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The shadow Russia casts over Europe has forced it to face the truth: the risk of war is once again real

20 HR AGO

Analysis by  Ivana Kottasová

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When a group of defense insiders gathered in Whitehall, the home of the British government, last month to discuss how prepared the United Kingdom and its allies were for a war they believe could come in the next few years, their verdict was pretty grim: They are not.

The people gathered at the conference, hosted by the London-based think tank the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), were not warmongers; they were people in

the know. Current and former members of the armed forces, government and

<https://edition.cnn.com/2025/12/25/europe/russia-europe-analysis-intl-cmd>

NATO officials, researchers and defense industry professionals whose thinking is based on the widely accepted intelligence assessment that Russia is preparing for the possibility of a direct conflict with Europe.

The only way to prevent that from happening, they say, is to make sure that if a war were to break out, Europe would win.

More investment into chronically underfunded European defense is key, but security experts are increasingly warning that a big shift in mindset is needed across the board too. It is time, they say, for European governments to get their citizens on board and make it clear that the time when Europe was able to ignore the threat of war is over.

“I think that there is an indication that societies are willing to have this conversation, but I think that we are also seeing governments that are still not quite confident enough to have that conversation with their publics,” said Sam Greene, a professor of Russian politics at King’s College London and an expert in democratic resilience.

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There is a growing consensus among experts that Russia is already waging a hybrid war on the West by conducting sabotage operations and injecting chaos and disinformation into domestic political discussions. They point to the overwhelming evidence, including repeated incursions into NATO airspace by Russian planes and drones and GPS jamming in the Baltics, to disinformation campaigns, and sabotage attacks against critical infrastructure in multiple countries that have been traced back to Russian secret services. Russia has consistently denied involvement.

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Greene said that these attacks have already shifted the views of many in Europe, even if some politicians remain unwilling to name them outright as hybrid warfare.

"I think that people are spooked, particularly as this becomes more visible," he said. "We see drones outside airports, and I think that there is a growing sense that it is probably (only) a matter of time before one of these drones brings down an airliner."



The house of Alicja and Tomasz Wesolowski in Poland's Wyryki-Wola was destroyed after Russian drones violated Polish airspace during an attack on Ukraine. (Kacper Pempel/Reuters)

Baltic fears

While Moscow has not carried out any direct attacks against NATO allies in Europe – experts say this is partly because **Russia knows it couldn't defeat** the alliance with its current capabilities – there are increasing signs that this could change in the future.

NATO's Secretary General Mark Rutte warned earlier this year that Russia could be ready to use military force against NATO within five years. German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul echoed that warning in a speech last month, saying that German intelligence services believe that Moscow is “at least keeping open the option of war against NATO by 2029 at the latest.”

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Russian President Vladimir Putin said in early December that while Russia is not planning to go to war with Europe, “if Europe suddenly wants to go to war with us and starts, we are ready right now.”



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks during a meeting of the Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) at the Senate Palace of the Kremlin in Moscow on December 8. (*Pavel Bednyakov/Reuters*)

The consensus among Baltic countries is that an attack against them could come as soon as in three years' time. When researchers at the **Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs** at the Harvard Kennedy School looked into the warnings and predictions made by various officials about Russia's readiness and willingness to launch a war against NATO, they found that the most often mentioned years are 2027 and 2028.

Recognition of this threat has led NATO to develop contingency plans for how to defend against a possible Russian aggression against the Baltics.

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But experts warn the alliance's plans don't stack up.

"There's a plan, with numbers. But the governments are not taking the necessary steps to implement it. We are still planning based on things that don't exist," said Jack Watling, a senior research fellow at RUSI. He highlighted the risk of trying to structure a defense response based on a wish list rather than reality, instead of accepting the resources that are available, and planning based on those.

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The British government earlier this year asked three high-profile experts – former NATO chief George Robertson, Gen. Richard Barrons, former head of the Joint Forces Command, and Fiona Hill, a former senior director at the US National Security Council – to conduct a strategic review of UK defense. The trio presented it with a manual on the steps needed to be ready for war.

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Speaking at the RUSI event last month, Barrons said that the UK must rethink the resilience of its infrastructure, build up its armed forces, reserves and civil defense,

and invest in its health service, industry and the economy, to allow a quick pivot to a war footing.

“We frankly don’t need much more analysis to tell us what it is we need to do. The problem is that we need to actually do it,” he said. He points to “civil society and our politicians” having other concerns as the reason for the lack of haste.



Soldiers of the 88th Gun Battery of the British Army prepare an artillery gun during the Allied Spirit 25 military exercise in Germany. (Sean Gallup/Getty Images)

While the UK is moving in the right direction, he said, at the current pace it would take the country about 10 years to be ready for a war.

“And our analysis and our allies are saying to us, well, maybe you’ve got three to five years... so this is a matter of will, societal as much as political, and then competence. Maybe we need to do better,” he said.

Peace dividend

Many European capitals, including London, have spent the past few decades barely thinking about defense. With no major direct military conflicts taking place on the continent since 1945, Europe has enjoyed the longest period of continuous peace in centuries.

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These decades of relative calm came with a significant peace dividend. Successive governments were able to spend money on welfare instead of defense, making the lives of ordinary Europeans much more comfortable, while relying on the United States, the world's biggest military spender, to come to the rescue should the need arise.

Then came two harsh awakenings: a US president, in Donald Trump, who made it clear to NATO allies that they could no longer rely so heavily on the US, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.



US President Donald Trump during a press conference at the NATO summit in The Hague, Netherlands on June 25. Of Nato's 32 members, 31 are set to meet the target of spending 2% of GDP on defense this year – up from just six in 2021. (*Piroschka Van De Wouw/Reuters*)

This upending of the status quo prompted most of NATO's European members to increase defense spending. According to **data from NATO**, 31 of its 32 members are set to meet the target of spending 2% of GDP on defense this year – up from just six in 2021, the year before Russia launched its invasion. Iceland, a founding member of NATO and the only country that is not projected to meet the target, does not have its own armed forces. Instead, it contributes financially, with civilian personnel, and with air defense and surveillance systems.

NATO members agreed, in June, to increase the target to 5% of GDP by 2035. However, many analysts are skeptical about the goal – especially because most European countries are facing financial pressures even without thinking about a massive boost to their defense spending.

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Explaining to voters that some resources might need to be reallocated, and that, perhaps, more people might need to serve in reserve or regular forces, is not something most politicians want to do.

Several Eurobarometer surveys, which measure public opinion across the European Union, this year showed that an overwhelming majority of Europeans – 78% – are concerned about the EU’s defense and security in the next five years. A third of people believe defense should be among the bloc’s spending priorities.

Nonetheless, Gen. Fabien Mandon, France’s armed forces chief, sparked outcry last

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possible future losses against Russian aggression, saying France must “accept losing its children” to “protect who we are.”

Robin Potter, an academy associate at the UK-based think tank Chatham House, said that the willingness of people across Europe to understand the threat – and to play part in countering it – varies significantly.



A group of civilians takes part in training military techniques in a session billed as "Train with the Army" by the country's defence ministry, in Gdynia, Poland, on April 5. (*Lukasz Glowala/Reuters*)

"If you're in the east, if you perhaps border Russia, if you're in Poland or in the Baltic states, the threat is very real for people there, and they are taking a lot more steps in terms of public shelters because they think the risk of an air attack is higher," he said.

Sweden and Finland updated guidance to their citizens on how to **survive war** last year, distributing booklets that included instructions on how to prepare for communications outages, power cuts and extreme weather. Several countries, including Lithuania, Latvia and Sweden, have reintroduced conscription over the past decade, while other countries like Germany, Poland, Belgium, Romania and Bulgaria have brought in voluntary military training programs for their citizens.

Potter said citizens with deeper trust in their countries' institutions are more likely to accept sacrifices for the wider good.

"If people feel the state is working for them, they're probably more inclined to want to give something back," he said. He pointed to the Nordic states, which consistently rank high on welfare, happiness and wellbeing and where the concept of civic duty and "total defense" – where every citizen, business and public body becomes part of a war effort if needed – are deeply engrained.

"I think there's a kind of question about whether you can just lift that model and put it in a quite different society with very low trust in public institutions in comparison, like the UK."



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