



Capabilities - Missiles, Drones, Space, Sanctions and the Neutrals

Curated by Robin Ashby

May - July 2026

Â

This paper — the third in a series of four — addresses the capability layers that give the institutional architecture of Paper II its operational substance. Papers I and II established the strategic case and the institutional framework. Paper IV addresses the industrial and procurement foundation. This paper covers missiles and air defence; drones and the lessons of Ukraine; Galileo as the space-based navigation layer; sanctions as economic collective defence; and the contribution framework available to the EU's neutral and non-aligned member states.

Â I. Missiles and Air Defence: The Immediate Capability Gap

No single European nation can afford a full-spectrum air defence architecture. Russia's use of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones against Ukrainian infrastructure has demonstrated the requirement for layered air defence — long-range intercept, medium-range area defence, short-range point defence — that no European nation possesses independently but that collective procurement could provide at viable cost.

MBDA's portfolio — Meteor, Aster, Brimstone, CAMM — represents a European missile industrial base of real depth. The challenge is ensuring that political will to use, replenish, and develop these systems matches the industrial capability to produce them. Joint procurement through OCCAR, with EDF support for next-generation development, is the appropriate

framework. The EU's proposed European Air Shield — one of four flagship programmes in the Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 — is designed to address the air defence gap through pooled procurement and shared capability. A communautaire air defence layer sitting above nationally-owned systems would represent the first genuinely European collective defence capability in the kinetic domain. The industrial ownership model that protects the IP within the MBDA portfolio is addressed in Paper IV.

Â **II. Drones: The Lesson Ukraine Is Teaching**

Ukraine has transformed the operational understanding of drones from a specialist ISR tool into the defining technology of modern land and maritime warfare. Europe has been alarmingly slow to absorb the lesson.

A. The Eurodrone Cautionary Tale

The flagship European MALE drone programme — Eurodrone, managed by OCCAR with Airbus, Dassault, and Leonardo — is simultaneously the proof of concept and the cautionary tale. Originally conceived in 2015 with a first delivery target of 2025, prototype first flight is now expected by mid-2027 with first deliveries in 2028 at the earliest. The Chief of Staff of the French Air and Space Force has described it as 'yesterday's drone that we can get tomorrow.' France formally withdrew from the programme in October 2025, citing lower-cost sovereign theatre drones better suited to high-intensity conflict. The Eurodrone story illustrates every procurement pathology simultaneously: design-by-committee, juste retour politics slowing every decision, and fixation on high-end capability at the expense of the mass and affordability that Ukraine has demonstrated matter most.

B. What Ukraine Has Taught

The average Ukrainian quadcopter costs under EUR 3,000 yet neutralises assets worth EUR 160,000. Swarming tactics and man-machine teaming have cut artillery sensor-to-shooter loops from more than 20 minutes in 2021 to under three minutes by late 2025. Military drones have become the single weapon type causing the most casualties in the conflict, their use spanning reconnaissance, precision strike, logistics, and naval operations against major surface vessels.

This ratio — cheap, attritable, numerous versus expensive, exquisite, scarce — represents a fundamental challenge to European procurement culture, which has consistently favoured the latter. Europe needs both the high-end capability that Eurodrone-type programmes represent and the mass, low-cost, rapidly-iterated systems that Ukraine has shown are operationally decisive. Current European procurement culture is designed to produce the former and structurally incapable of producing the latter.

C. The Policy Response

The European Commission's February 2026 Action Plan on Drone and Counter-Drone Security is the most comprehensive EU policy statement on unmanned systems to date. It proposes detection of malicious drones using 5G technology, protection of critical infrastructure, and a Drone Alliance with Ukraine to accelerate affordable defence technology and fast-track mass production. The Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 includes the European Drone Defence Initiative as one of four flagship programmes, with first operational capabilities targeted by end 2026. The EDF 2026 Work Programme earmarks EUR 1 billion across 31 topics including swarms of small robots and drones — structured as a competitive challenge rather than a traditional tender, which is itself a procurement innovation worth extending.

D. Counter-Drone: The JEY-CUAS to E-CUAS Progression

The counter-drone programme sequence illustrates the collaborative development model argued for throughout this series. JEY-CUAS — EU co-funded, led by Leonardo, partners from 14 countries — employed a flexible plug-and-play architecture focused on countering swarms and micro-drones, with the April 2024 final demonstration showcasing capabilities from detection to neutralisation. The successor E-CUAS, funded at EUR 71 million with 24 beneficiaries from 12 member states and Norway, integrates passive and active sensors, soft-kill and hard-kill effectors, command and control, networking, cybersecurity, and interoperability data models. This explicit programme continuity — architecture established then scaled and deepened — is the STAIRS C model applied to unmanned systems: collaborative development, shared IP, broad European access, successive generations building on rather than reinventing previous work.

E. Two Critical Constraints

Two structural problems risk undermining European drone ambition regardless of funding levels. First, the supply chain: Europe lacks approximately 12,000 aeronautical engineers and relies on China for 90 percent of refined rare-earth magnets essential for drone motor production. Current stockpiles would run dry after approximately eight months of high-tempo operations. The EU's Critical Raw Materials Act addresses this at policy level; translating policy into production capacity is the urgent practical task.

Second, airspace fragmentation: only nine EU countries had established permanent military drone corridors by early 2025, delaying joint operations including EU Battle Group rotations. Harmonised military airspace rules for drone operations are an urgent regulatory prerequisite — a problem that costs political attention rather than money to fix.

Â III. Galileo: Strategic Autonomy in Space

Galileo's Public Regulated Service offers drone operators and military forces jam-resistant, encrypted navigation that GPS cannot guarantee in a contested electromagnetic environment — exactly what Ukraine has demonstrated adversaries will create. The GEODE project is explicitly testing PRS equipment on drone and naval platforms across 14 EU member states. Any drone programme or force element receiving EDF or OCCAR support should have Galileo PRS integration as a funded requirement from the outset, not a retrofit. This simultaneously drives demand for GEODE receivers, creates interoperability across the European defence fleet, and builds the strategic autonomy in positioning, navigation, and timing that European collective defence requires.

Galileo PRS is also the technical route into European collective security for neutral states: equipping coast guards, police, mountain rescue, and emergency services with jam-resistant navigation carries zero constitutional cost and achieves full integration into a critical European security system. Every EU member state — including Ireland, Austria, Malta, and Cyprus — can establish a Competent PRS Authority and authorise domestic users to access PRS. This is the 'inside the tent' principle applied to space-based navigation: European-owned, European-operated, and structurally inaccessible to strategic competitors.

Â IV. Sanctions: The Economic Dimension of Collective Defence

Economic coercion is a capability of European collective defence that sits alongside military force, not beneath it. The EU has demonstrated through successive rounds of sanctions on Russia that it can mobilise coordinated economic pressure at scale. The lesson from this experience is threefold.

A. The Sanctions Architecture

The EU's 20th sanctions package, adopted April 2026, marked several milestones: the first use of the EU's anti-circumvention tool against a specific third country (Kyrgyzstan) for enabling the re-export of restricted goods to Russia; a framework for a prospective full ban on maritime services related to Russian oil; 46 additional shadow fleet vessels listed; and a full sectoral ban on Russian crypto-asset service providers. The 21st package, proposed June 2026, went further: the first targeting of vessels supporting the shadow fleet including those providing bunkering services; measures directed at critical infrastructure including ports, airports, and refineries involved in handling Russian oil; and restrictions on LNG tanker sales to Russia.

The UK has taken parallel action. On 14 June 2026, Royal Marine Commandos and National Crime Agency officers boarded the Russian shadow fleet vessel SMYRTOS in international waters — the first kinetic enforcement action against the shadow fleet — enabled by an OFSI Interdiction General Licence issued two days earlier. The vessel was carrying approximately \$30 million in Russian crude oil to India. The Captain was arrested on suspicion of sanctions breaching.

B. Three Lessons

The sanctions experience teaches three lessons for European collective defence. First, speed of implementation has improved with each package but remains vulnerable to member state divergence — the unanimity problem in economic policy mirrors the unanimity problem in Article 42.7 invocation, and the constructive abstention solution applies equally in both domains.

Second, enforcement requires maritime and intelligence capacity that connects directly to the Frontex and JEF NORDIC WARDEN discussion in Paper II. The SMYRTOS operation demonstrated what enforcement looks like when the political will and the legal instrument exist. Scaling that to the shadow fleet as a whole requires the maritime surveillance architecture — Frontex naval assets, EATC maritime patrol platforms, JEF mine countermeasures vessels — that Papers I and II argue for. Sanctions and security are not separate policy domains. They are two faces of the same instrument.

Third, secondary sanctions — whether and how the EU can penalise third-country entities that sustain sanctioned economies — remains the most consequential unresolved issue in European economic security. The first use of the anti-circumvention tool against Kyrgyzstan is a beginning. A systematic secondary sanctions architecture, coordinated with UK and allied partners, would dramatically increase the economic pressure on Russia's war economy.

C. Article 222 and Economic Collective Defence

The Article 222 Solidarity Clause has an economic dimension that is underexplored: collective response to economic coercion directed at a member state — energy cutoffs, cyber attacks on financial infrastructure, trade blockades — falls within its scope. Developing pre-agreed economic response frameworks under Article 222 alongside the military response frameworks under Article 42.7 would give European collective defence a genuinely comprehensive character. Military capability deters kinetic aggression; economic capability deters and responds to hybrid and coercive pressure below the military threshold. The two instruments are

complementary and should be developed as such.

Â V. The Neutrals: Contribution, Not Absence

The Article 42.7 carve-out accommodates Ireland, Austria, Malta, and Cyprus — none legally obliged to participate in EU military operations. But the strategic environment of 2026 makes the use of this carve-out as cover for minimal contribution politically unsustainable and strategically incoherent.

A. The Four Neutrals

Ireland spends the least on defence of any EU member state despite having the second-highest GDP per capita, while approximately 75 percent of international data cables pass through or near its waters — representing the bulk of international data traffic and constituting a critical infrastructure vulnerability of the highest order. Ireland has maintained a continuous UN peacekeeping presence since 1958 — the natural foundation for expanded contribution.

Austria's constitutional neutrality — the Federal Constitutional Law of 1955 — is genuine and must be respected. But the tradition of aktive Neutralität, which has meant hosting the United Nations in Vienna, contributing to peacekeeping, and facilitating multilateral diplomacy, is entirely consistent with substantially expanded engagement. Three-quarters of Austrians concede their country cannot defend itself, yet constitutional neutrality continues to be invoked as justification for minimal contribution. Malta, constitutionally neutral since 1987, is the only EU member not participating in PESCO — a position increasingly difficult to justify given its central Mediterranean strategic significance. Cyprus spends significantly on defence — sixth in the EU as a percentage of GDP — but its constraints are geopolitical (Turkey's blocking of NATO accession) rather than philosophical.

B. A Graduated Contribution Framework

A framework of neutral state contribution, within existing constitutional constraints, encompasses:

- •UN operations and Petersberg tasks: all four neutral states could significantly increase contributions to UN-mandated operations, EU battle groups in non-combat roles, and CSDP civilian missions. Ireland's peacekeeping tradition and Austria's CENCOOP framework are the foundations to build on.
- •Medical and humanitarian capability: a pooled EU medical corps drawing on neutral contributions — field hospitals, medical evacuation, trauma surgery — deployable under UN or

EU mandate without constitutional friction. Austria and Ireland have relevant capacity and tradition.

- •Cyber and hybrid defence: no military deployment required. Ireland's cable infrastructure exposure makes this a direct national interest. Austria's Vienna institutions make it both a target for hybrid operations and a natural contributor to EU cyber rapid response frameworks and ENISA coordination.

- •Frontex maritime surveillance: operating patrol assets in adjacent waters under Frontex's border security mandate is sovereign security through a communautaire instrument — entirely compatible with neutrality and directly aligned with national security interests. Malta's Mediterranean position and Ireland's Atlantic coastline make both natural contributors.

- •Galileo PRS: establishing a national Competent PRS Authority; equipping police, coast guard, mountain rescue, and emergency services with jam-resistant navigation; contributing to GEODE receiver development. Zero constitutional cost. Full integration into a critical European security system.

- •Total Defence resilience: civilian preparedness, critical infrastructure protection, and hybrid threat resilience building are entirely consistent with constitutional neutrality and directly serve the collective security architecture that Article 42.7 requires.

C. Reframing the Carve-Out

Neutrality was designed to keep small states out of great power conflicts and preserve their mediating role. In 2026, the great power threat to European security is unambiguous and the mediating role is diminished. What neutrality should mean is not absence from collective security arrangements but a distinctive contribution within them. The contribution framework above asks nothing that conflicts with any of the four states' constitutional positions. It asks only that those positions be honoured in substance rather than used as cover for free-riding that allies bearing the collective burden can no longer reasonably be asked to subsidise.

For Austria specifically, the aktive Neutralität tradition is the strongest possible argument for expanded engagement — not despite neutrality but because of it. Austria's unique convening role in Vienna, its peacekeeping tradition, its CENCOOP experience, and its mediation credibility are themselves contributions to European security that should be recognised, resourced, and extended. The question is not whether Austria should contribute but how it should do so distinctively.

Â VI. Conclusion to Paper III

The capability layers addressed in this paper — missiles and air defence, drones, Galileo, sanctions, and the neutral state contribution — are not separate policy domains. They are aspects of a single question: what does it take to give Article 42.7 credible operational weight across the full spectrum of scenarios it is likely to face?

The European Air Shield addresses the kinetic air and missile defence requirement. The drone architecture — Eurodrone for the high end, the Drone Alliance with Ukraine for operational mass, JEY-CUAS to E-CUAS for counter-drone capability — addresses the unmanned systems revolution. Galileo PRS addresses the strategic autonomy in navigation that both drone operations and broader force elements require. The sanctions architecture addresses the economic coercion dimension that military force alone cannot. The neutral state contribution framework addresses the political sustainability question — collective defence that systematically free-rides on some members' contributions while others opt out is neither sustainable nor credible.

Paper IV addresses the industrial and procurement foundation without which none of these capabilities can be built, sustained, or kept technologically current.

The tiger has muscle as well as bones. It is time to move.

Â References

[1]Â European Commission and High Representative, Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030, October 2025.

defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/readiness-roadmap-2030_en

[2]Â European Commission, Action Plan on Drone and Counter-Drone Security, 11 February 2026.

defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/commission-publishes-action-plan-drone-and-counter-drone-security-2026-02-11_en

[3]Â European Defence Fund 2026 Work Programme. European Commission, defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu

[4]Â E-CUAS Programme — European Counter-UAS System. EUR 71 million, 24 beneficiaries, 12 EU member states and Norway. EDF-funded, 2025-27.

[5]Â GEODE Project (Galileo for EU Defence). EUR 44 million EU grant, 14 EU member states. Military user segment development. euspa.europa.eu

[6]Â EU 20th Sanctions Package against Russia, Council Regulation (EU) 2026/506, 23 April 2026. eur-lex.europa.eu

[7]Â EU Commission announcement, 21st Sanctions Package, June 2026. sanctionsnews.bakermckenzie.com/eu-commission-announces-21st-sanctions-package-against-russia-targeting-energy-financial-sector-and-trade

[8]Â Hill Dickinson, Sanctions Update: June 2026 — SMYRTOS interdiction operation. hilldickinson.com/our-view/articles/sanctions-update-june-2026

[9]Â Robin Ashby, "Frontex: the EU's Readily Available Toolkit to Enhance Security, Defence and Safety in the Melting Arctic," Defence Viewpoints, UK Defence Forum, 24 December 2021. Written without AI assistance. defenceviewpoints.co.uk

[10]Â Robin Ashby with Eurodefense Working Group 18-30, "European Defence Procurement: Some UK Perspectives," Defence Viewpoints, UK Defence Forum, 8 April 2023. Written without AI assistance. defenceviewpoints.co.uk

Cross-references: Mind the Gap III (hybrid threat taxonomy and cable sabotage scenarios); Mind the Gap VIII (closing window, American conditionality). All published at defenceviewpoints.co.uk, 2026.

Â

About the Author

Robin Ashby is Director General and Commissioning Editor of the UK Defence Forum / Defence

Viewpoints, and Secretary General of Eurodefense-UK. He is Rapporteur of the Eurodefense Arctic ICE Observatory, Chair of the Eurodefense Russia Observatory, and founder of the High North Observatory. He has written extensively on European defence, Arctic security, and collective defence architecture.

www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk | <https://robinashbyukdf.substack.com> | <https://dr.academia.edu/RobinAshby>

Since 2026 Robin has been using Claude, Anthropic's AI model (version Sonnet 4.6 for this series). All such papers include a specific logo declaring the source of research, structure and document production. Curation, direction, analytical judgements, arguments and original insights, and some source materials, are the author's. The buck stops with him.

Editorial note: This series was substantially drafted before the NATO Ankara Summit of 7-8 July 2026 and associated recent developments in European defence architecture. A commentary paper addressing those developments — including the JFC command transfer, the Coalition of the Willing anti-ballistic missile coalition, the Defence Industry Forum announcements, and the evolution of EU sanctions enforcement — will follow shortly after publication