



PRICE OF FREEDOM

SkyShield

a practical security
guarantee for Ukraine



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This strategy proposal introduces SkyShield, a European-led Integrated Air Protection Zone (IAPZ) that employs combat air patrols (CAPs) over uncontested areas of Ukraine. SkyShield's principal mission is the protection of western Ukrainian airspace from cruise missiles. The combat aircraft involved will fly from European airbases and closely coordinate with the Ukraine Air Force (UAF).

SkyShield is designed to be one of the principal building blocks of a broader strategy to defend Ukraine and to ensure its future resilience and prosperity, with the reintegration of all occupied territories in mind. It also weakens Russia militarily without increasing risks of nuclear escalation to achieve a stable armistice. By mobilising just 120 European aircraft, SkyShield can achieve greater military, political, and socioeconomic impact than 10,000 European ground troops:

Military Impacts

- Protects Ukrainian civilians and infrastructure from Russian attacks
- Relieves UAF resources to focus on eastern Ukraine and the front
- Enables the establishment of NATO-standard equipment maintenance and repair centres on Ukrainian territory, reducing costs and expediting turnaround

Political Impacts

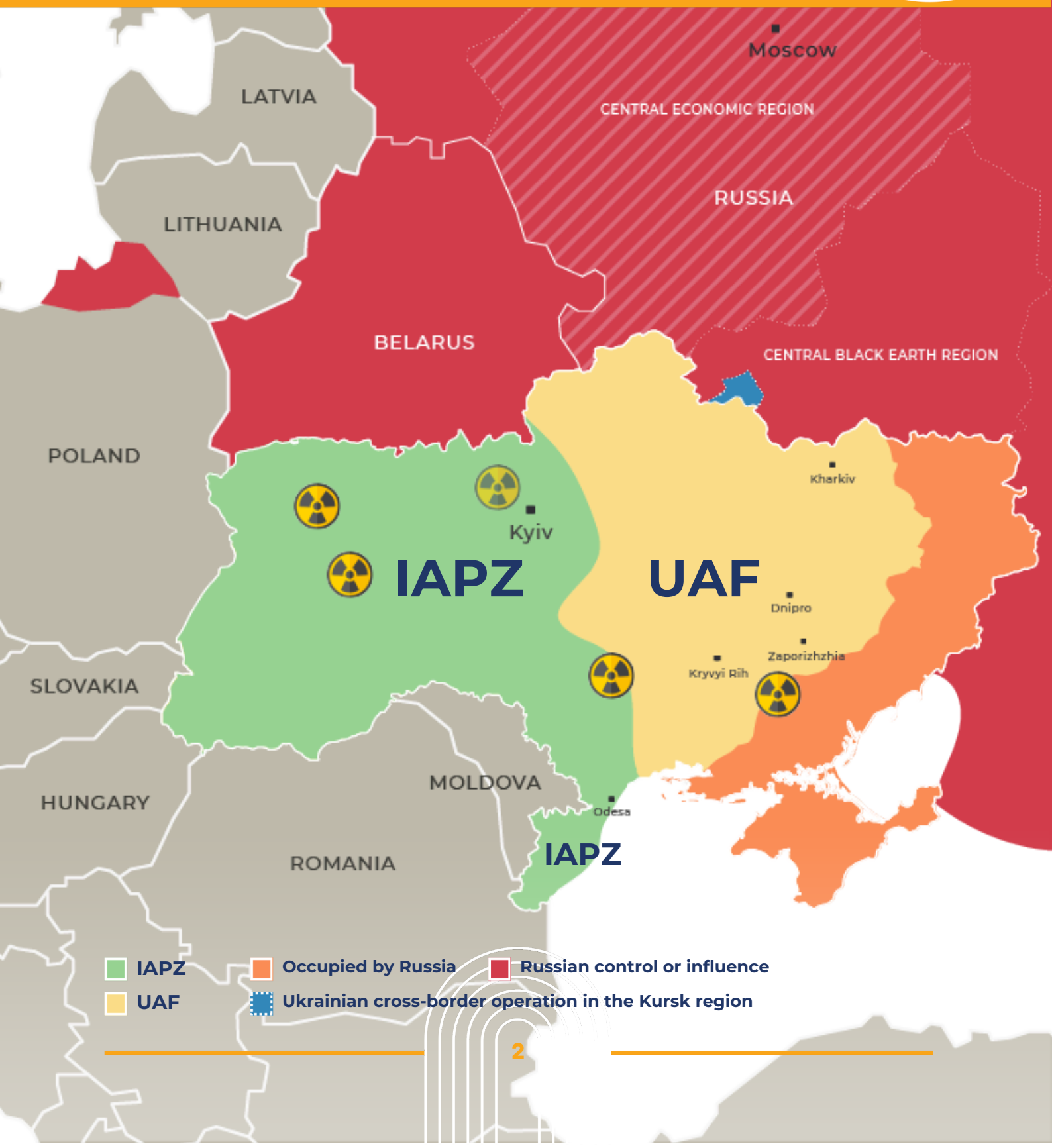
- Sends a clear signal to our adversaries: Europe can and will defend Europe
- Significantly lowers European personnel commitments required for mission success compared to ground troop deployments
- Creates a rallying effect across Europe during this breach in the transatlantic alliance

Socioeconomic Impacts

- Protects vital export corridors
- Increases investor confidence in industry within the IAPZ
- Raises public confidence and encourages refugees to return to Ukraine

SkyShield can be deployed by a coalition of willing NATO member states. Formal NATO auspices are unnecessary, although using the Alliance's command and control, intelligence capacities, and infrastructure is unavoidable. SkyShield must be executed in close coordination with other programmes to support Ukraine. Should an armistice be negotiated, it will seamlessly transform into a part of Ukraine's future security guarantees alongside any additional allied commitments.

Integrated Air Protection Zone (IAPZ)



Strategic considerations



At this stage of the war, Russian military power rests on three pillars:

1. Incessant infantry attacks with mechanised support.
2. Glide bombs to destroy Ukrainian positions, clearing the way for infantry attacks, as well as destroying settlements close to the frontline.
3. Attritional drone and missile attacks across the depth of the territory of Ukraine aimed at breaking the morale of the Ukrainian population.

SkyShield will contribute to eroding each of these pillars. Ukraine's leadership will be able to relocate UAF assets freed from the IAPZ eastward, enhancing the protection of big cities (Kharkiv, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Kryvyi Rih). Relocated UAF combat aircraft will also curtail the Russian air force's use of glide bombs against Ukrainian frontline troops, a tactical game-changer for Ukraine, which can shift the strategic equation on the front.

SkyShield will provide economic, industrial, and humanitarian relief not only for the territory covered by the IAPZ, but also indirectly for the rest of unoccupied Ukraine. The practical and psychological impacts of SkyShield will decrease and potentially reverse refugee flows, allow economic reconstruction, and enable further expansion of Ukraine's defence industry even while the war continues to be fought.

Proposed IAPZ:

Three major points must be considered regarding the proposed IAPZ:

- 1 It will not involve the Coalition's members in a nuclear or conventional war with Russia.
- 2 It can be done. The West has organised and sustained much more extensive air campaigns.
- 3 SkyShield is a workable, effective political and legal solution.



1

SkyShield will not involve the Coalition's members in a nuclear or conventional war with Russia.

NATO air policing in the Baltics has been ongoing for 21 years without incident despite countless provocations. During the Western air campaign in Syria, the Russian Airspace Force (VKS) carefully avoided hostilities with the US-led coalition aircraft. The Assad regime's air defence systems also rarely shot at the Coalition's aircraft while still engaging the Israeli Air Force.

When Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 in November 2015 at their border, it caused a minor vertical escalation in Syria as well as some symbolic sanctions from Russia. Despite abundant gestures, no military action against Turkey or other NATO members was taken. At the beginning of the fourth year of the full-scale war, Russia's capacity is damaged enough for the Kremlin to be even more reluctant to use force against the Coalition. Furthermore, the Coalition's aircraft within the IAPZ will be separated from Russian aircraft by vast swathes of Ukrainian territory – more than 200 km wide in most places.

While the Coalition will need firm rules of engagement and must be ready for the possibility of engaging a Russian fighter jet in the IAPZ while the fighting continues, the escalatory potential of this moment is offset against the much higher escalation potential of not providing Ukraine with support. Failure to move on SkyShield now will embolden Russia to continue its destruction of Ukraine and eventually attack NATO member states. SkyShield represents the lowest risk, highest impact measure European allies can take now to end this war sooner and prevent war between NATO and Russia.

What about Russian red lines?

For all their nuclear fearmongering, Russians are in fact very cautious and conservative in their actions. Their actual red lines are not those they bluff about.

The first and most obvious real red line would be a massive land force invasion into the Central Economic Region of Russia. This would be perceived as an existential threat to Russia and cause the Russian leadership to escalate, including a real possibility of nuclear strikes.

This approach is rooted in the Russian understanding of their history and reinforced by a centuries-long history of developing the area around Moscow as a self-sufficient military-economic entity. SkyShield will be seen as an impediment to Russia's power projection, like Baltic air policing or the Syrian air campaign, but not as an existential threat to Russia itself.

Even the Ukrainian large-scale offensive into Russia's Kursk Region was not seen as an existential threat, and thus did not cause any serious escalation beyond the deployment of North Korean soldiers. This underscores Russia's deep fear of real escalation with the West and their lack of practical means to undertake it.

The second red line would be a direct attempt on the life of Putin and several people in his closest circle. The Kremlin's emotional, retaliatory reactions to Ukrainian strikes on their army HQs hint at tacit rules of the game – threats should not be against the Russian leadership personally. Massive missile strikes on Putin's residence could indeed provoke an escalatory, even nuclear, response if perceived as an attempt at regime change. There is no risk of SkyShield crossing this 'red line.'

The third red line would be a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Russian territory. This purely theoretical possibility is beyond the realistic scope of imagination and presents no risk to SkyShield.

Russia will certainly respond to the IAPZ with hybrid means, as it cannot answer with any efficient military escalation beyond what is already in place. Cyberattacks, propaganda, and attempts to sabotage key infrastructure will be attempted but with limited results should Coalition members make use of their technological advantages.

A predictable increase of pressure on the Coalition in the Baltics and elsewhere – like flying more sorties of antiquated TU-95 to strain air defences or GPS signal interference – should be anticipated and planned for as a part of IAPZ implementation.

2

SkyShield can be established. The West has organised and sustained much larger air campaigns.

Policing the proposed IAPZ requires 120 F-16s, F-16AM/BMs, or an “operational equivalent” provided by squadrons of other aircraft types (F-35, Mirage, Eurofighter Typhoon, JAS 39 Gripen) flying from European airbases. AEW&C, tanker aircraft, and different types of specialised and support craft will also be needed, as well as ISR, EW, cyber protection, and other assets and capabilities. **The EU and Great Britain have enough combat airpower to independently establish the IAPZ.**

The 1999 Kosovo Air Campaign involved over 1,000 combat aircraft flying sorties over hostile territory. Conducting an order-of-magnitude smaller campaign over friendly territory is feasible.

Ground personnel and facilities operating on NATO territory will not be attacked kinetically by Russian forces. During three years of full-scale war, the territory of EU/NATO member states has not been attacked by Russian missiles or projectiles barring the odd stray. Facilities and logistical routes handling weapons and military equipment intended for the Armed Forces of Ukraine have also not been struck.

The risk to SkyShield pilots is low – Russia hasn’t dared to send aircraft into the proposed IAPZ airspace since early 2022. The defensive nature of SkyShield missions will offer significant standoff from Russian threats, both airborne and ground-based.

Coalition planes will protect themselves with beyond-visual-range missiles and countermeasures. They will fly over friendly territory in coordination with the UAF. Combat search and rescue (CSAR) can be conducted jointly or by the UAF.

3

SkyShield is a workable political and legal solution.

The SkyShield Coalition structure leverages the strengths of multiple nations to maximise operational efficiency and ensure mutual support. The core of the coalition will provide fighter aircraft, aircrews, and C&C. It should ideally be made up of as many European states as are willing to contribute. Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic will play a crucial role in granting access to airfields and infrastructure, possibly including ISR capacities.

The Baltic states' (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) organisational experience and know-how gained through Baltic Air patrols, as well as their auxiliary airfields, will be very welcome. Other countries are welcome to join in support roles.

The SkyShield Coalition's mission will be accomplished when the UAF has gained enough capacity to reliably protect the entirety of Ukraine's airspace from Russian attacks. American and Ukrainian air force experts estimate this timespan to be three to five years.

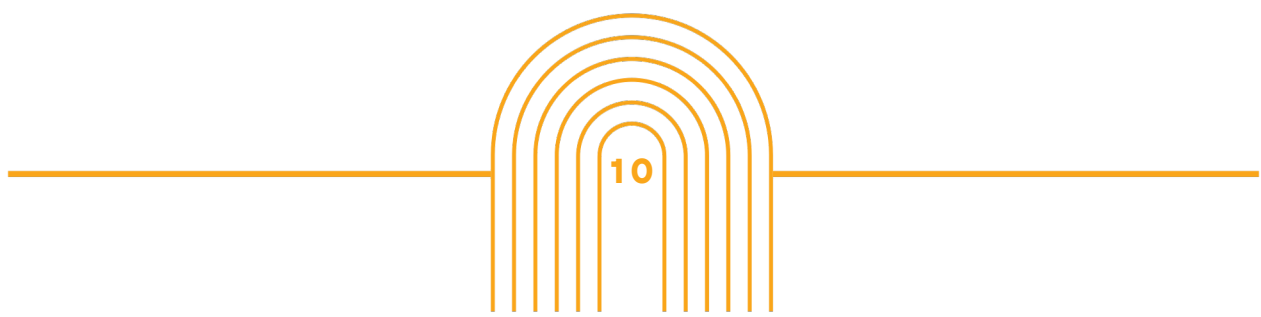
Coalition expenses can be paid by seizing frozen Russian assets in Europe. As with other military assistance currently received from the West, Russian consent need not be sought.

SkyShield's legal and political justifications are reinforced by key international conventions, such as:

- the Convention on Assistance in the Case of a Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency
- the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
- the Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation

These conventions collectively justify measures to secure Ukrainian airspace and infrastructure in collaboration with regional partners for humanitarian and protective purposes, which in turn can be implemented by the IAPZ Coalition.

The IAPZ has extensive grounding in international law. It is politically sound, balancing support of the rules-based international order with low risks of practical implementation. If we want to protect Ukraine without sending troops, this is our best option.



Important considerations

The proposed IAPZ covers all **three nuclear power stations** operated by Ukraine – Rivne, Khmelnytsky, and South Ukrainian. The fourth – Zaporizhzhia – has been occupied by the Russians since early 2022. Electricity generated by the remaining three stations is vital for Ukrainian society and economy. Preventing damage to them is vital to all of Europe.

In 2024 alone, Russia executed **thirteen large-scale attacks** on Ukrainian energy infrastructure. In two cases, a Chornobyl-style nuclear incident was prevented only by the competence of damage control teams on the ground. With the level of persistence demonstrated by Russia, a nuclear fallout of a comparable scale is just a matter of time. Protecting the Ukrainian nuclear power grid thus also protects millions of people across Northern, Central and Western Europe.

SkyShield will show the Ukrainian military and society that it can truly rely on its European allies to stand with them, thus raising Ukrainian morale. Raised morale transforms into increased conscription levels, better fighting spirit, and more creative thinking on the tactical level – tipping the scales to Ukraine's advantage. It would also place Ukraine in a stronger position ahead of any armistice negotiations.

Currently, six million Ukrainians are refugees, and four-and-a-half million are internally displaced. Enhanced protection of the free territory of Ukraine by the Coalition and UAF working in concert will substantially decrease attacks on Ukraine's population. This will **prevent new waves of refugees to the EU**, as well as alleviate stress and suffering.

SkyShield will also enable the long-term recovery of Ukrainian large-scale energy generation and boost its industrial base. The domestic defence industry will significantly benefit from increased levels of protection, strengthening investor confidence. Protecting ports and sea routes around Odesa is also vital for the country's long-term survival and economic stability.

Deliveries of additional SAM systems are not a viable alternative to the SkyShield Coalition. SAM systems, embodiments of advanced Western technology, have inherent technical and tactical limitations. They are only available in limited numbers and, without the support of a sizeable fighter force, cannot prevent the degradation of Ukrainian infrastructure and living conditions through Russian strikes.

The UAF has demonstrated incredible organisational and tactical feats and heroic combat performance. It punches far above its weight. Despite this, its limited organisational resources and lack of infrastructure are constraining factors. Although it has performed better than any reasonable expectations, the UAF has still not generated enough air power to negotiate from a position of strength.

SkyShield will allow for safe training of UAF personnel in Ukraine rather than EU countries, thus contributing to a mid-to-long-term increase in combat efficiency. This, in turn, will increase deterrence and could transform an armistice into a long-term peaceful political solution.

Maintaining the IAPZ will give coalition militaries invaluable combat experience. Flying CAPs in a modern high-intensity, near-peer war provides a unique training environment and technological testbed. Such experience provides long-term military advantages that are needed in an unpredictable global environment and are difficult to obtain anywhere else.

Conclusion

By protecting uncontested Ukrainian territory, relieving the UAF to focus on the frontline battlefield, helping secure its economy and nuclear security, boosting national morale, and enabling expanded Ukrainian defence production, **SkyShield can tilt the balance of power in this war and force Russia to the negotiation table.**

SkyShield won't end the war alone. It is, however, the best practical way Europe can help Ukraine and weaken Russia in the immediate term without risking direct combat between Russia and the West.

The story of Ukrainian perseverance, allied with Europe, achieving strategic victory over Russia, allied with China, Iran, and North Korea, will become a powerful narrative for Ukraine and Europe across the world. It will enhance Europe's position as a global power, and it will show the United States that Europe can and will defend its own continent. SkyShield is a practical, feasible, necessary step Europe should take now for Ukrainian victory and European security.

Together, the SkyShield Coalition will provide a much-needed lifeline to the rules-based order and reiterate the enduring power of liberal democracy, not simply as a set of values but as a commitment to defending individual freedoms, our way of life, and peace in Europe.



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