

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Europe risks a self-fulfilling prophecy over the threat from Russia

Leaders on the continent should be wary of beating the drums of war too loudly

HANNA NOTTE



A Russian 'Grad' self-propelled multiple rocket launcher fires towards Ukrainian positions this week. Europe is likely to face a highly militarised Russia for years to come © Russian Defense Ministry/AP

Hanna Notte

Published DEC 19 2025

The writer is director of the Eurasia Nonproliferation Program at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

With a Ukrainian endgame looming, European concerns over a future Russian attack against a Nato country are acquiring a new sense of urgency, even inevitability.

In November, Germany's defence minister Boris Pistorius invoked warnings by military historians that "we already had our last summer of peace". Soon afterwards, Nato secretary-general Mark Rutte prophesied that "we are Russia's next target" and "must be prepared for the scale of war our grandparents or great-grandparents endured". Sir Richard Knighton, the UK chief of defence staff, echoed such sentiments when he called on the nation's "sons and daughters" to be ready to fight in the event of a Russian attack on Britain.

European trepidation is only too understandable. The continent is likely to face a revanchist and highly militarised Russia for years to come, whichever way the war in Ukraine ends.

The Kremlin makes no secret of its enduring intent to roll back Nato's borders and revise the European security architecture. Vladimir Putin's bellicose rhetoric — recently warning that if Europe were to start a war, Russia would be ready to fight and leave "no one to negotiate with" — doesn't help. And the new US national security strategy, which warns of the dangers of "civilizational erasure" on the continent and orientates US policy towards "patriotic European parties" often sympathetic to Moscow, hammers home the risk that Europe might find itself strategically isolated in confronting an aggressive Russia.

Considering these unsettling circumstances, European officials hope, in sounding the alarm over a future Russian attack, to convey the high stakes to their populations — which have remained largely apathetic in the face of Russia's hybrid campaign.

Judging by the arduous debates over (and delays to) increased defence spending over the past three and a half years, it is true that Europe needs to be shocked into action. But beating the drums of war has pitfalls, too.

The first of these is analytical. Fatally mistaken in their conviction that Russia would *not* invade Ukraine in February 2022, some Europeans now seem to be overcorrecting for that past error of judgment, convincing themselves and others that an attack on Europe is bound to happen.

That overcorrection might nurture confirmation bias, an inclination to look for evidence that validates one's fears while ignoring any signs to the contrary. But sober analysis must always remain open to the possibility that Russia, however adversarial, will not dare a large-scale attack against a Nato country. It should allow for the possibility that Moscow will calculate that the current hybrid campaign serves its purposes just fine, or that it continues to believe in the US commitment to Nato's collective defence more than the Europeans do, or both.

More problematic is that invoking the spectre of an unavoidable war with Russia could fuel a spiral of escalation. European alarmism has already encouraged a growing chorus of Russian elites to engage in mirror imaging. They claim that it is Europe, re-arming, that is preparing to wage war against Russia, with the aim of inflicting a "strategic defeat" on the country.

Russian propagandists are jumping at the opportunity to cast what they describe as a warmongering Europe as the new adversary-in-chief, now that Donald Trump prefers to engage Russia in dialogue. According to a recent opinion poll, the share of Russians who view Europe as an enemy has risen sharply over the past year.

Now, one might argue that the Kremlin will fuel Europhobia no matter what the Europeans say or do — or that growing Russian hostility only further validates the need for Europe to sound the clarion call. But as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Amid escalating rhetoric on both sides, a perennially paranoid Russia could be more prone to view certain acts — for instance, Baltic countries intercepting a Russian ship — as the prelude to an attack, and react accordingly. In other words, the more one side believes war is coming, the more the other side will believe it too.

The danger of war becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy is compounded by the [glaring](#) scarcity of direct European-Russian communication lines that could be leveraged to clarify intentions amid rising tensions.

Squeezed between a menacing Russia and a mercurial Trump administration, European states are right to invest in deterrence and defence. But if they come to view war with Russia as inevitable, they could risk accelerating the very conflict they hope to avert.

Adversarial relations with Russia will remain a fixture of the European security landscape for a long time to come. That makes it more, not less, important for Europeans to seek channels for reducing military risk with Russia, and to weigh their words and actions with care.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Hanna Notte

Russian politics

War in Ukraine

EU foreign policy