THE JOINT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE IN THE EUROPEAN SECURITY SYSTEM: INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION AND PROSPECTS FOR PARTNERSHIP WITH UKRAINE

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Abstract

This article examines the opportunities and limitations of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) as a regional defense cooperation framework and assesses prospects for partnership with Ukraine. It uses a qualitative case study design and documentary analysis of official materials and research publications, covering 2014 to 1 September 2026. The theoretical framework combines defense minilateralism with an institutional approach. The findings indicate that the JEF's evolution combines organizational continuity with changing political priorities and expanding activities. Its flexibility enables interested states to participate in specific activities, while effectiveness depends on national decisions, resources and coordination with NATO. Evidence from exercises and NORDIC WARDEN demonstrates multinational coordination but is insufficient to establish the JEF's independent deterrent effect. The analysis traces the expansion of agreed arrangements for Ukraine's involvement and distinguishes partnership intentions from verified implementation outcomes. It proposes cooperation priorities in maritime security, critical infrastructure protection, unmanned systems and staff training, alongside conditional scenarios for JEF development to 2030. The study contributes by linking institutional analysis of the JEF with an assessment of mechanisms for partnership with Ukraine. Its principal limitation is reliance on open sources and limited evidence of operational outcomes.

Keywords: Joint Expeditionary Force, JEF, Ukraine, NATO, European security, Russian Federation, deterrence, hybrid warfare, Baltic Sea, High North, North Atlantic, critical infrastructure.

Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has brought renewed attention to European states' ability to coordinate political decisions and respond promptly to military and hybrid threats. Defence cooperation frameworks that combine national control over armed forces with previously agreed procedures for joint planning and the employment of military resources have gained particular importance. One such framework is the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which brings together ten states under the leadership of the United Kingdom (Joint Expeditionary Force, n.d.; UK Government, 2021).

The JEF's distinctive features lie in the combination of its regional focus, the United Kingdom's role as the Framework Nation, and participating states' voluntary decisions on involvement in specific activities. This model provides the organisational conditions for a flexible response, but its practical capabilities depend on the alignment of political interests, the readiness of national forces and the availability of resources. Its limited membership and procedural flexibility

should therefore be treated as factors whose effects require analysis, rather than as sufficient evidence of the JEF's effectiveness.

The relationship between the functions of the JEF and NATO is of particular research interest. The JEF's involvement in protecting critical underwater infrastructure and responding to hybrid threats raises questions about its contribution to regional security and the conditions under which its activities complement Alliance mechanisms (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2024; UK Government, 2021, 2026). Assessing this contribution requires a distinction between declared objectives, implemented activities and outcomes that can be verified using available sources.

The development of the Enhanced Partnership between Ukraine and the JEF introduces further questions concerning the mutual exchange and application of military experience, joint training and capability development (UK Government, 2025, 2026). However, political agreements on cooperation do not, in themselves, determine its effectiveness. It is necessary to establish which partnership mechanisms are provided for in official documents, which forms of cooperation are already being implemented and which areas remain prospects for future development.

The research problem therefore concerns how the JEF's institutional characteristics relate to its capabilities and limitations in responding to regional security challenges, and what implications this has for its partnership with Ukraine. This formulation moves beyond describing JEF activities towards analysing the relationship between its organisational model, cooperation practices and place within the European security system.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on the Joint Expeditionary Force addresses its place in European security, its interaction with NATO and its capacity for regional response. Analysing the JEF requires a distinction between official documents, which establish political intentions and the organizational foundations of cooperation, and research publications, which assess the opportunities and limitations of this framework. This distinction helps avoid equating declared objectives with achieved outcomes.

Arnold, E. examines the JEF as an instrument for strengthening the United Kingdom's military and political influence and Northern European states' contribution to European security. He identifies political and military leadership, flexibility and regional specialization as comparative advantages of this framework. At the same time, he emphasizes the need for resources and political support, without which the JEF's expanding ambitions could undermine confidence in its capabilities (Arnold, 2024). This approach is relevant to the present study because it links institutional advantages to the conditions required for their practical realization.

Pihlajamaa, A. analyses prospects for integrating the JEF into the Northern European security architecture. He argues that regional JEF activities can complement NATO's efforts but cautions against an excessive expansion of its tasks. Particularly relevant is his observation concerning the tension between political flexibility and military effectiveness: voluntary participation facilitates agreement on individual activities but does not ensure sustained contributions of forces and assets. He also highlights that states draw on the same limited resources to fulfil JEF and NATO tasks (Pihlajamaa, 2024). Complementarity between these frameworks therefore requires coordination of planning and resource commitments.

Hofmann, S. C. offers a broader theoretical perspective by examining the organization of European security through interactions among institutions and actors. Her approach distinguishes between using multiple frameworks to avoid difficult consensus-building and pursuing cooperation in which institutional functions and activities are coordinated (Hofmann, 2025). Applying this distinction to the JEF directs attention to whether its activities coherently complement broader security arrangements and under what conditions duplication of tasks or competition for resources may arise.

The concept of minilateralism is also useful for explaining the JEF's organizational model. In their examination of minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific, F. Heiduk and T. Wilkins demonstrate the diversity of their institutional characteristics and possible development trajectories. They do not regard the transformation of such arrangements into formal alliances or other enduring structures as a predetermined process (Heiduk & Wilkins, 2024). This finding has conceptual relevance for analyzing the JEF, although its application requires consideration of differences between regional contexts.

In this article, defense minilateralism is understood as cooperation among a limited group of states focused on agreed security tasks. This working definition is used to analyze membership, coordination mechanisms and the conditions for committing national resources. Limited membership alone is not treated as a sufficient condition for rapid or effective joint action.

The reviewed publications provide a basis for explaining the JEF's regional role, flexibility and interaction with NATO. However, implementing the Enhanced Partnership with Ukraine under the agreements reached in 2025–2026 requires a separate analysis informed by new official documents (UK Government, 2025, 2026). This article focuses on the relationship between the JEF's institutional model, available evidence of practical cooperation and the conditions for deepening its partnership with Ukraine. This approach allows earlier assessments to be refined without assuming a general absence of research on the subject.

Five interrelated dimensions are identified for the subsequent analysis: political leadership and coordination; voluntary participation and the predictability of contributions; regional and functional specialization; coordination with NATO; and mechanisms for partnership with Ukraine. Within each dimension, a distinction is drawn between officially stated intentions, documented activities and the authors' assessments of future prospects. This enables the JEF's opportunities and limitations to be examined together, without substituting a description of activities for an assessment of outcomes.

The aim of this article is to identify the opportunities and limitations of the Joint Expeditionary Force as a regional defense cooperation framework by analyzing its institutional evolution, mechanisms for responding to military and hybrid threats, and prospects for partnership with Ukraine.

To achieve this aim, the study sets the following objectives: to trace changes in the JEF's priorities and areas of activity; to analyze the role of the Framework Nation, the principle of voluntary participation and mechanisms for coordinating national contributions; to examine critical underwater infrastructure protection as an example of security response; and to identify opportunities and limitations associated with deepening cooperation with Ukraine.

The study seeks to answer three questions: What changes characterize the JEF's institutional evolution? How does its organizational model relate to the opportunities and limitations of regional response? Which areas of partnership with Ukraine have documented foundations for practical implementation?

Materials and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative case study design, focusing on the JEF. The case was selected because it combines a regional focus, British leadership, voluntary state participation in specific activities and a developing partnership with Ukraine. The analysis examines the relationship between the JEF's institutional characteristics, security cooperation practices and opportunities for further development.

The study's principal timeframe extends from the establishment of the multinational JEF framework in 2014 to 1 September 2026. Earlier developments are considered to explain the circumstances surrounding its formation. Particular attention is paid to changes following Russia's full-

scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and to documents concerning the Ukraine–JEF Enhanced Partnership in 2025–2026. Events after the specified cut-off date fall outside the study's empirical scope.

The source base comprises two groups of materials. The first includes official JEF and UK Government documents and communications: policy provisions, joint statements, information on exercises, response activities and partnership arrangements (Joint Expeditionary Force, n.d., 2023, 2024, 2025; UK Government, 2021, 2025, 2026). These materials are used to establish the chronology, identify declared objectives and determine documented forms of cooperation. The second group comprises research reports and academic articles addressing the JEF, the organisation of European security and the institutional development of minilateral arrangements (Arnold, 2024; Heiduk & Wilkins, 2024; Hofmann, 2025; Pihlajamaa, 2024). They provide a conceptual foundation and enable critical comparison of official positions with research assessments.

Materials are selected purposively. The analysis includes sources that directly address the research questions, have identifiable authorship or institutional provenance and allow the reported claims to be verified. Publication dates are considered for reports of specific events and decisions, while access dates are recorded for reference webpages. Bilateral agreements between individual states are used as contextual evidence and are not treated as decisions by all JEF participants without explicit documentary confirmation. The study does not claim to provide an exhaustive systematic review of all publications on the JEF.

The principal method is qualitative documentary analysis combined with thematic comparison of the materials. The unit of analysis is a documented statement concerning a JEF task, coordination mechanism, form of participation or practical activity. The analysis is organised around five dimensions: political leadership and coordination; voluntary participation and the predictability of contributions; regional and functional specialisation; coordination with NATO; and mechanisms for partnership with Ukraine.

The analytical procedure involves reconstructing the main stages of the JEF's development, comparing its declared priorities with reports of practical activities and identifying the opportunities and limitations of its organisational model. Political intentions, verified actions and the authors' interpretations are considered separately within each dimension. An announcement of planned participation in an exercise is not treated as evidence that participation occurred, and conducting an activity does not, in itself, demonstrate that the intended security effect was achieved.

An institutional approach is used to explain state roles, participation rules and coordination mechanisms. The concept of defence minilateralism directs attention to the relationship between limited membership, shared tasks and flexible cooperation. However, the JEF's limited membership is not treated as independent evidence of faster decision-making. Conclusions concerning the potential advantages of this framework are assessed against available information on the political and resource conditions governing its activities.

The credibility of interpretations is supported by comparing official documents with research publications and checking that conclusions are consistent with the source material. Repetition of the same report across multiple sources is not regarded as independent corroboration. Where sufficient evidence is unavailable, the relevant claim is identified as an assumption or a future possibility rather than an established finding.

Qualitative scenario analysis is used to examine prospects for the JEF's development. The scenarios are constructed by varying three conditions: political alignment among participating states, resource availability and coordination with NATO. The horizon to 2030 is selected to discuss possible medium-term changes; it does not represent an empirically established transition point or the deadline for a specific programme. The scenarios identify the conditions and observable indicators associated with different development trajectories without assigning probabilities to them.

The study's limitations arise from its reliance on open sources and the lack of access to internal decision-making procedures, operational plans and comprehensive assessments of force readiness. Official communications may emphasise achievements while providing incomplete accounts of implementation difficulties. The available sources allow an examination of the JEF's organisational mechanisms and documented activities but do not provide sufficient grounds for quantifying its combat effectiveness or establishing its independent causal effect on Russia's behaviour. Prospects for the JEF's development and its partnership with Ukraine are treated as conditional assessments dependent on political decisions, resource provision and changes in the security environment.

Results

Origins and Institutional Evolution of the JEF

The establishment of the Joint Expeditionary Force was linked to a British initiative to develop multinational military cooperation. The JEF's institutional development proceeded gradually, from agreement on the overall concept to the establishment of mechanisms for joint activities. The launch of the framework, the expansion of its membership and the development of procedures for employing forces should therefore be considered distinct components of this process.

The multinational JEF framework was launched at the 2014 NATO Wales Summit in the context of NATO's Framework Nations Concept. Its initial participants were the United Kingdom, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway. The 2014 Letter of Intent, the 2015 Foundation Memorandum of Understanding and the 2018 Comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding progressively established the documentary basis for cooperation (Joint Expeditionary Force, n.d.; UK Government, 2021).

Membership expanded alongside institutional development. Finland and Sweden joined the JEF in 2017, followed by Iceland in 2021, bringing the number of participating states to ten. The United Kingdom retained its role as the Framework Nation (Joint Expeditionary Force, n.d.; UK Government, 2021). This sequence demonstrates that the JEF's original membership was not fixed, although future enlargement decisions cannot be inferred solely from previous accessions.

The 2021 JEF Policy Direction marked an important stage in clarifying its tasks. It envisaged a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from training and humanitarian response to crisis management and combat operations. The document also explicitly identified the need to operate below the threshold of conventional armed conflict and to coordinate military instruments with other government mechanisms. This direction was therefore established before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (UK Government, 2021).

After February 2022, JEF activities became more explicitly focused on responding to the Russian threat. The joint leaders' statement of 13 October 2023 identified Russia as the most significant and direct threat to security in the Euro-Atlantic area. It also linked the JEF's development to support for Ukraine, countering hybrid threats and protecting critical infrastructure (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023). This suggests a clarification of political priorities rather than a complete replacement of the original tasks.

In 2023, a ten-year vision for the JEF was agreed, and joint response options aligned with broader NATO defence plans and participating states' national plans were presented. The leaders also agreed to invite Ukraine to observe JEF exercises in 2024–2025 (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023). These decisions demonstrate an expansion of political planning and partnership engagement, but do not, in themselves, establish the effectiveness of their implementation.

Based on the documents examined, three stages of the JEF's institutional evolution are identified for this study. The first, covering 2014–2018, encompasses the formation of its multinational membership and the documentary foundations of cooperation. The second, covering

2019–2021, is characterised by the framework's further development, Iceland's accession and clarification of its policy foundations. The third, extending from 2022 to the study's cut-off date, involves increased regional response activities and deeper engagement with Ukraine. This periodisation is the authors' analytical synthesis rather than an official JEF classification.

The JEF's evolution thus combines continuity in its organisational model with changes in political priorities and practical tasks. Military interoperability remains a foundation for joint activities, while regional response and partnership with Ukraine broaden its applications. Assessing the outcomes of this development requires further examination of coordination mechanisms and specific activities.

The JEF's Organisational Model and Interaction with NATO

The JEF's organisational model combines UK-led coordination with retained national authority over participation in specific activities. Under the 2021 JEF Policy Direction, conducting operations and deploying forces do not require consensus among all participating states. Following consultation, the United Kingdom, as the Framework Nation, may conduct a JEF activity with one or more other participants. Decisions to contribute forces remain sovereign and are taken in accordance with national legal procedures (UK Government, 2021).

This principle of voluntary participation, referred to in this article as opt-in, allows participation to be tailored to a specific task. However, the absence of an obligation to join every activity means that the number of JEF members cannot automatically be equated with the scale of available forces. The practical feasibility of joint action depends on participating states' willingness to provide the necessary resources.

The United Kingdom provides organisational leadership, but its status as the Framework Nation does not confer the right to determine other participants' contributions unilaterally. The combination of central coordination and national control creates a distinctive institutional feature: cooperation procedures can be prepared in advance, while decisions on specific force commitments remain political. Assessments of JEF readiness must therefore consider both the availability of coordination mechanisms and the conditions for activating them.

The JEF has no permanently assigned body of troops. Its model relies on the ability to bring together national forces for specified tasks (UK Government, 2021). This allows contributions to be adapted to the requirements of a particular activity, but also limits the predictability of resource provision. Under this approach, flexibility is an organisational characteristic, whereas the speed and effectiveness of response require assessment through practical examples.

Interaction with NATO constitutes a separate dimension of this model. The 2023 joint statement by JEF leaders reaffirmed the intention to complement Alliance capabilities and national response mechanisms. The envisaged range of tasks covers both situations below the Article 5 threshold and activities during crises or conflicts in coordination with NATO (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023). Specialisation in particular regional threats therefore does not encompass all the JEF's possible functions.

The institutional distinction between these frameworks does not remove the need to coordinate their activities. As Pihlajamaa (2024) notes, states may use the same forces and assets to fulfil JEF and NATO tasks. Resource constraints consequently require coordination of priorities, training plans and potential deployments. Increased JEF activity should therefore also be assessed in terms of its compatibility with states' other defence commitments.

Accordingly, the JEF's contribution to European security depends on the extent to which regional coordination facilitates joint tasks while maintaining coherence with NATO activities. Relevant indicators include the alignment of plans, procedural compatibility, the availability of national contributions and the avoidance of competition for critical resources. The existence of a separate framework alone demonstrates neither duplication nor an effective division of functions.

The JEF's potential advantage therefore lies in its ability to organise activities involving interested states without requiring the participation of its entire membership. The principal limitation of this model is its dependence on specific national decisions and resources. The JEF can thus be understood as a flexible mechanism for regional cooperation whose effectiveness depends on the conditions of its practical application.

The JEF's Geographical Priorities and Regional Specialisation

The JEF's principal geographical priorities are the High North, the North Atlantic and the Baltic region. The 2021 JEF Policy Direction identifies these as the main areas of shared interest among participating states. The document also provides for the possible employment of forces beyond these areas, including in response to humanitarian crises (UK Government, 2021). The JEF's regional focus therefore establishes planning priorities without imposing an absolute geographical restriction on its activities.

Its focus on Northern Europe reflects its membership and the security interests of participating states. For the purposes of analysing the JEF, this area can be understood through the interconnections among maritime communications, critical infrastructure and regional defence requirements. This approach helps explain the prominence of underwater infrastructure protection and maritime coordination among the JEF's practical activities (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023, 2024).

Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively, changed the institutional conditions for regional cooperation: all ten JEF states became Alliance members. As Pihlajamaa (2024) observes, this created more favourable conditions for aligning JEF activities with NATO planning. However, shared membership does not ensure automatic integration. Its practical substance depends on the coordination of tasks, procedures and the use of national resources.

Regional specialisation can facilitate the accumulation of shared experience and preparation for specific scenarios. Nevertheless, geographical proximity does not eliminate differences in national priorities. Assessing cohesion within the JEF requires consideration of which threats participants regard as most pressing and which forces they are prepared to commit to joint activities. A shared regional setting should therefore be regarded as a condition conducive to cooperation, whose effectiveness requires separate verification.

This geographical focus has two implications for partnership with Ukraine. On the one hand, cooperation must take account of the JEF's priority tasks in Northern Europe. On the other, sharing experience in infrastructure protection, unmanned systems and military training does not require identical geographical security conditions (UK Government, 2025). Transferring this experience nevertheless requires adaptation to specific operational environments. Ukraine's different geographical location alone is insufficient grounds for determining the limits of its future partnership with the JEF.

Exercises and the Development of JEF Interoperability

Joint exercises are one mechanism for maintaining JEF interoperability. For a framework that draws on national forces for specific activities, they provide opportunities to practise cooperation among units and headquarters before a crisis occurs. The 2021 JEF Policy Direction identifies regular joint activity, operational-level coordination and a better understanding of the availability of national capabilities as means of improving interoperability (UK Government, 2021).

The TARASSIS series of activities, conducted in September–October 2025, exemplified the practical implementation of this approach. According to the UK Ministry of Defence, it covered Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and the Baltic Sea. More than 1,700 British personnel from the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force participated in joint training with partners. The announcement described TARASSIS as the JEF's largest series of military activities to that date (UK Government, 2025). This personnel figure refers to the British contribution rather than the total number of participants.

The scale and geographical coverage of TARASSIS demonstrate multinational training across several parts of Northern Europe. However, these characteristics do not provide sufficient grounds for conclusions about the level of combat readiness achieved. Such an assessment would require evidence concerning the performance of training tasks, identified shortcomings and subsequent corrective action. In this study, TARASSIS is therefore treated as evidence that joint training took place, while its impact on operational effectiveness remains only partially accessible to external analysis.

The JEF LION series was announced as the next development in exercise activities. The announcement of 5 November 2025 linked its launch to plans for 2026 and coordination with NATO (UK Government, 2025). The joint statement by JEF leaders of 26 March 2026 envisaged active participation by Ukrainian units in the series, alongside further exchanges of tactical and operational experience of modern warfare (UK Government, 2026). These documents confirm the intention to involve Ukraine in joint training, but do not, in themselves, establish that all planned activities were completed.

From an institutional perspective, involving Ukraine in exercises creates an opportunity to combine the rehearsal of joint procedures with the exchange of combat experience. However, assessing such exchanges requires tracing which specific lessons have been incorporated into scenarios, personnel training or staff procedures. In the absence of relevant evidence, it is appropriate to discuss the envisaged cooperation mechanism and its potential rather than a proven influence of Ukrainian experience on JEF planning.

Exercise activities thus provide a practical basis for interaction among participating states and partners. Available sources identify the scale of individual activities and directions for further training. Nevertheless, conclusions about effectiveness should rest on assessments of completed tasks rather than solely on participant numbers, geographical coverage or officially declared objectives.

The JEF and Countering Hybrid Threats

Countering hybrid threats is one area of JEF activity that combines military capabilities with the need for interstate and interagency coordination. This study focuses on threats to critical underwater infrastructure and mechanisms for joint response. Damage to infrastructure is not, in itself, treated as sufficient evidence of a hybrid operation: conclusions about intent, perpetrators and strategic purpose require separate substantiation.

The development of this area can be traced to the 2021 JEF Policy Direction. The document envisaged adaptation to adversary activities below the threshold of conventional armed conflict and the need to combine military instruments with other government mechanisms (UK Government, 2021). The institutional conditions for response therefore include not only the availability of military forces but also the ability to coordinate information, assessments and actions among different actors.

In 2023, following damage to the Balticconnector gas pipeline in the Baltic Sea, the JEF activated a joint response option for the first time to protect critical underwater infrastructure (Joint Expeditionary Force, n.d.). This episode should be distinguished from subsequent NORDIC WARDEN activities. The sequence reflects the development of JEF response practices rather than a single continuous activity.

In June 2024, a further response option was activated under NORDIC WARDEN, drawing on resources from JEF states. According to the Norwegian Armed Forces, the activity involved 28 ships and six aircraft, alongside the exchange of 99 intelligence reports and the tracking of 33 vessels of interest. The assets remained under national command, while the SJFHQ coordinated activities and message exchanges (Forsvaret, 2024).

These figures describe the scale of resource commitments and information exchange. They confirm the practical application of the JEF's coordination model while retaining national command. However, these indicators neither establish the number of incidents prevented nor independently demonstrate the deterrent effect of the activities.

A separate stage involved activating the NORDIC WARDEN monitoring system following damage to the Estlink 2 electricity cable in December 2024. The UK Government's announcement of 6 January 2025 described the use of data to assess vessel-related risks and identify potential threats to underwater infrastructure. Monitoring covered 22 areas of interest, including parts of the English Channel, the North Sea, the Kattegat and the Baltic Sea (UK Government, 2025). In this case, the analysis therefore concerns an information and analytical mechanism supporting response.

The NORDIC WARDEN experience reveals a sequence of interrelated functions: surveillance, information sharing, risk assessment and coordination of potential action. However, detecting suspicious vessel behaviour is not equivalent to establishing involvement in sabotage. Similarly, issuing a warning does not demonstrate that a threat has been eliminated. Distinguishing these functions is necessary to assess the JEF's contribution without overstating outcomes that can be verified through open sources.

For Ukraine, this experience is relevant primarily as an example of organising information exchange and coordination among several states. Its possible application requires consideration of differences between protecting infrastructure during active hostilities and monitoring risks in Northern European maritime areas. The practical value of cooperation therefore lies in comparing and adapting procedures rather than automatically transferring an established model.

Monitoring Russia's "Shadow Fleet" and the Limits of JEF Response

One specific area of JEF activity is monitoring vessels associated with Russia's "shadow fleet". The UK Government's announcement concerning the activation of NORDIC WARDEN in January 2025 directly linked this activity to tracking potential threats to critical underwater infrastructure (UK Government, 2025). For this article, the term "shadow fleet" refers to vessels that official sources associate with transporting Russian oil to circumvent sanctions. This working definition does not imply that all such vessels share identical characteristics or that their involvement in other unlawful activities has been established.

The security implications require a distinction between the sanctions and infrastructure dimensions. The former concerns shipping intended to circumvent restrictions; the latter concerns risks to underwater cables, pipelines and other facilities. A vessel's association with the "shadow fleet" is not independent evidence of its involvement in deliberate infrastructure damage. Assessments of specific incidents must consider established circumstances, the nature of the actions and investigation findings.

Within NORDIC WARDEN, the JEF's role primarily involves supporting situational awareness through monitoring maritime activity, assessing potential risks and issuing warnings to partners. The 2025 official announcement describes the system as an instrument for protection against potential deliberate acts and cases of gross negligence (UK Government, 2025). Its use therefore does not presuppose that every identified threat forms part of an organised hybrid campaign.

In their joint statement of 26 March 2026, JEF leaders reaffirmed their intention to deepen cooperation on threats associated with Russia's "shadow fleet" in the context of countering hybrid influence and activities (UK Government, 2026). The document establishes a political priority but does not, in itself, demonstrate the effectiveness of specific measures or the existence of separate enforcement powers vested in the JEF.

Analysing the response requires distinguishing joint monitoring functions from decisions by competent authorities to check, inspect or detain a vessel. The cited sources do not provide grounds for attributing independent supranational law enforcement or sanctions powers to the JEF. Each instance of coercive action must therefore be examined separately, identifying the state or authority responsible for the decision and its legal basis.

The JEF's documented contribution in this area thus primarily concerns information exchange and coordination. Further assessment of its effectiveness should consider the timeliness

and accuracy of warnings and their use by authorised bodies. The number of vessels tracked indicates the scale of surveillance, but without additional evidence it does not establish the extent to which infrastructure risks or opportunities for sanctions evasion have declined.

Ukraine's Partnership with the JEF: Agreements and Cooperation Mechanisms

Ukraine's cooperation with the JEF is developing through the gradual expansion of agreed forms of engagement. The joint statement by JEF leaders of 13 October 2023 provided for inviting Ukraine to observe exercises in 2024–2025. This step was linked to improving interoperability and developing the capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023). The statement demonstrates an intention to establish this form of engagement but does not, in itself, confirm Ukrainian representatives' participation in every planned activity.

The next stage concerned establishing the Enhanced Partnership. The March 2026 statement by JEF leaders indicates that Ukraine was invited to form this partnership at the 2025 meeting in Oslo (UK Government, 2026). The official announcement of 5 November 2025 recorded its launch at defence minister level. The envisaged areas included training Ukrainian military personnel, protecting critical underwater infrastructure, unmanned systems, military medicine and countering disinformation (UK Government, 2025). The political invitation and subsequent launch should therefore be understood as successive stages.

In March 2026, JEF leaders envisaged active participation by Ukrainian units in the JEF LION exercise series during the year and further exchanges of tactical and operational experience of modern warfare (UK Government, 2026). These provisions specify planned forms of engagement. However, assessing their implementation requires separate reports on completed activities, participants and the outcomes of joint work.

Comparison of the documents reveals an expansion in agreed forms of Ukrainian engagement: from an invitation to observe exercises to a partnership with defined areas of cooperation and planned participation by units. This demonstrates the development of an institutional basis for interaction. Nevertheless, the available evidence does not allow deeper agreements to be equated with the full realisation of all envisaged opportunities.

The partnership entails mutual interests. Ukraine can use joint training to improve interoperability and become familiar with partners' procedures. For JEF states, cooperation creates opportunities to study Ukrainian combat experience. The official announcement launching the partnership explicitly links it to learning lessons from the battlefield and developing innovation (UK Government, 2025). Establishing the actual influence of this experience, however, requires examples of its incorporation into training programmes, procedures or capability development decisions.

Exchanging experience also requires attention to differences between the conditions in which it is acquired and those in which it is applied. Ukrainian practices emerge during intensive hostilities, whereas JEF tasks cover situations ranging from joint training to crisis response. The practical value of a particular solution therefore depends on its suitability for the task, available resources and the organisational conditions of partner states.

The Enhanced Partnership should not automatically be interpreted as granting Ukraine unrestricted access to the headquarters structures, operational planning or intelligence of all JEF states. Each such form of interaction requires separate documentary confirmation. The sources examined support discussion of agreed cooperation areas and planned deeper participation, while maintaining a distinction between partnership opportunities and the outcomes of their implementation.

The development of Ukraine–JEF relations is thus characterised by an expansion of institutionally defined forms of interaction. Their future effectiveness depends on implementing agreements, providing resources and translating exchanges of experience into specific changes in training and the organisation of joint activities.

Priority Areas and Conditions for Deepening the Partnership

Based on the agreed areas of the Enhanced Partnership and the JEF's regional tasks, this study proposes four priorities for further cooperation with Ukraine. These are the authors' recommendations, whose implementation depends on separate agreements, available resources and the parties' needs. Their selection reflects the potential to combine Ukrainian experience with the JEF's practices of multinational coordination (UK Government, 2025, 2026).

The first area is maritime security. Comparing approaches to maritime surveillance, information sharing and the use of uncrewed systems offers potential benefits. Practical outcomes could include jointly developed training scenarios and recommendations on procedural compatibility. However, experience from operations in the Black Sea requires adaptation to conditions in the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic and the High North. Differences in tasks, environmental conditions and the nature of threats limit the direct transferability of particular solutions.

The second area is critical infrastructure protection. Protection of critical underwater infrastructure is a documented area of partnership (UK Government, 2025). Within this scope, cooperation should develop exchanges on risk assessment, early warning and coordination among the military, civilian authorities and infrastructure operators. Broader use of Ukrainian experience in protecting energy and transport facilities can be considered a proposal for further cooperation requiring separate agreement. The expected outcome is the refinement of information-sharing and response procedures that can be tested during joint exercises.

The third area is unmanned systems and countermeasures against them. Cooperation should focus on sharing consolidated operational lessons, identifying training needs and jointly evaluating solutions under agreed conditions. Effectiveness should be linked to specific changes in training programmes or procedures rather than merely the number of meetings held. Necessary conditions include protecting sensitive information, complying with agreed rules for transferring technological information and taking account of Ukraine's own defence requirements.

The fourth area is staff training and the exchange of planning experience. Announced plans for Ukrainian units to participate in JEF LION provide a basis for discussing further forms of joint training (UK Government, 2026). These could include command-post activities, wargaming and joint reviews of completed training tasks. Ukrainian officers' involvement in specific staff procedures should be considered a possible form of cooperation, with its scope determined by agreement between the parties. The expected outcome is a better understanding of partners' procedures and the identification of practical obstacles to cooperation.

A common condition for implementing these priorities is matching expected outcomes to the required commitments of time, personnel and other resources. Ukrainian specialists' participation should be planned with regard to their defence responsibilities. Each activity should have designated responsible participants, a specific output and a method for verifying its use. This approach would distinguish information exchange as a process from the changes it produces in training and joint activities.

Deepening the partnership should therefore be linked to the implementation of specific, mutually beneficial tasks. Its practical value may be reflected in agreed procedures, updated training programmes and the resolution of identified interoperability problems. These proposed benchmarks are criteria for future assessment rather than claims about outcomes already achieved.

Ukraine's Participation Framework and Prospects for JEF Enlargement

Further Ukrainian participation in the JEF requires a distinction between formal status and the substance of practical cooperation. The documents examined from 2025–2026 define engagement through the Enhanced Partnership, which provides for agreed areas of training, experience sharing and cooperation development (UK Government, 2025, 2026). This framework

constitutes the documented basis of relations. The sources used do not establish an agreed procedure for Ukraine to become a JEF participating state.

The JEF's regional orientation provides important context for discussing possible enlargement. Its principal geographical priorities encompass the High North, the North Atlantic and the Baltic region (UK Government, 2021). However, Ukraine's different geographical position does not, in itself, demonstrate that a change in status is impossible. Such a conclusion would require relevant founding provisions or explicit political decisions, which are not presented in the source base examined.

The JEF's history also precludes treating its membership as fixed: Finland, Sweden and Iceland joined after the framework was established (Joint Expeditionary Force, n.d.). Nevertheless, these accessions do not automatically determine the conditions for Ukraine or other partners to join. Each decision would require separate agreement on objectives, expected contributions and implications for organising joint activities.

In this study, the further development of Ukrainian participation is analysed along two dimensions: the substance of available forms of cooperation and the extent of involvement in defining joint tasks. Deeper training cooperation, experience sharing or exercise participation may occur within the partnership. By contrast, involvement in governance and decision-making mechanisms requires separate examination of the relevant agreements. Expanded practical cooperation should therefore not be equated with acquiring the rights of a participating state.

Assessments of possible JEF enlargement must consider both potential benefits and additional coordination requirements. New participants may increase available capabilities and experience while also requiring a broader range of interests to be reconciled. Effects on decision-making speed and operational effectiveness would depend on participation rules, the nature of tasks and resource contributions. An increase in membership therefore cannot be assumed in advance to weaken the JEF.

Nor are there sufficient grounds for asserting that practical partnership always offers greater benefits than formal status. Such a comparison requires clear criteria: access to training and information, involvement in planning, opportunities to influence shared priorities and associated obligations. Without examining these parameters, the superiority of one arrangement over another remains an assumption.

The available documents identify implementation of the Enhanced Partnership as a concrete direction of current Ukraine–JEF cooperation. Any subsequent change in status should be regarded as an open political and institutional question. The absence of a decision on Ukraine's accession in the sources examined demonstrates neither that such a decision is impossible nor that it will eventually be adopted.

The JEF's Place in the Multilevel European Security System

The JEF's place in European security should be understood through its links with national defence mechanisms and multilateral institutions. This approach enables assessment of the framework's specific functions without assigning it the status of an independent foundation for a new security architecture. The 2023 joint leaders' statement identified the JEF as a mechanism complementing NATO and participating states' capabilities (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023).

At the national level, states decide whether to provide forces and resources. Within the JEF, these contributions can be combined to carry out agreed tasks under the coordination of the Framework Nation (UK Government, 2021). Interaction with NATO requires JEF activities to be aligned with broader defence plans. The relationship among these levels therefore has practical substance: it concerns participation decisions, the organisation of joint activities and the compatibility of their tasks with states' other commitments.

In their statement of 26 March 2026, JEF leaders specifically highlighted its role in bridging national and NATO operations and in the transition from crisis to conflict. The document also envisages further harmonisation with Alliance planning (UK Government, 2026). These provisions establish a political vision of the JEF's functions. Assessing their implementation requires determining how plans are aligned, tasks allocated and continuity of action ensured in specific situations.

The examples of exercise activities and maritime infrastructure monitoring examined here demonstrate the use of the JEF to coordinate multinational activities. However, they do not justify generalising conclusions about its effectiveness to all types of crisis. An organisational model suited to information sharing or exercises may require different resources and procedures for sustained deployments or operations during armed conflict.

From an institutional perspective, the relationship between flexibility and coherence is important. Hofmann's (2025) approach to the organisation of European security raises the question of whether multiple frameworks facilitate coordinated efforts or create opportunities to circumvent difficult political negotiations. For the JEF, this requires examining practical links with NATO rather than simply comparing officially declared objectives.

Potential duplication of tasks likewise cannot be assessed solely through similarities in areas of activity. The decisive considerations are whether activities have an agreed division of functions, use compatible procedures and avoid imposing incompatible demands on the same national resources. Pihlajamaa (2024) specifically addresses resource constraints and the need to coordinate the JEF with NATO.

The available materials thus support understanding the JEF as a regional coordination mechanism within a multilevel European security system. Its potential contribution lies in organising agreed actions by interested states and supporting interaction with NATO. The scale of this contribution depends on resource availability, political alignment and verified outcomes of specific activities. Claims that the JEF is becoming the foundation of a new pan-European architecture would exceed the evidence examined in this article.

Conditional Scenarios for JEF Development to 2030

The JEF's prospects depend on participating states' political decisions, the availability of national resources and coordination with NATO. Official documents establish directions for cooperation but do not guarantee specific implementation outcomes (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023; UK Government, 2026). Three conditional scenarios are therefore proposed to assess possible changes to 2030. They are the authors' analytical constructs, based on the JEF's opportunities and limitations examined in this study. No probabilities are assigned to them.

The first scenario is deeper operational cooperation. Its conditions are sustained political leadership, sufficient national contributions and consistent alignment of JEF activities with NATO planning. Under these conditions, joint response mechanisms could be used more regularly, information sharing could improve and exercise findings could be incorporated into subsequent training. For Ukraine, this scenario creates opportunities to expand agreed forms of participation and apply combat experience in joint activities. Indicators could include recurring national contributions, documented procedural changes and the completion of specified partnership tasks.

The second scenario is selective functional specialisation. Under resource constraints, states may concentrate cooperation on specific tasks for which the JEF framework proves most suitable. These could continue to include maritime surveillance, critical underwater infrastructure protection and joint training. This scenario does not necessarily imply a weakening of the JEF: a narrower range of tasks may be accompanied by improvements in their execution. Under these conditions, partnership with Ukraine would develop primarily through specific projects aligned with selected priorities. Indicators would include the concentration of resources in defined areas and limited expansion of other activities.

The third scenario is reduced practical activity. This could arise from divergent political priorities, insufficient resources or the precedence of participating states' other commitments. In such circumstances, political declarations may continue without a corresponding increase in joint activities. For Ukraine, this would mean slower implementation of partnership agreements or fewer opportunities to participate. Indicators could include postponed activities, inconsistent national contributions and a prolonged absence of verified outcomes in announced areas of cooperation.

The proposed scenarios differ primarily in the relationship between political intentions and resource provision. They are not mutually exclusive across all areas of activity: deeper maritime cooperation, for example, could coexist with limited activity elsewhere. Assessing the JEF's development will therefore require observation of specific activities rather than a general characterisation of the framework alone.

Changes in membership numbers are not treated as a defining feature of any scenario. Enlargement does not, in itself, demonstrate stronger capabilities, just as retaining the existing membership does not guarantee sustained effectiveness. The substance of national contributions, the alignment of tasks and the fulfilment of agreements are more important.

The JEF's development to 2030 should therefore be assessed through the fulfilment of specific commitments, sustained resource provision and the practical outcomes of coordination. For Ukraine, a priority could be to formulate joint tasks with designated responsible actors, realistic timeframes and verifiable outcomes. This would allow cooperation to be adjusted to the JEF's actual development trajectory.

Discussion

The analysis explains the JEF's development as a combination of institutional continuity and increasingly specific political priorities. Responses to threats below the threshold of conventional armed conflict were already envisaged in the 2021 policy document (UK Government, 2021). Following Russia's full-scale invasion, the intensity of activities and their explicit focus on the Russian threat changed (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023). The identified changes should therefore be interpreted as the strengthening and practical implementation of previously defined functions. This refines the explanation that this area of activity emerged only after 2022.

The findings are consistent with Arnold's (2024) assessment of the importance of British leadership, flexibility and the JEF's regional specialisation. However, examining participation mechanisms clarifies the nature of this flexibility. It stems from the ability to organise a specific activity without requiring every state to participate, while force contributions remain a national decision. Organisational readiness to coordinate and the actual availability of resources are therefore distinct conditions for joint action. Conclusions about response speed require both conditions to be examined in specific cases.

This distinction supports Pihlajamaa's (2024) caution concerning the relationship between political flexibility and military effectiveness. Voluntary participation allows the composition of forces to be adapted to the task but also limits the predictability of contributions. The use of national resources to fulfil commitments across several frameworks is an additional consideration. Assessments of the JEF should therefore address not only the number of activities conducted but also the compatibility of their resource requirements with states' other defence tasks.

The NORDIC WARDEN case demonstrates the practical combination of joint coordination and retained national command. Information on participating ships and aircraft, message exchanges and vessel tracking describes activities undertaken (Forsvaret, 2024). However, it does not establish the number of incidents prevented or changes in a potential adversary's behaviour. Accordingly, a documented ability to organise surveillance and information sharing is insufficient evidence of an achieved deterrent effect. This distinction is important to avoid overstating the JEF's effectiveness.

Hofmann's (2025) conceptual approach directs attention to how different European security frameworks are coordinated. In the JEF's case, official documents confirm an intention to complement NATO rather than provide a complete account of the practical division of functions (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023; UK Government, 2026). It would therefore be premature, on the basis of the materials examined, to conclude either that institutional integration is complete or that systematic duplication of tasks occurs. Further assessment requires evidence concerning plan alignment, the sequence of response activities and the use of shared resources in specific crises.

The findings are also consistent with Heiduk and Wilkins's (2024) argument that minilateral frameworks do not follow a predetermined development trajectory. For the JEF, this means that deeper cooperation does not necessarily entail expanding membership or transforming into a different type of institution. At the same time, retaining the current membership does not, in itself, guarantee sustained practical contributions. The proposed scenarios reflect this uncertainty and identify indicators of possible changes without assigning calculated probabilities to them.

The analysis of the partnership with Ukraine complements the institutional assessment of the JEF. The documents reflect a gradual expansion of agreed forms of Ukrainian involvement, from an invitation to observe exercises to the establishment of the Enhanced Partnership and planned participation by units (Joint Expeditionary Force, 2023; UK Government, 2025, 2026). This supports the conclusion that the formal basis of cooperation has developed. However, establishing the influence of Ukrainian experience on JEF training requires examples of changes in programmes, procedures or the organisation of activities. Recognition of the value of this experience in a political statement and its actual incorporation into practice should be assessed separately.

The article's contribution lies in combining analysis of the JEF's institutional model with an assessment of documented mechanisms for partnership with Ukraine. Distinguishing political intentions, implemented activities and verified outcomes clarifies the limits of conclusions about the framework's flexibility and effectiveness. The practical significance of this approach lies in identifying verifiable outcomes for joint tasks rather than relying solely on general statements of mutual benefit.

Nevertheless, interpretation is constrained by the nature of the source base. Official documents allow decisions and individual activities to be traced but do not provide full access to implementation assessments. Incorporating research publications broadens the scope for critical comparison but does not eliminate this gap. Further research could combine documentary analysis with interviews with those involved in planning, exercise evaluation materials and comparisons across several response episodes. This would help establish the conditions under which the JEF's organisational flexibility produces practical advantages and identify the outcomes of its partnership with Ukraine.

Conclusions

Analysis of the institutional evolution of the Joint Expeditionary Force identifies the JEF as a regional defence cooperation framework combining British leadership, voluntary national contributions and previously agreed coordination mechanisms. Its development is characterised by the progressive establishment of organisational foundations, clarification of tasks and expansion of practical activities. Responses to threats below the threshold of conventional armed conflict were envisaged before 2022, while Russia's full-scale invasion increased the relevance of this area and sharpened the JEF's focus on the Russian threat.

The JEF's organisational flexibility stems from its ability to conduct specific activities without requiring every state to participate. Decisions on contributing forces and assets nevertheless remain national. This model enables participation to be adapted to a particular task but remains dependent

on political alignment and resource availability. The JEF's limited membership and voluntary participation therefore do not constitute sufficient evidence of faster or more effective responses.

The exercises and NORDIC WARDEN activities examined confirm the practical use of mechanisms for multinational training, surveillance and information sharing. However, the available evidence primarily describes the scale and substance of these activities. It does not provide sufficient grounds for establishing the JEF's independent deterrent effect or the number of threats averted. Its contribution to European security should be assessed through the outcomes of specific activities and their alignment with national tasks and NATO planning.

Ukraine's partnership with the JEF is characterised by an expansion of formally documented and agreed forms of engagement. Its development encompasses invitations to observe exercises, the establishment of the Enhanced Partnership and plans for Ukrainian units to participate in joint training. These decisions provide an institutional basis for cooperation but do not automatically confirm the implementation of all agreements or the incorporation of Ukrainian experience into JEF procedures.

Maritime security, critical infrastructure protection, unmanned systems and staff training are identified as practical priorities for further cooperation. These proposed areas require separate agreement on tasks, resources and effectiveness criteria, taking Ukraine's defence needs into account. Verifiable outcomes could include updated training programmes, agreed procedures and the removal of specific barriers to interoperability. Any potential change in Ukraine's status should be considered separately from deeper practical cooperation.

The study contributes by combining institutional analysis of the JEF with an assessment of mechanisms for partnership with Ukraine and consistently distinguishing political intentions, implemented activities and verified outcomes. The proposed scenarios to 2030 outline possible development trajectories depending on political alignment, resource provision and interaction with NATO. They do not assign probabilities to future events. Further research should focus on assessing the implementation of partnership agreements and comparing specific JEF response episodes.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

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