

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Commentary II-7

### *The Capabilities Expectations Gap—The UK's Response to Russia's War against Ukraine*

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February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 marks the beginning of a new dark era in European and international security. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is the latest manifestation of Russia as a threat to both international security and the liberal world order that began with the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 and continued with Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. The ongoing war in Ukraine poses a series of security risks that exceed geopolitical security and encompass energy security, food security, and the use of new forms of warfare. The latter have been exemplified, among other things, by Russian cyber-attacks against several institutions in Czechia and the Social Democratic Party in Germany that were carried out at the beginning of May 2024.<sup>1</sup> This is unfortunately not an isolated incidence. Russian hackers carried out a cyber-attack against the European Parliament in November 2022.<sup>2</sup> The hacking followed the European Parliament's publication of a resolution of 23 November which characterized Russia as a "state sponsor or terrorism" and as a "state that uses means of terrorism."<sup>3</sup>

These increasing and wide-ranging security risks need to be met by adequate responses, including deterrence by the UK and its European and transatlantic partners. Hence, the UK and its international partners face the major challenge of narrowing the capabilities-expectations gap in security and defense policy. The term "capabilities-expectations gap" was coined by the British scholar Christopher Hill, who argued in 1993 that for the EU to meet its expectations of becoming an actor with political and economic clout in international affairs, it needed to enhance its capabilities, especially with regards to addressing

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<sup>1</sup> "Statement by the North Atlantic Council concerning malicious cyber activities against Germany and Czechia," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. May 3 2024. <https://nato.cmail.ro.com/t/r-e-tdlyuytk-blhyddyirt-r/>

<sup>2</sup> "EU Parliament Website Hacked after MEPs Passed Critical Russian Resolution," *Euronews*, November 23 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/11/23/eu-parliament-website-down-after-passing-resolution-calling-russia-a-state-sponsor-of-terr>

<sup>3</sup> "European Parliament Declares Russia to be a State Sponsor of Terrorism," *News European Parliament*. Press releases. Plenary session. November 23 2022. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/2022118IPR55707/european-parliament-declares-russia-to-be-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism>

shortcomings in its security and defense policy.<sup>4</sup> About three decades since its inception, Hill's capabilities-expectations gap remains a relevant framework for conceptualizing the response of the UK and its allies to Russia's war against Ukraine. In this essay, capabilities imply the urgency in enhancing military, financial and humanitarian support for Ukraine whilst meeting expectations of re-establishing security in Ukraine and in Europe. This article demonstrates that the UK's response to the war in Ukraine between February 2022 until June 2024 faces a capabilities-expectations gap. Russia's increased aggression and brutality during the course of this war necessitates enhanced capabilities by Ukraine's allies, including the UK, to deliver ammunition, tanks, and fighter jets. Narrowing the capabilities-expectations gap is compounded by challenges in UK domestic politics and potential supply issues for its military support of Ukraine.

The UK's initial response to the war in Ukraine was challenged by a leadership crisis. On 24 February 2022, Prime Minister Boris Johnson reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by stating that "our worst fears have now come true, and all our warnings have proved tragically accurate. President Putin of Russia has unleashed war in our European continent. He has attacked a friendly country without any provocation and without any credible excuse." Five months later, in July 2022, Johnson was forced to step down following the resignation of several ministers, and evidence of his inability to govern during the COVID 19 pandemic, which was epitomized by business gatherings which were in breach of public health restrictions imposed by Johnson.<sup>5</sup> On 6 September Liz Truss became prime minister; her record-making six weeks in office were marked by the sacking of two of the longest serving ministers, and her proposal of a mini budget resulting in the largest tax cuts since 1972, which contributed to a gradually intensifying economic crisis marked by increasing inflation and a cost-of-living crisis, which was compounded by increases in gas and electricity prices in autumn 2022.<sup>6</sup> On 25 October 2022 Truss resigned, arguing that she "could not deliver the mandate on which [she] was elected."<sup>7</sup> Her geopolitically and economically disastrous policies left her successor, Rishi Sunak, with numerous challenges. Responding to the Ukraine crisis remains one of the priorities of Sunak's term as exemplified in the British government's announcement in December 2022 of a support package of £304 million for Ukraine. This package includes continued supply of ammunition in addition to previously supplied multiple launch rocket systems and 125 anti-aircraft guns.<sup>8</sup> Since Russia's full-scale invasion, the UK government pledged £ 12.5 billion support to Ukraine, including around £ 7.6 billion for military assistance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hill, "The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31: 3 (1993): 305-328. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5065.1993.tb00466>

<sup>5</sup> Eleni Courea, "Boris Johnson Set to Step Down on September 6," *Politico*, July 11 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-step-down-date-september-6/>

<sup>6</sup> Richard Partington, "The Mini-budget that Broke Britain – and Liz Truss," *The Guardian*, October 20 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/oct/20/the-mini-budget-that-broke-britain-and-liz-truss>

<sup>7</sup> Eleni Courea and Matt Honeycombe-Foster, "Liz Truss Quits as UK Prime Minister." *Politico*, October 20 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/liz-truss-uk-conservatives-latest-resign-prime-minister/>

<sup>8</sup> "UK to Provide Ukraine with \$304 Million in Military Aid," *The Kyiv Independent*, May 31 2023. <https://kyivindependent.com/uk-to-provide-ukraine-with-304-million-in-military-aid/>

<sup>9</sup> UK Parliament. House of Commons. Research Briefing. "Military Assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion," May 2 2024. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9477/>

Despite this assurance of additional ammunition to Ukraine by the UK and Ukraine's allies, potential supply shortages need to be taken into consideration when assessing the UK's military aid to Ukraine. On 14 February 2023 NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg acknowledged at a press conference prior to the NATO Defense Ministers meeting at the alliance's headquarters that "we are in a race of logistics. Key capabilities like ammunition, fuel and spare parts must reach Ukraine before Russia ceases the initiative on the battlefield."<sup>10</sup> In spite of plans to securing more ammunition, Stoltenberg stated in March 2023 that "the current rate of ammunition expenditure is higher than the current production rate."<sup>11</sup> He asserted that the war was consuming enormous amount of ammunition depleting allies' stockpiles: "The current rate of Ukraine's ammunition expenditure is many times higher than our current rate of production. It puts our defence industries under strain. The waiting time for large caliber ammunition has increased from twelve to twenty-eight months."<sup>12</sup> Considering these delays, he argued that an investment in production was needed. This investment had to be complemented with increasing investment in defense. At the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023, Stoltenberg stated that since 2014 an additional US \$ 450 billion had been made.<sup>13</sup> Almost one year after the Vilnius summit and the continuation of Russia's brutal war, NATO and its allies need to continuously enhance their capabilities in deterrence and defense to help Ukraine win this war.

The pressure to seek to close the capability-expectations gap by increasing defense is a responsibility for every NATO member-state. Despite the UK government's initial difficulty in meeting its expectations of delivering prompt military support to Ukraine, Sunak offered military support to Ukraine. A week prior to President Volodymyr Zelensky's meeting with Sunak on 15 May 2023, the UK government promised to supply long-range missiles and armed drones.<sup>14</sup> F-16 jets are crucial for controlling air space and are more effective than Soviet jets in seeking to strategically combat Russian-occupied territories. The UK government began training Ukrainian pilots in June 2023 but has not yet assured the delivery of F-16 jets.<sup>15</sup> However, in seeking to meet Ukraine's need for these jets, Downing Street started a policy of cooperation with the Dutch government. Two days after Zelensky's visit to the UK, the British prime minister and his Dutch counterpart Mark Rutte agreed to establish an "international coalition" to obtain F-16 fighter jets.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "Pre-ministerial Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the Meetings of NATO Defense Ministers," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, February 14 2023. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_211689.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_211689.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Dan Sabbagh, "NATO Chief: West must Brace to Support Ukraine in a Long War," *The Guardian*, 22 March 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/22/jens-stoltenberg-nato-chief-west-support-ukraine-for-long-war>.

<sup>12</sup> "Pre-ministerial Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the Meetings of NATO Defense Ministers," *NATO*, February 14 2023. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_211689.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_211689.htm).

<sup>13</sup> "NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania LT–Day 1" YouTube. July 11 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTiS6iskXtQ>

<sup>14</sup> Frank Gardner, "Zelensky meets PM as more Ukraine Weapons pledged." *BBC News*, May 15 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-65594540?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bmicrosoft%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D>

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Boffey. "Ukraine Pilots Being Trained to Fly F-16 Jets, Says NATO," *The Guardian*, June 15 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/15/ukraine-pilots-trained-f-16-jets-nato-russia>

<sup>16</sup> "UK and Netherlands Agree 'International Coalition' to Help Ukraine Procure F-16 Jets," *The Guardian*, May 16 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/16/uk-and-netherlands-agree-international-coalition-to-help-ukraine-with-f-16-jets>

On 7 November 2023, the UK government and Poland signed a deal that is worth over £4 billion to invest in the planning of the next phase of Poland's air defense to enhance European security in light of Russia's ongoing threats.<sup>17</sup>

International cooperation in the securing of F-16 jets remains crucial. Even though F-16s are produced in the US, the Biden administration was initially hesitant to offer them to Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> After having announced at the end of January 2023 that the US would not provide Ukraine with these jets, in May 2023 the US administration assured to offer support to its allies with the export of F-16 jets.<sup>19</sup>

On his visit to France in May 2023, President Zelensky repeated his request for the provision of F-16 jets, but his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron merely agreed to the training of Ukrainian pilots without specifying for which plane type.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein to Macron, the chairwoman of the Defense Committee in the German Bundestag Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann was hesitant to provide F-16 jets.<sup>21</sup> She stated that she “did not see German Tornado and Eurofighter jets operation in Ukrainian airspace.”<sup>22</sup> Despite these delays with delivery of these jets and the training of pilots and ground staff who are responsible for authorizing the release of weapons off the ground, progress regarding the use of F-16s seems to have been made. At the time of writing this article, June 2024, it is estimated that the necessary training will begin this summer after Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway promised Ukraine to deliver about 80 F-16s originating from the US.<sup>23</sup>

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz reiterated his country's financial support for Ukraine for as long as necessary and announced a military support plan of about €2.7 billion including tanks and aerial defense

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<sup>17</sup> Government UK. “£4 billion UK-Poland Air Defense Deal Strengthens European Security,” November 7 2023. [£4 billion UK-Poland air defence deal strengthens European security - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/4-billion-uk-poland-air-defence-deal-strengthens-european-security)

<sup>18</sup> Defense Leaders. “Record £1.9 billion UK-Poland Missile Export Deal Set to Bolster European Security.” May 2 2023. <https://www.defenceleaders.com/news/record-19-billion-uk-poland-missile-export-deal-set-bolster-european-security>

<sup>19</sup> Natasha Bertrand, Kylie Atwood, and Oren Liebermann, “US Signals to Allies it Won't Block their Export of F-16 Jets to Ukraine.” *CNN Politics*, May 19 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/18/politics/us-allies-f-16-jets-ukraine/index.html>

<sup>20</sup> Davide Basso, Euronews. “Ukraine: la France prête à Former des Pilotes <des maintenant>,” May 16 2023. <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/l-europe-dans-le-monde/news/ukraine-la-france-prete-a-former-des-pilotes-des-maintenant/>

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Suessmann, “Strack-Zimmermann Lehnt Lieferung Deutscher Kampffjets ab,” *Die Zeit*, May 16 2023. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-krieg-russland-newsblog-live>.

<sup>22</sup> Benedikt Stoeckl and Nick Alipour. “Scholz: Fighter Jets for Ukraine not German Responsibility,” <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/scholz-fighter-jets-for-ukraine-not-german-responsibility/>. *EurActiv*, May 18 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Pjotr Sauer, Shaun Walker, and Dan Sabbagh. “‘It is All Lining up’: Plan for Ukraine to Finally Start Using F-16 Jets this Summer,” *The Guardian*, June 20 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/20/it-is-all-lining-up-plan-for-ukraine-to-finally-start-using-f-16-jets-this-summer>

systems.<sup>24</sup> Almost one year later, on 11 June 2024, Chancellor Scholz and President Zelensky hosted a conference in Berlin addressing Ukraine's recovery. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced the agreement of a grant of €1.4 billion for Ukraine's reconstruction.<sup>25</sup>

Ukraine's military support in the form of F-16 jets for instance remains a challenge for the UK and its allies. Both the UK and its European allies have to increase their capabilities in ensuring the prompt and adequate supply of arms. Expectations to end the war whilst establishing peace and security in Ukraine and Europe remain extremely high. This expectation can only be met by continued and enhanced support for military aid to Ukraine. The narrowing of the capabilities-expectations gap is currently compounded by potential supply shortages of ammunition. Furthermore, the international political landscape is likely to be reshuffled this year due to the upcoming election in the UK on 4 July, and elections in France and the US. The hope remains that newly formed governments make support for Ukraine a priority on their political agendas despite remaining challenges to narrow the capabilities-expectations gap.

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<sup>24</sup> "Le Royaume-Uni va bientôt Former des Pilotes Ukrainiens sur des Avions F-16 (Premier Ministre)," *Euronews*, May 15 2023. <https://fr.euronews.com/2023/05/15/guerre-en-ukraine-londres-va-livrer-a-kyiv-des-centaines-de-missiles-et-drones-dattaque>

<sup>25</sup> "President von der Leyen participates along with several members of the College in the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024 to showcase steadfast Support for Ukraine," European Commission, European Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations. June 11 2024; [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/president-von-der-leyen-participates-along-several-members-college-ukraine-recovery-conference-2024-2024-06-11\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/president-von-der-leyen-participates-along-several-members-college-ukraine-recovery-conference-2024-2024-06-11_en)