Moscow became even more assertive

(Berg & Bazail-Eimil, 2024).

2. A Rekindled Debate: President Trump's Shadow and the Old Continent Under Pressure

After such reactions, the debate lost momentum and gradually faded until the prospect of American disengagement from Kyiv and Russia gaining ground in Ukraine, with the occupation of more than 4,000 square kilometres in 2024 (Shamim, 2025), revived these discussions in a different context (Hoorman et al., 2024). A recent visit to France by the UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, reignited the debate, announcing that the UK and France were working on a new defence cooperation agreement to create a hard core of European allies focused on Ukraine and European security. In these circumstances, the French Foreign Minister called on Western allies to "not set and express red lines" in their support for Ukraine (Cole, 2024, para. 17). Radio Liberty reported that France and the UK were exploring options to ensure Ukraine's security in case of peace talks with Russia, including deploying troops along the front lines to monitor ceasefire compliance (Goncharova, 2024). The story originated from anonymous sources in the French newspaper Le Monde at the end of November 2024, a few weeks before President Donald Trump's entrance to the White House, which generated concerns about the future US commitment to the conflict and the credibility of US deterrence for Europe. It reported that representatives from the two countries talked about deploying Western troops to shield Ukraine from further Russian aggression as part of the conditions regarding potential future peace talks (Croucher, 2024). President Emmanuel Macron withheld details about which nations might participate in the initiative, citing 'strategic ambiguity' (Daftari, 2024). Recurrently mentioned by French authorities, this practice consists of withholding clarity and being deliberately ambiguous on sensitive issues to deter potential adversaries, preserve diplomatic flexibility and manage domestic and international pressures (Youvan, 2024).

This time, the allies' responses were less resolved, even though British Foreign Secretary David Lammy said the UK's position remained not to commit troops to the theatre of action (Honeycombe-Foster & Blewett, 2024). Soon after, the EU's new High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, reiterated that nothing should be ruled out as she had explained ten months earlier, and emphasised that Europe should "play an important role" in the event of a ceasefire agreement (Brzozowski, 2024, para. 6). Despite the difference in tone, some countries rejected this prospect (Daftari, 2024). For example, Estonia's Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur said that Ukraine did not need troops, but money for its military (Cole, 2024). On the other hand, on December 9th, 2024, Zelensky opened to the possibility of welcoming Western troops in Ukraine as part of a potential security arrangement to end the war with Russia, though highlighting that ensuring that Ukraine obtains NATO membership is the

ultimate goal, which remains a contentious issue as long as the country is at war (Daftari, 2024). Ukrainian officials demanded security guarantees to prevent Russia from launching another invasion after the current hostilities have ceased (Dysa & Balmforth, 2024). However, Russia again demanded that Ukraine abandon its NATO ambitions, considering Kyiv's membership an unacceptable security threat (Banatvala, 2024).

At the same time, other governments and European leaders welcomed this proposal. While some German representatives reiterated their military instructors would continue training Ukraine's troops outside Ukrainian territory (Cole, 2024), Annalena Baerbock, German Foreign Minister, said she was committed to supporting any initiative promoting lasting peace in Ukraine (Paternoster, 2024). Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told Politico it was time to revisit the concept of deploying soldiers to Kyiv; despite highlighting that Europe was once more reactive and not proactive, he said he was confident about European states' possibility of turning President Macron's ideas into action (Vinocur, 2024). Interviewed by CNN, he had already declared that these troops could address training and assist the Ukrainian Armed Forces without fighting (Edwards et al., 2024). On the same days, Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna stated that one could conceive any form of guarantee, including deploying boots on the ground to preserve peace (Hall, 2024). Riho Terras, a former commander of Estonia's Armed Forces, added that Europeans should keep the option on the table since this would make the development of the conflict uncertain to the Russian leadership (Vinocur, 2024), an approach reflecting the strategic ambiguity praised by the French President. A similar statement came from Finland's Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen, who emphasised that Western nations should keep flexibility and not entirely rule out the idea (Croucher, 2024). The Czech Republic and the Netherlands also began considering this possibility (Crowther & Matisek, 2024b). This highlighted the existence of a growing bloc of countries open to direct European intervention (Crowther et al., 2024).

3. From Mere Suggestions to Concrete Scenarios: Likelihood and Limits of a Potential Deployment

The deployment of troops into Ukraine by NATO Member States remains a highly sensitive subject. While European states have been vocally supportive of the Ukrainian cause and provided substantial financial aid, they have considerably refrained from overcoming Russian-set supposed red lines to avoid direct conflict (Croucher, 2024). The fear of escalation has slowed down Western military supplies to Ukraine (Cole, 2024). Similarly, NATO leaders have sought to clarify that they are not party to the conflict (NATO, 2024). At the same time, the EU and European NATO Allies suffer from a leadership vacuum and the lack of recognition by other great powers as credible security providers, even in their continent. The recent American election has generated fears about the US, Ukraine's biggest

backer, withdrawing support to the country since incoming President Donald Trump has repeatedly promised an immediate end to the war when he takes office on January 20th, 2025 (Mitchell, 2024). Washington's hesitations had already revealed an increased discomfort in Western countries concerning the duration of the war. Therefore, several European leaders have started worrying about being left alone (McElvoy & Chiappa, 2024).

Analysts should examine the prospect of deploying European troops to Ukraine in this context. Although it has long been considered taboo, some officials have repeated that the West is being too cautious, thus penalising Ukraine in its fight (Vinocur, 2024). European leaders must not allow American political considerations to shape European security, and a Russian victory would enable the Kremlin to maintain Russia on a war footing. In this regard, analysts predominantly focused on two main options. The first possibility concerned sending support units and military personnel away from the frontline to perform specific tasks, such as repairing damaged vehicles and training Ukrainian soldiers. The second prospect would entail deploying European peacekeepers to safeguard a potential ceasefire as part of a future peace deal's terms.

The Experts' Voices: Assessing the Advantages and Drawbacks of a Dangerous Discussion

Several commentators have already expressed their opinions on this issue (Croucher, 2024). Retired NATO official Jamie Shea outlined two potential scenarios for deploying European troops before reaching a ceasefire. One, supported by Fabrice Pothier, founding director of Carnegie Europe, would entail moving the current training activities around Europe inside Ukraine closer to the frontline. The other would imply having European military specialists help maintain and repair Western-supplied equipment in loco without wasting time and resources sending it back to the allies' territory. Regarding the training mission, a potential tool could be the expansion of the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM) inside the country's territory to facilitate accelerated training timelines (Crowther & Matisek, 2024b). While Shea believed it was time for the big European countries to debate the options and evaluate their readiness to contribute, American foreign policy expert Ian Brzezinski went even further. He advocates sending allied troops to Ukraine to establish a security bubble, strengthen Ukraine's position, and ensure stability after the fighting ends without directly engaging Russian forces (Croucher, 2024). Kori Schake, an American international relations scholar, agreed that this would demonstrate that Ukraine is no longer relegated to a grey zone of insecurity and would enable Ukraine to concentrate its military resources directly against Russia's invading ground forces (Croucher, 2024). Other experts disagreed with their position. Barry Posen, Ford International Professor of Political Science at MIT, and John Lough, an expert on Russian security policy, judged the risk too high that those troops would expect NATO to bail them out, even though they acknowledged that

deploying only small units away from the front would reduce this risk (Croucher, 2024; Daniel, 2024). Moreover, having boots on the ground would likely draw too much public attention and increase the risk of a wider war.

Conversely, concerning the potential deployment of troops after a peace agreement, Liana Fix, a Council on Foreign Relations fellow for Europe, regarded this prospect as the only possibility of giving Ukraine security guarantees, eventually making a ceasefire possible (Momtaz, 2025). The presence of these soldiers would solve the commitment problem that the two parties would risk encountering during the negotiations and decrease the chances that the Russian authorities would decide to continue the war after reaching a ceasefire. James Carafano from the Heritage Foundation disagreed, stating that the peacekeepers would risk being like hostages (Croucher, 2024).

A Continental Shift? Europe's Changed Attitude and Persisting Fears

Between the two periods when the discussions intensified, France tried to rally a group of countries open to potentially sending Western troops to Ukraine. While the Baltic ministers soon praised France for 'thinking out of the box,' Warsaw slowly shifted its position (Lau, 2024, para. 7). Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski commented in March that the presence of NATO forces in Ukraine was not unthinkable. His Lithuanian counterpart insisted on drawing red lines for Russia, not for Europe itself (Lau, 2024). Furthermore, these countries have expressed their willingness to act independently if Russia achieves significant gains on the battlefield, reflecting the growing fear that insufficient support for Ukraine could embolden Russia and jeopardise the continent's security (Croucher, 2024). Such renewed assertiveness was also a reaction to the reports of thousands of North Korean soldiers arriving in Ukraine to support Russia (Paternoster, 2024).

Macron signalled the need for Europe to intensify its efforts supporting Ukraine while at the same time warning Russia that European states have high stakes in the war and are thus willing to undertake actions that would have been inconceivable a few months before. According to Reuters (Irish et al., 2024), Macron's comments may pave the way for greater direct Western involvement in the war under certain conditions. However, concerning the feasibility of the option, that decision would entail the involvement of countries with relevant transport and logistics capabilities and a unity of purpose among several countries, with the tacit approval of the entire coalition (Cook & Janicek, 2024). This would raise relevant political concerns due to the same fears of escalation that have led, for example, European states to place limits on the employment of long-range weapons (Daftari, 2024). A strictly non-combat mission would thus be the most acceptable to most European capitals. For instance, by staying west of the Dnieper River, European forces may demonstrate that their presence

does not directly threaten Russian troops (Crowther et al., 2024). An important yet problematic task they could perform would be strengthening Ukraine's air defence capabilities by helping to shoot down cruise missiles and drones (Crowther et al., 2024). Croucher (2024) believes that the presence of European troops would also raise the morale of the Ukrainian people and free up Ukrainian units to strengthen the front; according to him, the risk that deploying European soldiers to Ukraine will escalate the conflict is currently overblown.

Redefining Europe's Strategic Ambitions: The Timing and Purpose of Macron's Proposal

Despite their relevance and less hostile reception, the Elysée chief's declarations may also risk undermining unity among Western allies, which was precisely what he sought to bolster (Firstpost, 2024). John Foreman, a former defence attaché for the UK in Moscow and Kyiv, described the comments as distracting, arguing that he was not surprised by the other leaders' reaction (Watling, 2024). Ukrainian political scientist Volodymyr Fesenko had a different stance and considered these statements a bid for leadership in the EU, with Macron acting as the visionary leader of a united Europe (Kramarenko & Shekina, 2024). In addition, he recognised in those words a traditional method of political rhetoric, which consists of hoping to achieve a specific result by stating the goal in the most maximalist form. Therefore, his words may signal the first step in strengthening the EU's military subjectivity.

Nevertheless, the February outcry distancing from the French President's suggestion undermined the credibility of the EU as an actor with a voice in the conflict, comforting the Russian belief that Europe is weak (Firstpost, 2024). Kurt Volker, an American diplomat, believed that the response sent the wrong message to the Russian leadership, as well (Berg & Bazail-Eimil, 2024), as Russian officials seek to exploit risk aversion (Crowther & Matisek, 2024a). As General Onno Eichelsheim, the Netherlands' top military officer, stated, all options should be considered, even though NATO countries are unprepared to embark on such a mission and NATO itself assumed the responsibility to ensure that the war does not escalate and spread beyond Ukraine (NL Times, 2024). Former US ambassador Ivo Daalder agreed, convinced that rethinking assumptions behind closed doors through diplomacy could be useful (Berg & Bazail-Eimil, 2024).

In any case, simply talking about deployments would unlikely change the outcome in Ukraine (Crowther et al., 2024). Europe must clarify that Ukraine's territorial sovereignty is vital to European security architecture. Russia's invasion disrupted the regional balance of power to the detriment of other European states. However, Europeans do not seem ready to fight or assume a more relevant role in the conflict (Kramarenko & Shekina, 2024). Even though the

deployment is limited to training, technical and logistics units, there needs to be a certain level of political agreement in Europe because this would entail accepting some risk (Tavberidze, 2024). At least, the mere existence of the debate broke the one-sided escalation pattern, which usually implied Moscow threatening escalation with Berlin and Washington aiming to de-escalate at the expense of the Ukrainian ability to defend its territory (Crowther et al., 2024), as Russia is basing its hopes for victory also on European countries separating themselves from Ukraine. Any deployment, even outside the NATO framework, would reverse this perspective. Currently, the only option with a concrete possibility of being widely discussed would be sending European troops as peacekeepers, who might be needed to enforce any settlement (Cook, 2024), but whose command and control would certainly be quarrelled among European states and a European Union that strives to acquire more operational capacity.

Finally, President Macron's words can be interpreted as a warning to President Putin, signalling to the Kremlin that Europe would consider all options in the defence of Ukraine (Kramarenko & Shekina, 2024) and a way to initiate a discussion (Tavberidze, 2024). "This is a European war. It is our soil and our continent", he stated (Berlinger et al., 2024, para. 21). This approach would be coherent with his conception of the EU strategic autonomy vis-à-vis Washington and Moscow. Indeed, discussing troop deployment legitimises the European bloc's military role, showing its willingness to openly confront an imperialistic power waging a war of aggression.

Conclusion

When President Emmanuel Macron first discussed the eventuality of sending European troops to Ukraine in February 2024, he provoked a general outcry among its EU and NATO partners. French authorities were quick to downplay his declarations to reassure European citizens, limiting them to support roles like repair tasks and in loco training for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Concurrently, the French government referred to the principle of strategic ambiguity to avoid providing more details about the countries that had debated that possibility. The discussion lost momentum and slowly faded after a Ukrainian opening and a Russian warning against such a move. However, in the following months, a growing bloc of European states considered a possible deployment in different scenarios, with different conceptions about the role such troops could play. At the beginning of December 2024, the British and French governments reportedly revived discussions, focusing on the deployment of peacekeepers to shield Ukraine from further aggression in the future.

This article has analysed the renewed focus on such an option as part of European countries' efforts to prepare for the coming Trump administration and the potentially

resulting peace negotiations re-opening for Ukraine. While the likelihood of the event remains relatively low and the stakes probably too high for most European leaders, the article concludes that the debate itself is crucial for establishing Europe's geopolitical role, to signal the presence of European states as stakeholders to be taken into account and to expand the range of possibilities that the EU has in providing security guarantees for Ukraine.

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