

NORTHERN LIGHTS: HOW A NORDIC-BALTIC COALITION OF THE WILLING CAN DO EVEN MORE FOR UKRAINE

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SUMMARY

- With EU consensus becoming increasingly harder to achieve, Ukraine needs to explore more opportunities for bilateral cooperation.
- The Nordic-Baltic 8 (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden) stands as a strong, unified bloc well-positioned to support Ukraine.
- Public backing in the NB8 for Ukraine remains sky-high, with surveys showing strong support for military aid while pro-Russian parties remain on the sidelines.
- A shared history of Russian conflict reinforces these countries' stance against aggression, aligning their interests closely with Ukraine's.
- All the NB8 countries have signed bilateral agreements with Ukraine, with some pledging a specific GDP percentage for aid while supporting EU and NATO integration.
- Acting in unison, the NB8 could play an even more pivotal role by curtailing Russian oil exports through the Baltic Sea.
- Redirecting Norway's war-fuelled energy profits could boost Ukraine's defence capabilities.
- Full membership in the Joint Expeditionary Force, of which all NB8 countries are a part, could provide Ukraine with an extra layer of deterrence against Russian aggression.

Introduction

Ukraine stands at a critical juncture as it approaches the fourth year of the war against Russian aggression. The prolonged war has strained Western unity and revealed cracks in the international response, with many allies demonstrating hesitancy and a lack of urgency. Despite vocal commitments to support Ukraine, the West has often adopted a “too little, too late” approach, providing military aid incrementally and insufficiently. This strategy, dubbed by some as “killing me softly,” perpetuates a grim reality where Ukraine endures battlefield setbacks without the resources needed for decisive victories. Underlying these delays are differing threat perceptions among NATO members, some of which—driven by political calculations or fears of escalation—hesitate to commit fully, leading to a lack of consensus on the stakes of Ukraine’s survival.

Over this period, Ukraine has focused heavily on the G7 countries as primary partners for aid and advocacy. As geopolitical realities evolve, it needs to adapt. Donald Trump’s re-election in the United States forces Ukraine to face an even greater imperative to consolidate European support. Achieving this may require moving away from consensus-driven frameworks and instead leverage coalitions of the willing. One underutilised strategic vector is engagement with northern Europe, particularly the Nordic-Baltic 8 (Baltic and Nordic nations, or NB8). These states, geographically proximate and acutely aware of the Russian threat, offer opportunities for deeper collaboration that could complement Ukraine’s broader European and transatlantic strategy in its fight for survival.

Comprising the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), the NB8 is a unique regional cooperation format that has gained strategic importance in recent years. While formally established in the early 2000s, its roots can be traced back to the post-Cold War era, when the Baltics sought closer ties with the Nordics after regaining independence. Initially, the NB8 aimed to support the democratic transition and economic integration of the Baltic states. With Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joining the EU and NATO in 2004, the objectives of the NB8 evolved towards addressing shared challenges such as digital transformation, climate change, and regional security.

Together, NB8 countries form a resilient and highly integrated economic bloc in northern Europe. Despite varying in size and resources, they are united by strong institutions, high per capita GDP and robust social welfare systems. The Nordic economies, particularly Norway and Sweden, are driven by advanced industries and technology sectors; along with Denmark and Finland, they are key contributors to the EU GDP. Meanwhile, the Baltic states have

shown remarkable growth, becoming key hubs for digital innovation and services. Despite being smaller in GDP terms, they have also shown agility in economic reforms and resilience against external shocks.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point for the NB8, imbuing the group with a renewed sense of purpose and urgency. [1] [2] Faced with a common security threat, the NB8 countries deepened their integration, aligning closely on policies to counter Russian aggression and significantly increasing military, humanitarian, and economic backing for Ukraine.

On 14 February, following Trump's unilateral announcement of talks with Vladimir Putin to end the war in Ukraine—without its or the EU's, involvement—the NB8 issued a strong statement reaffirming its commitment to bolstering support for the country's defence.

This support is rooted not only in government policies, but also in deeply ingrained societal attitudes shaped by centuries of geographic proximity to Russia and a shared understanding of the threats posed by Russian expansionism. Public opinion carries a historical awareness of Russian aggression as well as a commitment to international law, human rights and the defence of smaller sovereign states. This collective stance has made the Nordic-Baltic countries some of the most reliable and enduring supporters of Ukraine, with public backing that is both predictable and sustainable.

Despite being an informal alignment, the NB8 operates through coordination mechanisms, including annual meetings of foreign ministers, prime ministers and sector-specific officials. With an aggregate GDP exceeding €1.5trn in 2024, the NB8 is a significant economic bloc both in Europe and globally. Based on recent estimates, the collective economy of the NB8 ranks around fifth in Europe; globally, the NB8's collective GDP would rank around tenth. Their integration and economic alignment provide a solid foundation for enhancing economic cooperation with Ukraine, especially in trade, investment and defence.

The methodology employed for this policy brief combined both desk research and key informant interviews. Desk research involved an extensive review of official documents, policy briefs, reports, and other relevant literature from both Ukraine and the NB8 countries to establish a foundational understanding of the current state of cooperation. Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, as well as their counterparts from the NB8 countries. These interviews also included insights from experts affiliated with leading think-tanks in the respective states.

Historical context: Understanding Russian threats

The Nordic and Baltic countries' geographic proximity to Russia and their historical experiences with Russian expansionism have deeply shaped societal views on security and international relations.

The Baltic states share a deep-rooted and complex history of conflict and subjugation by Russia, which shape their current threat perceptions and strong stance against Russian aggression. This difficult relationship dates to the early 18th century when the Russian Empire annexed these territories. Under Tsarist rule, the Baltic states experienced systematic Russification efforts, which aimed to erode local identities, languages and cultures, with the imposition of Russian laws, the restriction of local governance and forced migrations.

The trauma of Soviet occupation during and after the second world war further solidified the Baltic states' aversion to Russian influence. The occupation was marked by brutal political repression, including mass deportations, the execution of political leaders and the forced collectivisation of agriculture. Tens of thousands of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians were deported to Siberia in the 1940s, disrupting families and decimating national elites. This period is remembered as a time of cultural annihilation and systemic efforts to erase Baltic national identities, further intensifying the historical animosity towards Russia.

The Singing Revolution of the late 1980s, a series of peaceful protests across the region, showcased their collective yearning for freedom from Soviet control. By 1991, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had regained their independence, but the lingering threats from Russia—including attempts at political meddling and economic coercion—have kept their security concerns acute.

The shared experiences of subjugation and resistance against Russian imperialism have fostered a strong sense of solidarity between the Baltic states and Ukraine. This historical alignment is also mirrored in the Nordic countries, whose own experiences with Russian expansionism have similarly influenced their approach to security and reinforced their support for Ukraine's defence efforts.

Finland, for example, has a long history of conflict with Russia. The Winter War from 1939 to 1940, in which Finland successfully defended itself against a Soviet invasion, remains a cornerstone of Finnish national identity and shapes societal understanding of Russian threats. The subsequent loss of territory and the long-standing policy of "Finlandisation," in which Finland made concessions to its more powerful neighbour and maintained neutrality to

ensure its sovereignty and avoid direct conflict, has left a lasting imprint on how Finns view Russia. Today, not least because of Russia's full-scale invasion, Finland has distanced itself from this historical tradition by aligning more closely with Western institutions, most importantly with NATO.

Sweden's historical trajectory is remarkably similar to that of Ukraine when it comes to relations with Russia. For over 300 years, Sweden was locked in conflict with Russia, often centred on control over Baltic territories. This long history of warfare with Russia has left deep cultural and historical marks on Swedish society, with the historical parallels perhaps explaining its strong support for Ukraine. Notably, the situation in Crimea and its strategic importance in the Black Sea resembles Sweden's own concerns regarding the strategic importance of Gotland and the Baltic Sea. [3] An important historical episode that underscores this shared experience is the alliance between the Ukrainian Cossacks, led by Hetman Ivan Mazepa, and Sweden under King Charles XII during the Great Northern War. The Battle of Poltava in 1709, where this alliance faced the Russian Empire, is a poignant reminder of the long-standing confrontations both nations have had with Russian expansionism and their shared legacy of resistance.

Other Nordic nations, such as Norway and Denmark, have also maintained a vigilant stance toward Russian activities, especially in the heavily militarised Arctic region, where Russia has established new military bases, deployed icebreakers, and is ever expanding naval capabilities to reinforce its dominance. Monitoring and responding to Russian military activities in the Arctic are a priority for Norway, which shares a 198km land border with Russia in the region. Encompassing key areas such as the Sør-Varanger municipality, this border places Norway at the forefront of European security concerns regarding Russia's ambitions in the "High North". Additionally, the Arctic's growing strategic importance, driven by climate change and the opening of new shipping routes, has made the region a focal point of international competition. Norway's significant energy resources and its NATO membership further underline its strategic role in countering potential Russian aggression. To address these challenges, Norway has invested in modernising its defence capabilities, including surveillance systems and Arctic-ready military forces, while fostering close collaboration with allies to ensure stability and deterrence in the region.

The power dynamics between Russia and Denmark in the Arctic region are shaped by competing interests in security, resource access and geopolitical influence. Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland provides it with a significant foothold in the Arctic, making Greenland critical for monitoring and securing shipping routes, as well as for strategic military operations under NATO. Furthermore, Greenland's untapped natural resources, including rare earth minerals and hydrocarbons, further bolster Denmark's influence in

Arctic affairs. Denmark advocates for a cooperative approach through multilateral institutions such as the Arctic Council. However, Russia's increasing militarisation and unilateral actions often undermine these frameworks. This militarisation, coupled with competing interests in exploiting Arctic resources, continues to be a source of tension between the two nations.

NB8's support for Ukraine

Society

The staunch support for Ukraine among the Nordic and Baltic societies is evident. To illustrate this point, a recent Eurobarometer survey shows strong public support for financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine. The survey found that 92% of Swedes, 88% of Danes, 88% of Finns, 76% of Lithuanians, 70% of Latvians, and 63% of Estonians totally agree with this measure.

This support stems from a combination of factors, including the region's historical experiences with Russia. For the Baltics, for example, the horrors of Soviet occupation are still very much alive. Recent aggressive actions by Russia in their own territories, such as cable sabotage at the Baltic Sea or cyber-attacks, have exacerbated this feeling. There is a common understanding of the security implications if Russia is not stopped in Ukraine, which fosters and keeps the public support to Ukraine in NB8 countries on a high level. Across different parts of society, including top officials and volunteers, it is emphasised that “Ukraine is protecting all of us”, or that if “Ukraine falls, we are next”. For the Baltics and Nordics, the stakes are clear—they need no further persuasion about the gravity of the situation.

In Finland, widespread backing for continued military assistance persists even as tensions with Russia remain high. Finland's decision to join NATO in 2023, abandoning its long-held policy of neutrality, reflects the overwhelming public consensus on the need to enhance security against Russia. For decades, a majority of Finns were opposed to joining NATO. As recently as December 2021, 51% of the Finnish population opposed NATO membership. But in November 2022, support for NATO membership surged to 78%, with only 8% opposing. Following Finland's official accession to NATO in April 2023, approval for NATO membership reached an unprecedented 90% in 2024.

In Sweden, public support for Ukraine remains similarly strong, with over 70% of Swedes in favour of providing both economic and military aid. Accession to NATO also reflects a societal

consensus on Ukraine. The historical memory of multiple wars with Russia has fostered a collective understanding that small nations like Ukraine must be defended to maintain the balance of power in Europe.

In Denmark, a whopping 91% support imposing sanctions on Russia. In Norway, public sentiment is more ambiguous: While an overwhelming majority of Norwegians support sanctions, 84% of the population also say it is important for Norway to have a good relationship with Russia.

In the Baltics, pro-Ukrainian sentiment was perhaps best reflected in the remarkable social mobilisation. One striking example was in May 2022, when Lithuanian media figure and activist Andrius Tapinas spearheaded a campaign to raise €5mn to purchase a Bayraktar combat drone for Ukraine. The goal was met in just three days, demonstrating both the deep public commitment to Ukraine and the innovative ways in which the Baltics are contributing to the fight against Russian aggression.

A recent poll in Latvia found that 52% of respondents support either maintaining the country's assistance to Ukraine at its current level or increasing it, with this proportion rising to 72% among those of Latvian ethnicity (and falling to 20% among Russian-Latvians). Meanwhile, a poll in Estonia at the start of year 2024 showed that 61% favour providing military aid to Ukraine, with 95% of Estonian nationals opposing Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

One of the defining features of the Baltic and Nordic countries' support for Ukraine is its predictability and sustainability. In contrast to other European regions where public opinion might fluctuate due to economic pressures or fears of escalation, the societal discourse in the Nordic countries is more stable. This is largely due to the ingrained historical understanding of Russian threats and the strong belief in defending smaller, democratic nations against authoritarian aggression.

Politics

Throughout the NB8, politicians and parties that adopt pro-Russian rhetoric struggle to garner high support rates. Several interviewed experts noted that suggesting to cut support for Ukraine is viewed as political suicide, since that would antagonise the overwhelmingly pro-Ukrainian public in these countries. [4] [5] [6]

Some political actors across the spectrum voice opposition towards the high level of aid directed to Ukraine. For example, some far-left parties, such as Norway's Red Party, are calling for limits to the weapons sent to Ukraine, or proposing restrictions on their use to

Ukrainian territory only. On the far-right side, parties such as the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) attempted to exploit any resentment against Ukrainian refugees, alleging that “mass immigration” could result in ethnic Estonians becoming a minority in their own country. These stances, however, did not manage to attract widespread support. In EKRE's case, the 2023 Estonian parliament election saw it lose a few seats and stay in opposition. Following the European Parliament election in 2024, several figures left the party, criticising the pro-Russian views of its leadership.

Lack of support for pro-Russian views was also demonstrated by the presidential elections in Lithuania in May 2024. While the majority of candidates had pro-Ukrainian stances, Eduardas Vaitkus stood out by openly questioning Lithuania's support for Ukraine, suggesting that Lithuania should not assist Ukraine's NATO aspirations and asserting that Russia does not pose a threat to Lithuania. His platform garnered approximately 7% of the vote, primarily from the Russian-speaking minority and those nostalgic for the Soviet era. In the subsequent parliamentary elections in October 2024, his party failed to secure seats, and Vaitkus did not gain a position in the parliament.

As politicians cannot cash in on pro-Russia sentiment, many radical Nordic and Baltic political parties opted to align with the pro-Ukrainian policies of the major parties, such as the far-right Finns Party in Finland. In some cases, they even supported policies that deviate from their usual positions. For example, the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP), which usually advocates tight asylum and migration laws, shifted their stance and overwhelmingly backed Ukrainian refugees (in great contrast with their policies towards Syrian refugees). Similarly, while FrP criticised Norway's NATO commitments and stance on Russia, the party continues to support the government's handling of the war or stays silent in such debates.

Today, political parties with traditionally Russia-friendly views are increasingly marginalised. While it is not necessarily their pro-Russian stance that pushes them to the sidelines, it is evident that this position does not help them to get votes. For example, the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), which has traditionally been highly Eurosceptic, has recognised that the war in Ukraine underscores the EU's critical role in maintaining security, coordinating sanctions, and providing military and financial aid. Indeed, public perceptions have shifted, as many who previously doubted the EU's relevance are now more likely to recognise its strategic importance. As a result, support for hardline Eurosceptic parties like Dansk Folkeparti has waned, with their share of the vote dropping from 26.6% in 2014 to 6.95% in 2024.

In Sweden, the marginalisation is evident in the reluctance of the major political forces to include parties with pro-Russian views in the coalition. The Sweden Democrats (SD) is still seen as untrustworthy

even after they moderated their pro-Kremlin views after the full-scale invasion. This stands in stark contrast with the rising support for parties with Russia-friendly views in central Europe, including Germany, where many *Russlandversteher*s enjoy comfortable polling positions.

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine dampened support for Russia-friendly politicians in NB8 countries, it also paved the way for the rise of Russia hawks who actively criticise Russia's actions on the national, European and global stages. Notable figures include Latvia's president Edgars Rinkevics, Estonia's former prime minister Kaja Kallas (now the EU's top diplomat), and Denmark's prime minister Mette Frederiksen. High levels of public support for Ukraine give Nordic and Baltic governments the political space to continue providing military, economic, and humanitarian aid without fear of significant domestic backlash. This alignment between public opinion and governmental action ensures that the Nordic and Baltic contributions to Ukraine's defence remain steadfast and reliable.

Military aid

The NB8 countries have been at the forefront of military support for Ukraine since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, often leading the way with contributions and actions that set precedents for other Western allies. By leading by example, these countries have challenged the cautious approaches in the West, setting new standards for military support and encouraging broader international coalitions to increase and diversify aid to Ukraine.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were among the very first to send lethal aid, including Javelin anti-tank missiles and Stinger MANPADS, just before the full-scale invasion in February 2022. This decisive action underscored their commitment in the face of imminent conflict. They demonstrated a strong political stance by clearing the way for other countries to supply advanced weapons systems, breaking the psychological barrier of providing offensive military aid.

Estonia was the first country to send significant quantities of heavy artillery, including howitzers, to Ukraine. The provision of 122mm and 155mm howitzers early in the invasion played a crucial role in bolstering Ukraine's defensive capabilities and marked a departure from cautious Western policies. Also, being a global leader in cybersecurity, it was quick to provide substantial cyber defence support to Ukraine.

Denmark was among the first to pledge and deliver Leopard 1 main battle tanks to Ukraine. This commitment was crucial in influencing other European countries to follow suit with pledges of more advanced Leopard 2 tanks. Denmark's decision played a key role in breaking the deadlock on sending Western-manufactured tanks. It was also one of the first countries,

alongside the Netherlands, to commit to training Ukrainian pilots and delivering F-16 fighter jets. This move set a precedent for other countries and significantly boosted Ukraine's capabilities in air defence and counteroffensive operations. Moreover, Denmark has played a pioneering role in supporting Ukraine's defence industry by directly funding the production of Ukrainian-made weaponry, notably the Bohdana self-propelled howitzers. In July 2024, Denmark announced the financing of 18 Bohdana howitzers, marking the first instance of a NATO country investing directly in Ukraine's domestic arms manufacturing. This initiative not only provided the Ukrainian Armed Forces with vital artillery systems but also bolstered Ukraine's defence production capabilities.

Following Denmark's lead, other nations have adopted similar approaches. Norway, for instance, approved the production of Norwegian-developed artillery ammunition within Ukraine, facilitating quicker supplies for Ukrainian forces. Additionally, Norway is considering measures to further increase production capacity, potentially channelling funding through initiatives that support Ukraine in acquiring arms directly from its defence companies. Norway also took the lead in providing Ukraine with advanced air defence systems, such as the NASAMS, a critical asset for countering Russian missile attacks. But most crucial is Norway's Nansen Support Programme for Ukraine, established in 2023. It is a comprehensive initiative providing around €7.5bn over the five years between 2023 and 2027 to support Ukraine through military aid, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction efforts. This programme is notable for its long-term commitment, distinguishing it as one of the first multi-year support frameworks of its kind for Ukraine. In 2024, the Norwegian government proposed an expansion of the Nansen Programme, increasing the total funding to €11.6bn and extending its timeline to 2032.

Finland, traditionally neutral, also provided substantial military support, including anti-aircraft systems, ammunition and artillery, marking a historic shift in its defence policy. As of December 2024, Finland had delivered 26 packages of defence material to Ukraine, with a combined value exceeding €2.3bn. Finland is a member of the tank support coalition, alongside Germany, Italy and Poland, and participates in the IT coalition led by Estonia and Luxembourg. Furthermore, Finland has joined the Czech-led initiative to procure ammunition for the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Sweden's military aid packages, which included everything from anti-tank weapons to winter gear and medical supplies, were not only sizable but also well-tailored to meet the immediate needs of Ukrainian forces. At the end of January 2025, the Swedish government announced its largest military aid package to Ukraine to date, valued at \$1.25bn. Among other objectives, the package aims to enhance Ukraine's long-range capabilities, including enabling the domestic production of long-range missiles and drones. Sweden's decision to join NATO during the war

further reinforced its commitment to Ukraine's defence.

Bilateral security agreements

All eight countries signed bilateral security agreements with Ukraine in 2024. Although the frameworks are not mutual defence pacts, they reflect the countries' strong commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and aligns with similar security agreements Ukraine has made with other Western allies. They share several common themes while the specific contributions of each country are tailored to its strengths, capabilities and priorities, creating a comprehensive and multi-faceted support structure for Ukraine.

All these agreements are long-term, typically spanning ten years, and emphasise sustained and deepened collaboration. A cornerstone of the agreements is military support, which includes the provision of advanced weaponry, air defence systems and combat vehicles. Denmark, Norway and Sweden have notably pledged to enhance Ukraine's air capabilities, with Denmark committing to the delivery and maintenance of F-16 fighter jets, Sweden offering Gripen jets, and Norway providing expertise and resources for F-16 training. In addition to these contributions, the agreements focus on improving Ukraine's overall defence posture through air defence, artillery and armoured vehicles.

Alongside military assistance, the Nordic countries are deeply committed to supporting Ukraine's humanitarian needs, and the protection and reconstruction of its infrastructure. The agreements outline funding for demining efforts, energy sector restoration and civil defence, with Finland specifically focusing on mitigating environmental damage from the war. Norway has committed to supporting Ukraine's reconstruction through the Nansen Support Programme. This holistic approach underscores the importance of rebuilding Ukraine's resilience not just through military aid but also through economic and humanitarian efforts.

Another key common element is the emphasis on cybersecurity and intelligence collaboration. Several countries, including Denmark, Lithuania and Sweden, have prioritised cooperation in countering Russian cyberattacks and hybrid threats, strengthening Ukraine's resilience against these increasingly sophisticated forms of warfare. The agreements also align with broader geopolitical goals, with all Nordic-Baltic countries voicing strong support for Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO. Lithuania and Latvia in particular have committed to advancing Ukraine's defence interoperability with NATO, while several countries have pledged to expedite Ukraine's accession process.

While the financial contributions across the agreements are significant, they also vary

depending on the country's economic capacity and geopolitical priorities. Denmark stands out with a €8.5bn commitment through its Ukraine Support Fund, which extends until 2028, while Sweden has pledged €6.5bn in military aid from 2024 to 2026. Norway has committed to providing €6.4bn through its multi-year support programme, with a focus on air defence and maritime defence in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. Iceland's financial commitment, while smaller at €30mn annually, is distinctive for its logistical support and focus on the integration of women in the Ukrainian military. Lithuania and Latvia have both pledged to contribute 0.25% of their GDP annually, emphasising their strong commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and regional stability.

Support of Ukraine's victory plan

In October 2024, Odesa hosted a visit by eight foreign ministers representing the Nordic and Baltic countries. The discussions primarily centred on enhancing Ukraine's defence capabilities and bolstering its energy resilience in preparation for the winter months. Particular emphasis was placed on Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's victory plan, which includes a formal invitation to join NATO and more weapons delivery with no restrictions on their use.

While NATO accession is likely off the table for the time being, most of the NB8 countries have voiced clear support for the plan, illustrated by former Lithuanian foreign minister Gabriellus Landsbergis' speech at the Odesa meeting: "Lithuania and Latvia have a clear goal and vision and that is Ukraine's victory. We all agree that Ukraine must win—there is no other way. Russia will not stop until it is stopped. [...]. All I know is that if we choose a plan other than Zelensky's, we will deeply regret it later."

The plan comprises five points: an invitation to join NATO; a defence aspect; deterrence of Russian aggression; economic growth and cooperation; and post-war security architecture. Looking at the main points of the plan, the three that are crucial for ending the war on favourable terms for Ukraine are supported by the NB8 countries.

NATO accession

All NB8 countries have expressed support for Ukraine's NATO accession in the face of Russian aggression. In fact, all bilateral security agreements with the NB8 underscore support for Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO, with several countries committed to accelerating Ukraine's defence interoperability with the alliance. Meetings of the NB8 presidents and foreign ministers have reiterated their NATO commitment.

Yet, Trump's recent comments suggest that Kyiv's NATO membership is currently off the table. In a recent interview, Trump expressed sympathy for Russia's opposition to Ukraine joining NATO and criticised former president Joe Biden for allegedly changing the US stance on the issue. While Ukraine continues to push for an invitation to the alliance, it is becoming clear that alternative security guarantees also need to be considered.

The transatlantic security landscape is increasingly shifting toward "coalitions of the willing"—countries ready to take proactive, decisive action without waiting for the slow consensus-building that often characterises NATO. This approach is both pragmatic and effective—and aligns more with Trump's logic, which favours smaller, more flexible groups capable of decisive action, rather than the broader, more bureaucratic processes favoured by Biden.

In Europe, a coalition of the willing is gradually taking shape, with most NB8 countries on board, aimed at deterring Russia and supporting Ukraine. It is important to note, however, that these efforts are not seen as a replacement for NATO. Instead, they represent an adaptation to new geostrategic realities, where NATO's key member, the US, is more likely to take seriously those allies who take initiative and are ready to contribute to their own security.

Deterring Russia

Another element of Ukraine's victory plan focuses on enhancing non-nuclear deterrence. The proposal seeks to establish a "comprehensive non-nuclear strategic deterrence framework" on Ukrainian territory to mitigate the risk of future aggression. Although this point includes a classified annex and has not been fully detailed, it can be inferred that it involves leveraging a strategic presence. This could entail deploying international training missions, positioning allied troops or conducting maritime patrols similar to the UK's pre-invasion activities, which included joint naval exercises and freedom of navigation operations in the Black Sea to demonstrate deterrence.

Ukraine's leadership is not foreseeing this deterrence strategy as a NATO-wide mission but as a "coalition of willing states." This approach, known as "protection by presence," seeks to create a credible deterrent effect through the visible and sustained involvement of a coalition of committed states, potentially including members of some of the NB8.

While France and the UK have been more outspoken on this matter and are likely to take on a leading role in case of need, the Baltic states have also signalled their willingness to contribute, strengthening the potential coalition of the willing for deterring Russia. For instance, Kaja Kallas has mentioned that her country does not rule out deploying military

trainers to Ukraine, while Lithuania's former defence minister Arvydas Anusauskas has shown openness to sending Lithuanian troops for training missions. These countries, along with the UK and France, have begun a political and bureaucratic process to determine how such a joint mission could be structured, funded and sustained.

Enhancing Ukraine's capabilities

Ukraine and its partners have established eight capability coalitions with 34 member countries from the Ukraine Defence Contact Group. The coalition format became widespread in 2023, aimed at coordinating multiple countries for the delivery of specific types of military equipment rather than having individual nations make separate decisions. Capability coalitions are expected to become the primary tool for shaping military aid packages from partner countries. The coalition format enables a rapid response to urgent needs of the defence forces while also supporting the long-term development of capabilities.

Here, too, the NB8 countries are prominent supporters of Ukraine, leading or co-leading five out of the eight coalitions. Specifically, Estonia co-leads the IT Coalition, Lithuania and Iceland co-lead the Coalition for Demining, Latvia co-leads the Drone Coalition, Norway co-leads the Naval Capabilities Coalition, and Denmark co-leads the Coalition for Aviation Capabilities.

Use of weapons on Russian territory

The second point in the Zelensky's victory plan stresses, among other things, the need to lift restrictions on long-range strikes in Russia, commit to additional supplies of long-range missiles, as well as building up Ukrainian defence capabilities.

In early 2023, when Russia intensified its attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, the Baltic states, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the UK signalled that they did not object to the use of their weapons against targets on Russian territory. By August 2024, a total of 13 NATO countries (Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the UK) had officially permitted Ukraine to utilise Western-provided equipment, including tanks, artillery and infantry fighting vehicles, within Russia. In November, the US approved Ukraine's use of long-range US weapons inside Russia, yet only in the Kursk oblast.

Seizing the opportunity: Recommendations for NB8-Ukraine cooperation

Cutting Russia's oil revenues

A critical component missing from Ukraine's victory plan is a comprehensive strategy for addressing the implementation of sanctions, particularly in the energy sector. For Russia, this sector is a crucial source of revenue that directly funds its military efforts. The Achilles' heel of Putin's regime lies in the revenue derived from oil exports, as gas now plays a much smaller role. Following the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia lost its main European market for natural gas exports, making oil and petroleum products even more significant—likely accounting for over 70% of Russia's current energy exports. These revenues are the largest external source of funding for Russia's military expenditures, including the procurement of military equipment and dual-use goods, contributing around one-third of the federal budget (8-9trn roubles). As long as Russia can continue exporting oil, it can sustain its war efforts.

The NB8 countries, with the Baltic Sea as their internal waterway, are uniquely positioned to play a decisive role in reducing Russia's maritime exports of oil and petroleum products. The combined exports from the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea account for approximately 80% of Russia's total maritime oil trade, amounting to about 15 million tonnes of crude oil and 6 to 7 million tons of petroleum products per month. Among these, the Baltic Sea is particularly significant, accounting for 60% of Russia's maritime crude oil exports due to its favourable political and geographical conditions.

Despite existing sanctions, Russia continues to generate substantial revenues from oil exports due to loopholes in enforcement. The so-called price cap is not effective as it has no safeguards against falsifying documents related to the value of tanker cargo [7]. Since 2022, signing contracts in compliance with the price cap has been prohibited in Russia by decree and is strictly monitored. Meanwhile, 30 to 35% of Russia's maritime crude exports is transported from Russian ports by tanker fleets from EU members, primarily Greece. Additionally, approximately 10% of Russian oil is transferred via ship-to-ship operations near EU waters in the Mediterranean, from where it can be shipped in small batches with falsified documentation. Russia disguises shipments of petroleum products as non-sanctioned goods like fertilisers and vegetable oil, or circumvents price caps by using a shadow fleet of old tankers insured through shell companies.

A paradigm shift in the sanctions approach is necessary, focusing on physically limiting Russia's ability to export oil rather than relying solely on price caps. The NB8 countries should lead efforts to declare a "special period" for the temporary suspension of certain international maritime laws governing freedom of navigation and transit, such as those outlined in the Copenhagen Treaty of 1857. Under current maritime law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, it is difficult to implement restrictive measures in peacetime conditions. However, a "special period" would allow partner nations to take actions that may not fully align with peacetime legal norms, effectively tightening control over Russian oil exports. The proposed "special period" concept could be accompanied by legal justifications under hybrid threats doctrine: arguing that hybrid warfare tactics (such as undersea sabotage) require exceptional legal responses.

While the ideal approach would be a consensus-based decision by the EU, achieving unanimity has become increasingly challenging in recent years. Opposition from Hungary and Slovakia has frequently stalled decisive European action, making a unified stance on energy sanctions unlikely. However, this would not be the first time actions have been taken outside the framework of full EU or NATO unanimity. Given these constraints, bold measures should be considered from the Baltic Sea security perspective.

There is growing concern over Russia's use of hybrid tactics in the Baltic Sea, including the suspected sabotage of undersea cables and pipelines, which have intensified in recent months. These actions aim to destabilise the region and test NATO and EU member states' responses. While NATO and the EU play significant roles in regional security, the immediacy and specificity of hybrid threats prompt the Baltic Sea nations to act autonomously. Proactive measures such as restricting Russian vessel access to the Danish straits would signal a firm commitment to safeguarding critical infrastructure and maintaining stability in the region.

The Baltic Sea nations, acting independently of broader EU or NATO consensus, could take immediate steps given that the Baltic Sea is essentially an internal NATO waterway. They could temporarily enforce mandatory pilotage in the Danish straits, limiting the passage of sanctioned vessels. This measure, along with a comprehensive ban on providing pilotage and other maritime services to sanctioned tankers, would block the primary exit route for Russian oil from Baltic ports.

Furthermore, the NB8 countries should swiftly sanction all tankers recorded in the past several months as transporting Russian oil. These sanctions should extend beyond territorial waters to include bans on access to ports, anchorages and maritime services. A prohibition on tankers lacking proper insurance from transiting through territorial waters—particularly near Denmark and Latvia—would further disrupt Russian exports. Additional sanctions should target companies providing reinsurance for these shipments.

At the EU level, a complete ban on EU-registered shipowners transporting Russian oil and petroleum products from Russian ports is essential. This measure would create a temporary shortage of tanker capacity, significantly hindering Russia's export capabilities. The NB8 coalition is well-positioned to advocate for such multilateral action within the EU, leveraging their strategic interest in curbing Russian aggression.

Such measures could disrupt the global oil market, potentially affecting price stability and energy security in multiple regions. Therefore, they must be carefully managed to prevent or mitigate broader energy instability. The West could collaborate with key oil-producing nations to offset the reduction in Russian supply. Increased production from alternative sources, particularly the US, could help stabilise global markets—a move aligned with Trump's energy policies. Additionally, encouraging Norway, Europe's largest oil exporter, to ramp up production would further bolster European energy security.

Naturally, a potential Russian response and the West's fear of escalation remain the biggest obstacles to decisive action. However, it is crucial to recognise that Russia is continuously testing the West on multiple fronts, including in the maritime domain. Since the start of its

full-scale invasion, there have been at least nine confirmed incidents of Russian drones and missiles crossing into NATO countries, including Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania. Additionally, at least 11 Baltic undersea cables have been damaged since October 2023. These actions are part of a broader Russian strategy to probe NATO's defence systems and response protocols. By deliberately violating NATO airspace and maritime zones, Russia seeks to assess the alliance's reaction time and preparedness.

By finally responding with strength, the Baltic Sea states can send a clear message to Russia—using the only language it understands. A key reference point is the 2015 incident when Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber near the Turkey-Syria border after repeated airspace violations and multiple warnings. Russia initially retaliated with harsh rhetoric, economic sanctions and a diplomatic freeze, displaying its characteristic aggressive posture. However, despite its threats, Moscow ultimately sought reconciliation, and by mid-2016, relations had begun to normalise after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed regret. By 2017, Russia and Turkey had fully restored economic and military cooperation, including energy projects like TurkStream and joint operations in Syria—demonstrating that Russia respects only decisive action and quickly re-engages when confronted with strength.

Managing Norway's "war profits"

In 2022, Norway's revenues from oil and gas sales soared to unprecedented levels, driven by the spike in global energy prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Norwegian state more than doubled its earnings from these resources compared to 2021—from approximately \$60bn to \$140bn. This surge is primarily attributed to Europe's urgent need for alternatives to Russian energy supplies, solidifying Norway's role as a critical energy provider to the continent.

However, this windfall has sparked domestic and international debate over the ethical implications of profiting from a conflict that has caused immense human suffering. Critics argue that Norway has a moral obligation to allocate a substantial portion of these revenues to supporting Ukraine. Beyond the general question of whether such funds should be directed to Ukraine, a more critical issue is how to allocate these funds most effectively. While reconstruction and humanitarian aid remain vital, prioritising military support—particularly funding Ukraine's defence production—would yield the most significant strategic and long-term benefits for Ukraine's survival and sovereignty.

The Norwegian government has partially addressed these concerns through the Nansen Aid Program, a five-year initiative encompassing military and humanitarian assistance. In 2024, the government proposed expanding the programme, increasing its total funding to 135bn

NKr (or €11.6) and extending its timeline to 2032. This move reflects Norway's acknowledgment of Ukraine's enduring needs and its commitment to sustained support.

However, the programme has been critiqued for its lack of urgency. Instead of spreading funding evenly over the years, the allocation should prioritise a significant increase in the 2025 budget to address Ukraine's immediate defence needs, particularly through investments in Ukrainian weapons production, following the example of Denmark – currently the undisputed leader in support for Ukraine's armed forces among the Nordics, with an allocation of €6.4bn in military support or 1.6% of its GDP. The ongoing negotiations between Norway and Ukraine regarding a proposed “Norwegian model” for establishing joint military enterprises with Norwegian financial backing offer a promising avenue for bolstering Ukraine's underfunded defence production capabilities. Concurrently, an alternative approach could involve allocating a portion of Norway's available funding to procure US weaponry—readily available and stockpiled—to address Ukraine's immediate military needs. [8]

Encouragingly, the programme's flexible design allows for adjustments, as demonstrated in 2023 and 2024 when the government front-loaded and increased initially budgeted contributions multiple times. If Ukraine and Norway swiftly reach an agreement on the financial and bureaucratic mechanisms underpinning the Norwegian model for financing Ukraine's military production, it is plausible that additional funding could be integrated into the allocated Nansen Aid Program budget for 2025.

In light of evolving geopolitical realities, including uncertainties surrounding the new US leadership, Norway has a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to assert a more visible role in European and transatlantic security. With its extraordinary financial gains directly linked to Russia's war on Ukraine, Norway can and should leverage these resources to strengthen Ukraine's military resilience and contribute decisively to European stability.

Expanding Ukraine's production capacity

In a joint statement from May last year, Nordic leaders and the Ukrainian president committed to enhancing defence production capabilities, declaring: “We will jointly strive to increase Ukraine's and our own production capacity to meet Ukraine's needs for battle-decisive munitions.” This pledge reflects the urgent necessity for Ukraine's partners to invest more significantly in the country's defence industry, which has rapidly expanded since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion but remains underutilised due to limited domestic funding.

Despite its rapid growth, Ukraine's defence industry is operating far below its full potential due to budgetary constraints. According to Oleksander Kamyshin, Ukraine's former minister of strategic industries, the total capacity of the sector currently stands at \$20bn annually, yet only \$6bn is available domestically to fund production. As a result, only one-third of Ukraine's production capacity is fully utilised, leaving untapped potential that external investments could unlock.

This surplus is particularly evident in Ukraine's burgeoning drone industry, which now includes over 200 companies producing millions of drones annually. The rapid expansion has outpaced the state's ability to procure these drones, creating a risk of companies relocating abroad or shutting down. To prevent this, Ukraine's partners should place direct orders with Ukrainian drone manufacturers, a step Denmark has already taken.

In April 2024, Denmark became the first country to procure weapons for Ukraine's Armed Forces directly from Ukrainian manufacturers, setting a critical precedent for other allies.

This has already provided Ukraine with €50mn, which funded the production of Bohdana self-propelled artillery systems. By autumn, the scope of this collaboration expanded significantly, with Ukraine and Denmark signing contracts worth approximately €535mn to procure Ukrainian-made artillery systems, strike drones, anti-tank weapons, and missiles. These contracts were financed through contributions from the governments of Denmark and Sweden, as well as revenues from frozen Russian assets. In November, Norway's minister of defence stated that the country would join the Danish support format and finance the production of Ukrainian weapons and equipment. Finland and Estonia have also expressed interest in purchasing Ukraine-made drones and exploring joint production opportunities.

Following the Danish example, the Nordic countries can significantly upscale the volumes and funding of similar procurement contracts while spearheading other ways to support Ukraine's defence sector. This includes direct purchases of Ukrainian military equipment for their own arsenals, joint production ventures, co-investments, localisation of manufacturing, or collaborative defence projects. Domestically produced long-range weapons are particularly crucial. Ukraine's defence strategy increasingly emphasises the development of long-range drones and missiles capable of striking deep inside Russia. Defence minister Rustem Umerov recently confirmed that ramping up the production of these capabilities will be a key priority for 2025. Given that Western partners often restrict Ukraine's access to long-range weaponry, supporting the domestic production of such systems becomes a strategic imperative. Each of these approaches contributes to strengthening Ukraine's military production base, which is essential for sustaining its defence efforts and bolstering European security.

However, Ukraine must also address its internal policies by permitting the export of domestically produced weapons—a step that could significantly stimulate production and compensate for the government's budgetary limitations. [9] Enabling such exports has the potential to generate up to \$15bn annually for arms manufacturers, while simultaneously accelerating the growth of Ukraine's defence industry.

Strengthening Ukraine's northern security through the JEF

An important opportunity for Ukraine's northern foreign and security policy lies in deepening its cooperation with the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). This UK-led defence coalition was established in 2014 in response to heightened security threats in northern Europe and the Baltic region, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea, hence implicitly linking it to Ukraine's broader security concerns. Ukraine joined the JEF as an observer in March 2022, shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion, as part of its efforts to engage with accessible security alliances beyond NATO. Notably, the majority of JEF members are part of the NB8 group, with the coalition comprising ten nations: the NB8 countries, the UK, and the Netherlands.

The JEF benefits from the unique contributions of its member states, enhancing its operational flexibility. The UK leads the JEF, providing command capabilities and substantial military assets. Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Norway contribute naval strength and cyber expertise, bolstering the JEF's response capacity in the Baltic and Arctic regions. Finland and Sweden, joining in 2017, strengthen the coalition's northern presence with highly skilled troops, air defence systems, and cybersecurity capabilities. Iceland, despite lacking a conventional military, adds strategic value through intelligence-

sharing and maritime surveillance in the north Atlantic. Ukraine's potential membership would offer significant benefits, leveraging its experience as Europe's only battle-tested army. Ukraine's proven ability in multi-domain operations, including cyber and electronic warfare, advanced counter-drone tactics combined with its extensive field-testing of Western equipment, would provide the JEF with critical operational insights and enhanced readiness.

The primary mission of the JEF is to provide a rapid and flexible response to crises affecting regional stability. This flexibility is a core feature, reflected in both its operational approach and decision-making processes. The JEF can mobilise forces quickly, allowing for swift deployment in response to emerging threats. Unlike NATO's consensus-based decision model, the JEF operates with fewer formalities, enabling faster decisions—an essential factor for addressing hybrid threats that require immediate action.

It is important to emphasise that potential full membership in the JEF would not replace but rather complement Ukraine's aspirations of NATO integration. While it is true that the JEF does not offer the mutual defence guarantee of NATO's article 5, it still provides a valuable defence partnership that enhances Ukraine's strategic options. Full membership would strengthen Ukraine's defence, particularly through rapid deployment support, which is crucial given ongoing Russian threats. Participation in JEF exercises would also deepen Ukraine's interoperability with Western forces, enhancing access to advanced military training, which could be aligned with the training programmes Ukraine's armed forces are currently undergoing.

The experiences of Finland and Sweden provide a useful precedent for Ukraine, demonstrating how JEF membership can facilitate deeper integration into European defence structures, including NATO. Both countries joined the JEF in 2017, significantly boosting their defence readiness. Through participation in exercises like Baltic Protector, Finland and Sweden aligned their operations with NATO standards, streamlined command structures and enhanced their hybrid warfare capabilities. This alignment was key to their seamless transition to full NATO membership, mitigating security risks during the interim period before formal accession. This latter approach could similarly benefit Ukraine, as JEF membership could provide an extra layer of deterrence against Russian aggression—especially if formal NATO security guarantees or bilateral assurances, as seen with Finland and Sweden, are delayed. While not identical to NATO membership, it would nonetheless provide a critical layer of regional defence, reinforcing Ukraine's position within the broader European security architecture.

Boosting defence reforms through civil society development

The full-scale war has highlighted the urgent need to overhaul the management and decision-making processes within Ukraine's Ministry of Defence, from enhancing analytical capabilities to developing effective defence policies. Despite efforts to modernise, Ukraine's defence system remains largely rooted in Soviet-era structures, only now beginning to adopt NATO standards amid the complexities of wartime challenges. Before 2014, the armed forces of Ukraine suffered from years of neglect and a lack of societal support, resulting in an outdated, rigid and highly conservative bureaucratic culture resistant to innovation.

Since 2014, the influx of volunteers and civic activists has introduced a culture of self-organisation and leadership, creating a wave of innovative practices within the defence sector. Between 2022 to 2024, these innovators reached a critical mass, paving the way for a shift in the defence culture of Ukraine. However, while there has been significant growth in the number of civil society organisations and think-tanks aiming to support defence reform, the broader ecosystem of non-state actors in this sector remains underdeveloped. This weakness results in a lack of timely, high-quality analytical support for strategic decision-making. It is paradoxical that in a country known for its vibrant and resilient civil society—a driving force behind numerous successful reforms—the defence-focused civic ecosystem remains relatively weak. This is largely due to the lack of funding for NGOs, think-tanks, advocacy groups and educational institutions working on these issues. While countries like the UK and Canada have provided financial support to civil society organisations in the security and defence sector, most other nations treat such assistance as impermissible military aid, constrained by a strict separation between official development assistance (ODA) and military support.

Nordic and Baltic countries are well-positioned to adopt a similar approach to the UK, which directs about 93% of its defence aid to Ukraine into ODA-compliant activities. These efforts focus on three key areas: improving governance, enhancing transparency and anti-corruption measures, and bolstering human and reputational security initiatives, such as women, peace, and security programmes and the protection of civilians under international humanitarian law.

Countries like Iceland, which lack a conventional military, or the Baltic states, which may have limited capacity to provide impactful military support, could focus on strengthening Ukraine's civilian defence ecosystem. Financial resources required for such support are minimal compared to direct military aid, yet the potential systemic impact on Ukraine's defence sector would be substantial. In a nation where civil society plays a critical role in

driving change, investing in the development of a strong, independent ecosystem of non-state defence actors would offer invaluable support to Ukraine's long-term security reform efforts—especially given that the end of the war is not yet in sight. The Baltic states, given their shared Soviet past and recognition of the importance of grassroots, non-governmental networks as key drivers of change (in contrast to the Soviet administrative hierarchy), are particularly well-suited to support and fund civil society initiatives.

Conclusion

The NB8 has solidified its role as staunch advocates for Ukraine, drawing on shared historical experiences, aligned geopolitical interests, and strategic foresight to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. United in its opposition to Russian aggression, this coalition of the willing has become a dependable partner, providing critical military, financial and diplomatic support. As the transatlantic political landscape shifts, particularly under a new Trump administration, the NB8's role in supporting Ukraine's defence is poised to become even more important, cementing these countries as a crucial foreign policy and security vector for Ukraine's fight for freedom.

The NB8's dedication stems from a shared threat perception rooted in a history of direct confrontations with Russian expansionism. This commonality positions the Nordic-Baltic region as natural allies for Ukraine, with each country leveraging its unique strengths—whether advanced defence technologies, humanitarian aid or diplomatic advocacy—to counteract Russian aggression. As Europe increasingly relies on coalitions of the willing amid changing transatlantic dynamics, the NB8 is well-positioned to take a leadership role with others, such as France and the UK, in supporting Ukraine and securing their own regional security.

To maximise the potential of this partnership, deeper strategic collaboration, enhanced bilateral and multilateral connections, and greater investment are essential. The NB8 can amplify their impact by addressing critical areas such as blocking Russian oil exports through Baltic ports, ensuring that Ukraine's NATO aspirations are not lost, expediting mechanisms for joint military initiatives in Ukraine, building consensus for Ukraine's full membership in the JEF, and scaling up funding for defence procurement to bolster Ukraine's defence capabilities. Additionally, strengthening Ukraine's civil society organisations in the defence sector is vital to keep crucial reforms going despite the war challenges.

This enduring partnership not only secures Ukraine's future but also strengthens Europe's broader security architecture, fostering a more unified and resilient continent. By learning from the experiences and lessons of its Nordic and Eastern neighbours, Europe can better

prepare for the challenges ahead while supporting Ukraine's path to peace and stability.

About the author

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[1] ECFR in-person interview with a senior Ukrainian diplomat, August 2024.

[2] ECFR online interview with a senior Swedish diplomat, December 2024.

[3] ECFR in-person interview with a senior Swedish foreign policy expert, November 2024

[4] ECFR in-person interview with a senior Norwegian diplomat, December 2024.

[5] ECFR in-person interview with a senior Swedish diplomat, December 2024.

[6] ECFR online interview with a Swedish researcher, November 2024.

[7] ECFR in-person interview with a Ukrainian sanctions expert, November 2024

[8] ECFR in-person interview with a Norwegian researcher, January 2025

[9] ECFR in-person interview with a Ukrainian drone manufacturer, December 2024

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