Stress Test for Europe

How to Maintain Support for Ukraine

Körber
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Introduction
Testing European Resilience

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European support for Ukraine has been unbroken to date but the costs for backing the country's self-defence in the short term are rising, whether in terms of military supplies, financial assistance, the cost of sanctions or of accommodating refugees. At the same time, European states are increasing their security spending to strengthen their own defence in the long term. Amid economic stagnation, the risk of war fatigue across Europe grows. This could severely hamper the room for manoeuvre of European governments to sustain support for Kyiv in the short term and create challenges in explaining the long-term nature of the threat to Europe as a whole. Meanwhile, Russia is ready to exploit any sign of weakness in Europe and is capable of driving wedges between European countries by further increasing the war burden.

Against this backdrop, the Körber Policy Game brought together a small group of high-level participants from Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden to assess policy options for Europe to sustain support for Ukraine if the costs of war continue to rise for European societies. Which policy options do European countries have to limit and manage the war burden? How to counter mounting Russian obstruction? How to secure European unity?

The Körber Policy Game is based on the idea of projecting current foreign and security policy trends into a future scenario, and in this way seeking to develop a deeper understanding of the interests and priorities of different actors as well as their policy options. Previous Körber Policy Games have discussed a potential re-election of Donald Trump, an escalation in the Taiwan Strait, Europe's future after COVID-19 and Turkey's role in Syria.

The discussions took place in a confidential setting in Berlin in May 2023. This report summarizes the insights and positions generated by the Körber Policy Game. Please note that it reflects the analysis of the authors and not necessarily that of the participants.

Executive Summary

How to support Ukraine in the long term?

All teams said their respective countries would maintain support for Ukraine in the event of a protracted war and reduced US assistance – some for as long as possible, others for as long as necessary. Poland and Sweden share a longstanding threat perception of Russia and would be prepared to support Ukraine as long as it takes. Germany's view of Russia has changed dramatically since the start of the war, leading to unwavering support for Ukraine's self-defence. Italy, on the other hand, has acknowledged the limits of its political and economic resources to sustain long-term support.

How much agreement within the EU?

The policy game revealed that EU member states do not prioritize unity in the same way. While the four country teams shared many policy objectives, maintaining unity within the EU was not always seen as a prerequisite. The Swedish, German and Italian teams saw EU unity as key. However, their approach to maintaining it differed. Germany and Italy would be prepared to use a carrot-and-stick strategy to deal with outliers, while Sweden would rely mainly on pressure. The Polish team prioritized NATO's ability to act over EU unity, preferring to build a coalition of the willing where necessary to push for a decisive political response.

What about transatlantic relations?

The four country teams shared an understanding of the United States as a key actor for European security. The importance of the US political, financial and military contribution cannot be underestimated. Therefore, all teams recommended policies to keep the United States engaged in Ukraine's self-defence and European security. This included involving NATO in countering attacks against Europe, as well as adopting a transactional approach and offering to help the United States protect its security interests in the Indo-Pacific. However, the teams differed in their assessment of Europe's ability to maintain Ukraine's self-defence without or with significantly less US support. While the German, Polish and Swedish team focused on maintaining Kyiv's military capabilities, the Italian team assumed that this would not be possible without the United States.

Giving in to public opinion?

Domestic pressure was perceived very differently in the four countries. Public opinion was seen as reinforcing the positions of the Polish and Swedish governments against Russia and in favour of Ukraine. The German team did not take public support for Ukraine for granted and saw an important task for the government in actively maintaining this. The Italian team shaped its political response around domestic pressure to accommodate sceptical voices in the population. Strategic communication to counter disinformation and false narratives was considered equally important by all teams.

What conditions for peace negotiations?

There was a strong consensus that peace negotiations could only take place on Ukraine's terms. However, the teams differed as to what should be the preconditions to support or join negotiations. If a Western ally agreed to negotiate a Chinese-brokered peace plan, Germany, Poland and Sweden would be sceptical and would seek to move towards a European initiative. Italy was more inclined to support negotiations to reach a ceasefire as soon as possible.

What role for the international community?

All four teams recommended reaching out to states that have not taken a clear stance on Russia's war against Ukraine, including India and Brazil, and offering support to mitigate the negative effects of the war. This approach was driven by the understanding that support from a wide range of states is needed to increase pressure on Russia and continue to isolate it. This was most strongly endorsed by the Italian team and least so by the Polish team, which focused mainly on Western institutions. A mediating role for China would be rejected by Germany, Poland, and Sweden. Warsaw and Stockholm in particular would refuse to see Beijing as a legitimate mediator. Given Italy's perception of having limited power to influence events, it would be more willing to explore the possibilities of China as a mediator.

Policy Recommendations

1. Safeguard European unity

Unity remains a precondition for a decisive European response to Russian aggression and support for Ukraine. The ability to maintain this unity against increasing internal and external pressure depends on a common understanding of the preferred outcome of the war. Europe needs to create a shared vision of the continent's future, but also red lines in order to actively shape its future rather than react to events. This will reduce the risk of Russia driving wedges between European countries. To deal with outliers that undermine common action, the EU can rely on economic and financial pressure, but it must also be prepared to make transactional compromises in other policy areas.

2. Strengthen the ownership and agency of Ukraine

While European security is at risk, it is Ukraine's survival that is most acutely at stake. If the war burden for Europe increases while public support for Kyiv declines, it must not turn inward. Instead, the interests of Ukraine must be kept constantly in mind through close coordination with it. Europe could use existing formats within NATO, the EU and the European Political Community, as well as bilateral contacts, to allow for constant coordination. It must also make it clear to Moscow that nothing will be agreed without Ukraine's consent.

3. Engage the United States as much as possible

The United States' support is needed to shape the outcome of the war in Ukraine's favour and to secure NATO's eastern flank. Europe should reach out to political actors among Democrats and Republicans, and emphasize that European and US security is a shared security, especially vis-à-vis Russia. An emboldened Russia would strengthen China's position, thereby hampering US and European interests vis-à-vis China. If a new US administration favours a transactional foreign policy approach, rather than one based on shared values, Europe could use sanctions on Beijing and a military presence in the Indo-Pacific to maintain Washington's support for Ukraine and European security.

4. Improve strategic communication to European audiences

Foreign policy decisions are shaped by domestic realities. To preserve room for manoeuvre, European governments should communicate more clearly that supporting Ukraine is in Europe's interest, while a war outcome shaped by Russian imperialism would threaten the security of the whole continent. Key should be the narrative that even though security comes at a price, giving in to Russian aggression is ultimately the more costly option, both in terms of economy and security. The communication strategies must be tailored to the respective domestic audiences, as relations with and perceptions of Ukraine, Russia and the war vary across the continent.

5. Implement contingency planning for hybrid attacks

To increase resilience to cyber and hybrid attacks, Europe needs to improve its civil-military and cross-national cooperation, as set out in the European Cyber Defence Policy. To limit the impact of attacks on Europe's readiness to support Ukraine, contingency planning must include clear communication to the European public on the origin and purpose of the attacks, as well as on the measures necessary to counter them. Moreover, Europe should coordinate national action in the cyber realm, including possible retaliation measures.

6. Invest in (joint) European military production capabilities

Europe's support for Ukraine's self-defence is shaped by political will but even more by resources. In case of a reduction of US assistance to Kyiv, Europe has to rely on its own military production capabilities if it wants to maintain Ukraine's self-defence. To this end, Europe needs to take action now by creating production facilities, assembling know-how and experts, coordinating and streamlining production capacities across the continent, and allocating funding. Additionally, Europe should reach out to non-European partners to set up production partnerships.

The Scenario
What if War Fatigue Spreads?

November 2025

The war in Ukraine has become a protracted conflict. Transatlantic and European unity crumbles as war fatigue sets in, popular support for supporting Ukraine decreases and the world economy struggles to emerge from stagflation. Europe experiences increasing cyberattacks against its critical infrastructure, in particular against the German and Italian electricity grids. This results in power blackouts causing unheated private homes and production stoppages in small and medium-sized enterprises. The latest NATO member, Sweden, invests steadily in its defence and resilience. Increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait provide an excuse for US President Ron De Santis to announce a reduction of military and financial support for Ukraine and to put all the United States' weight into its struggle with China.

February 2026

Across Europe, pro-Russia propaganda campaigns fuel scepticism of President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's government. Media reports on companies busting Europe's sanctions on Russia spark a heated debate on their effectiveness. The frequency and intensity of cyberattacks increases all over the continent. Transport infrastructure, medical facilities and local administrations are affected. Evidence mounts that the attacks are attributable to Russia-sponsored groups. This triggers mass demonstrations in numerous European cities, demanding an end to sanctions and 'Peace with Moscow'. At a summit, EU member states discuss sanctions and retaliation measures against Russia, but Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán blocks any reaction. He leaves the summit early rendering the EU unable to act. US intelligence reports indicate that Russia receives large amounts of Chinese ammunition and lethal weapons via North Korea. Moscow uses these and its newly mobilized forces for a new offensive in Ukraine. The military prospects for Kyiv look dire.

June 2026

In addition to continued hybrid attacks, submarine cables crossing the Atlantic and the Red Sea are damaged. First evidence points to Russia as the culprit. Canada triggers an Article 4 NATO meeting but the Baltic states and the United Kingdom push for a meeting under Article 5 instead. After a state visit by President Vladimir Putin to Beijing, President Xi Jinping announces a new peace plan, which includes an end to military support to Russia allegedly by North Korea and to Ukraine by Europe as well as a ceasefire. Negotiations are to take place in Shanghai. France's President Emmanuel Macron travels to Shanghai and proposes a dual strategy for Europe, consisting of sanctions and cyber retaliation while exploring the possibility of negotiations.

Methodology

The Körber Policy Game is based on a short-to-medium-term scenario of three escalating moves, which is provided to participants on the day of the event. The scenario does not attempt to predict the future and is not a forecasting tool. Rather, it serves as a tool to enable participants to discuss the policy game's guiding questions and the interests and policy options of different actors in concrete terms. To limit the complexity of the scenario, it is generally based on the assumption that the current state of affairs is projected into the future in all aspects not explicitly mentioned. The context of the scenario is therefore in most respects a linear continuation of the current situation. Participants in the Körber Policy Game are senior experts and officials from four countries (this year: Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden).

Interests and Policy Options
How to Maintain Support for Ukraine

Considering a scenario that involves a protracted conflict in Ukraine, diminishing support from the United States and a risk of war fatigue spreading across the continent, the four country teams defined their countries' interests and formulated policy options. The following sections outline the crisis response that the teams would recommend to their respective governments in the given scenario.
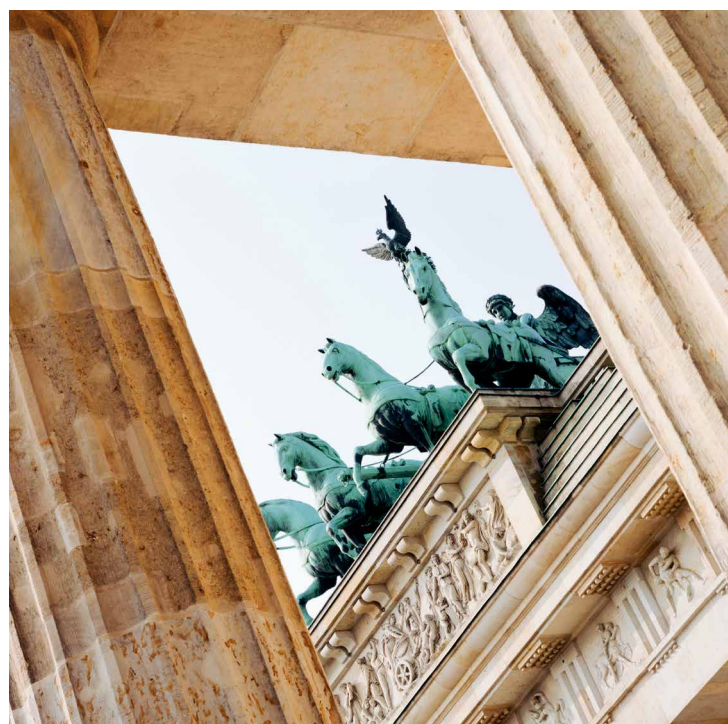
Germany
Preserving European Unity

The German team agreed that 'Germany would maintain its support to Ukraine as long as it takes', even in the event of a US withdrawal and a bleak military outlook for Ukraine. To this end, the German government would need to keep the population on board. It should double down on its communication to make clear that support for Ukraine is necessary for Germany's security and that it is in control of the domestic fallout from the attacks. However, Germany's limited military resources are a serious obstacle to maintaining or even increasing support, especially more than four years into the war. Nevertheless, peace talks with Russia were seen as a viable option only on terms agreed to by Ukraine. Negotiations under Chinese auspices would be unlikely to ensure Ukrainian ownership and European security. On the contrary, Europe would lose room for manoeuvre. The German team therefore proposed holding peace talks in Europe to reduce Chinese influence and force Beijing into a bystander position.

> 'We need to keep Ukraine up, Russia out and the United States in.'

Containing Russia and responding to its hybrid attacks against Europe would be a core interest of Germany's foreign policy. To achieve this, Berlin should rely on cyber retaliation, sanctions and increased NATO exercises. Following Russian cyber and kinetic attacks, Germany should invoke Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, while retaining the option of invoking Article 5 as well as the defence clause in Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union. Deterring and retaliating against Russia while controlling the risk of further escalation remain a delicate balancing act.

US military and diplomatic support for European security remains irreplaceable from the German point of view. To maintain US interest in Europe and Ukraine's defence, the German team proposed a two-pronged approach. First, using US security concerns in the Indo-Pacific as transactional leverage by offering sanctions against China. Second, emphasising US security interests in Europe at a time of Russian attacks on transatlantic infrastructure.

Throughout the policy game, the German team saw unity as key to Europe's ability to act. Macron's unilateral advance as prescribed by the scenario raised significant concerns. Germany would want to protect what has largely been achieved so far: unity within the EU, the G7 and NATO. To this end, they would consider sanctioning China to maintain US support for Ukraine. The team was also prepared to make concessions to outliers in individual policy areas. This would include offering Hungary a compromise on its rule-of-law conflict with the EU to win its support for sanctions against Russia.

The German team sought to transform Berlin's reactive policy into an active shaping of European realities, proposing a 'surge initiative' to rally support for Ukraine among partners. In addition, Germany should reach out to non-Western states. This would recognize that Russia's endurance would be affected not only by the European response, but also by the position of states outside the political West.

Italy
Adapting Foreign Policy to Domestic Realities

The Italian team based its response on two guiding principles: strengthening the European and transatlantic bond, and focusing on domestic demands and economic constraints. Italy would be wary of a protracted war in Ukraine due to fluctuating public backing and concerns that Europe could not maintain the same level of support without the United States. A balance between overt support for Ukraine and support for covert negotiations with all actors involved was seen as a pragmatic and realistic way forward.

The Italian team focused on European coordination to find a common response to increasing Russian attacks on European infrastructure. Italy would not agree to a response under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, but it would push for Article 4 consultations to build a broader consensus and keep the United States involved. Italy would work with other affected countries, such as Germany and Poland, to mitigate the damage caused by the attacks. It would also support maintaining sanctions against Russia.

Italy would want to take a strong stance against Russia and maintain support for Ukraine as long as possible as part of a robust European alliance. However, the team expressed doubts as to whether Europe could support Ukraine sufficiently for it to make significant gains without the contribution of the United States. Under these circumstances, maintaining the current level of support for Ukraine was already viewed as a success. In the

event of Hungary's obstruction of a common European position, Rome would be torn between trying to build bilateral ties to engage Budapest and fearing that strengthening Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's position could damage European cohesion in the long term. The team feared that a growing rift with Hungary could be used by Russia to further divide Europe.

The Italian team proposed moving to a transactional approach towards the United States, in particular offering support for US interests in the Indo-Pacific. However, Italy would not go beyond offering political support to the United States and pushing for a diplomatic solution in the Indo-Pacific, partly due to a lack of resources for more engagement. Sanctions against China would not be in Italy's interest because the economic consequences would be too great.

The Russian attacks could be used to reverse the public narrative on Russia and make clear that it is a threat to Italy's security, regardless of the war in Ukraine. Strategic communication to the public about the Russian threat would be crucial for Italy as protests grow and calls for peace grow louder. However, sustained protests against the government's course would be met with a search for compromise.

> 'Italy is not in a position to influence the peace plan. We should rather focus on the reconstruction of Ukraine.'

In the face of domestic pressure, economic hardship and diminished US support, the Italian team made a strong case for peace negotiations at the European level. While Italy would not take a leading role in a peace process, it would encourage any initiative towards peace. This was justified with public opinion and growing economic pressure. Italy would aim to foster a common European stance in peace talks. The Vatican was seen as a potential facilitator of such negotiations. Italy would consider it acceptable to start with vague goals and move towards more concrete Ukrainian and European interests later.

Poland
Maintaining Support for Ukraine at All Costs

In the event of a protracted war in Ukraine and growing pressure on Europe, the Polish team defined two main interests. First, to ensure a Ukrainian victory, and therefore to provide Ukraine with as much support as it needs. Second, to deter Russia in the long term. For Poland, this would require unity among NATO allies and also NATO partners signalling that they are prepared to use their retaliation power if necessary.

The Polish team opted for a clear and proactive response to increasing Russian hybrid attacks on European infrastructure. For Poland, the attacks on its infrastructure and on that of its European partners would constitute a case for invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. In addition to joint consultations on how to proceed, the team considered hybrid retaliatory operations with the help of Poland's allies. Regaining the initiative rather than remaining in a reactive position would be the guideline for Warsaw.

> 'We should be prepared to use unconventional tools and solutions.'

If the United States were to reduce its military support to Ukraine, strengthening military production and building strong European capabilities in the cyber domain would become increasingly important for Poland to consolidate Europe's deterrence and defence capabilities. NATO's ability to act would take precedence over European unity. A coalition of the willing should drive the transatlantic alliance's response. Poland would also seek to strengthen the transatlantic bond and demonstrate its continued commitment to its relationship with the United States, which remains a key player in its security. In addition, concessions on Warsaw's position on China should help to regain US support.

Regarding the disagreement among EU member states on sanctions and retaliation, the Polish team would opt for a pragmatic approach and seek partners willing and able to join their course of action. A strong response to Russian aggression would be vital, so diplomatic solutions that have been successful previously should be used to get unwilling partners on board so that they do not block action.

Poland would not perceive China as a neutral actor that could credibly negotiate a ceasefire or peace plan. It would seek to bring negotiations into a NATO or EU format, rather than having individual leaders take the lead. While it would be up to Ukraine to formulate terms acceptable to itself, Poland would insist European states be at the table when discussing an end to the war. Moreover, safeguarding Kyiv's interests in a potential peace process would remain crucial for Warsaw.
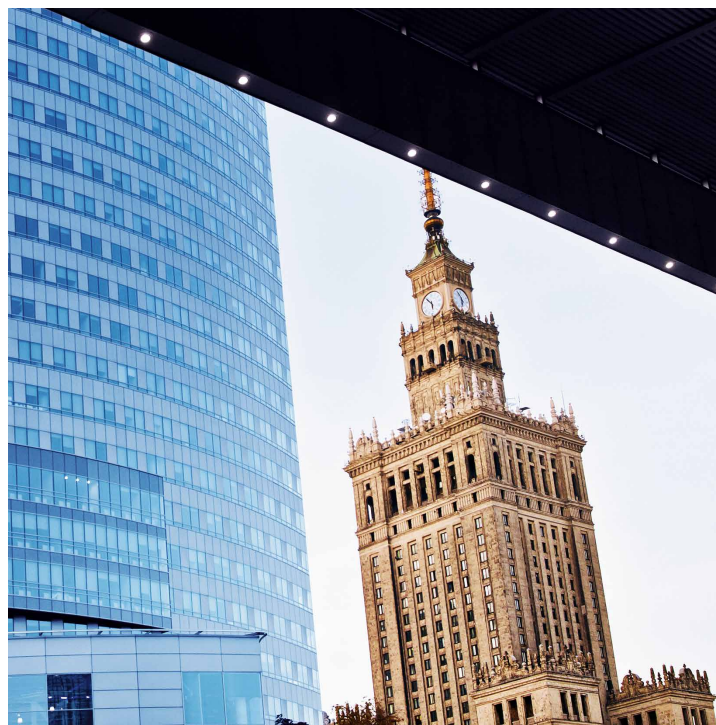
Given the perception of Russia as an existential threat to Poland, the Polish team did not expect a drastic shift in public opinion in favour of the Kremlin's war aims. However, there would be an increasing need for strategic communication to maintain public support for military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Poland would also use a wide range of tools to counter Russian disinformation campaigns in Europe.

Sweden
Prioritizing Decisive Action

The Swedish team emphasised readiness to maintain support for Ukraine at all costs. A Russian defeat would remain the essential political goal for Sweden. Its strong consensus in support of Ukraine and its resilience to cyberattacks and Russian propaganda would reduce the risk of war fatigue in the country. This would give the government more room for manoeuvre in implementing policies to break the military stalemate in Kyiv's favour. The team suggested increasing military production capacity in cooperation with international partners, such as South Korea, and buying up equipment from international sellers that Russia would otherwise buy to sustain its war.

Russian cyber and hybrid attacks should be met with the invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and the defence clause in Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union. The allies should determine the appropriate level of response and respond horizontally, using similar means in other theatres. Concrete countermeasures could include cyber retaliation and additional sanctions against Moscow, as well as securing NATO's eastern flank. To spearhead a European response, Sweden should form a group of like-minded states, including the Nordic and Baltic states, Germany and Poland.

The Swedish team framed the war in Ukraine as a conflict between democracies and autocracies. It emphasised European unity and envisaged a common European approach along the lines of solidarity with attacked states, outreach to global partners and building European resilience. The perception of divided interests within Europe would have to be avoided. However, if individual governments were to paralyse common action, Sweden would favour moving forward in flexible formats, prioritizing the ability to act over European unity. Outliers such as Hungary should be integrated in the long term. To achieve this, the Swedish team recommended economic pressure on Budapest to keep rank.

The US decision to reduce support for Ukraine would be a serious obstacle to European security. The United States would have to be kept engaged in Europe by highlighting Russian attacks on transatlantic infrastructure and common security. To strengthen transatlantic ties, the Swedish team recommended coordinated EU-US sanctions against China. This would exploit the links between the two theatres to maintain US interest and support for European security.

> 'We need to prevent a kind of Minsk III. Negotiations can only take place if Russia withdraws its troops from Ukraine.'

The Swedish team had no faith in a Chinese peace plan and therefore saw the need to avoid legitimizing Beijing as an arbiter. Instead, the withdrawal of Russian troops was seen as the only viable option to prevent a kind of Minsk III. This would guarantee Ukraine's security and European stability, which are necessary to maintain the country as a functioning state. President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and other European leaders should meet in Europe and demonstrate perseverance.

The Berlin Pulse
German Foreign Policy in Perspective

In our annual flagship report "The Berlin Pulse", we present foreign policy positions of the German public along with perspectives by international leaders and experts who express their hopes and expectations of German foreign policy.

The upcoming issue of "The Berlin Pulse" will discuss paradigms and power shifts, as the war in Ukraine has forced Germany to readjust its foreign policy paradigms, while the global distribution of power is shifting and reshaping multilateral decision-making.

Coming in late November 2023:
The Berlin Pulse 2023 / 2024

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