



By: TA | AP Insight

# Is Europe on its own against the Russian threat?



Since Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO has focused on trying to deter an attack on its own territory and avoid all-out war with nuclear armed Russia.

Now the time has come for NATO to defend itself, and European allies might have to do it alone, experts and leaders say.

As it has attacked Ukraine, Russia has incessantly **harassed** Kyiv's European backers. Warplanes and ships have breached NATO airspace and waters.

Transport and communications networks have been sabotaged in **attacks** blamed on Russia. Disinformation **campaigns** have sought to undermine support and weaken unity. Putin opponents have been poisoned in Europe in the past too.

But the flight of multiple Russian **drones** over Poland this week marks a clear escalation, experts say. NATO responded with overwhelming force. Cheap drones were **shot** down with high-tech military kit and top-line F-35 jets were deployed. A costly exercise.

Russia's armed forces said they weren't targeting Poland. Belarus suggested the drones veered off course, perhaps due to jamming.

France, the Netherlands and the U.K. are sending more equipment to help Poland defend its borders, notably near Belarus where Russia **launched** military exercises on Friday.

NATO's eastern flank in Europe will be bolstered with more air defenses stationed there.

## Europe is alone, for now

It's "unclear what more – if anything – the U.S. is willing to do to strengthen NATO air defenses. So far, we've seen Europeans operating U.S. platforms without a direct American military role," NATO's longest-serving spokesperson Oana Lungescu, now an expert at the RUSI think tank, said on social

media.

NATO relies on U.S. leadership, but the Trump administration **insists** that Europe must now take care of its own security, and that of Ukraine.

Europe's leaders have condemned the drone incident and promised action. President Donald Trump has said that it "could have been a mistake."

## Trump's ambiguity about defending Europe has undermined trust at NATO

Trump's ambiguity about defending Europe has undermined trust at NATO, despite the alliance's attempts to project unity at a **summit** in July.

"We would also wish that the drone attack on Poland was a mistake. But it wasn't. And we know it," Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk posted on X on Friday.

After a meeting of the Polish National Security Council on Thursday, Tusk said: "We would all prefer that the biggest ally spoke openly and publicly about this incident, but let's not be picky, we must also get accustomed to the new situation."

## Russia takes advantage

For Putin, it's as good a time as any to test NATO's resolve. To the dismay of Ukraine and European allies, Trump dropped his demands for an immediate ceasefire at his **summit** with Russia's leader in Alaska last month, preferring a broader deal to end the war.

Long-threatened U.S. sanctions against Russia have remained just threats and Putin has bought more time to try to seize Ukrainian territory.

Winter is approaching and the fighting is likely to grind to a halt within a few months anyway.

## Putin wants to force the allies to make the choice between defending NATO and defend Ukraine – Jamie Shea

“Putin is really out now to put down a marker to NATO,” Jamie Shea, an expert on international security at the Chatham House think tank in London and a former top NATO official, told The Associated Press.

By provoking the allies to send air defenses to Poland, some of which might otherwise be bound for Ukraine, Putin wants to force the allies to “make the choice between defending NATO and defend Ukraine, which should be the same thing,” Shea said.

Should they be unable to do so, he said, “from Putin’s point of view, this would be a very happy development because then he would be able to take apart Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, cause misery for the Ukrainian population.”

## How best to respond

It would not be easy for European allies to defend everyone at once without integrating their air defense systems with Ukraine.

One possibility might be for Poland to accept Kyiv’s request to shoot down Russian missiles over western Ukraine should their trajectory take them toward Polish territory. Tusk’s government has never ruled out doing so.



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missiles over western Ukraine should their trajectory take them toward Polish territory

Either way, time is on Russia’s side. While Trump has agreed to sell American weapons to the Europeans to help them arm themselves and Ukraine, many must be manufactured first.

Putin understands that these systems take months, if not years, to make.

The drone incident came just before Russia’s joint military exercise with Belarus — dubbed “Zapad 2025,” or “West 2025,” — got underway and could be linked.

NATO accused Russia of using the “Zapad” exercises in 2021 to pre-position equipment for its invasion of Ukraine the following year.

That the exercises are taking place, even with a smaller Russian presence than usual, is “to demonstrate that (Putin) can invade Ukraine and put pressure on NATO at the same time,” Shea said.

Few experts think NATO will resort to **activating** Article 5 of its founding treaty over the incident — the three musketeers-like pledge that an attack on one ally will be treated as an attack on them all — and the military alliance has not suggested that it would.

For now, bolstering defenses on NATO’s eastern flank is the order of the day.