

Hanging Together or Hanging Separately?

Europe and the Indo-Pacific
in United States-China Rivalry



Edited By
Luis Simón and Daniel Fiott

CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

CSDS IN DEPTH

MAY 2025



BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE

CENTRE FOR SECURITY,
DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF PRIORITISATION: UNDERSTANDING THE TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE INDO-PACIFIC BY LUIS SIMÓN AND ZACK COOPER	9
THE UKRAINE WAR AND THE RISE (AND DECLINE?) OF ADVERSARIAL GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENTS BY LUIS SIMÓN	16
EUROPE'S ROLE IN ALLEVIATING THE "TWO FRONT" PREDICAMENT BY LUIS SIMÓN, DANIEL FIOTT AND OCTAVIAN MANEA	22
CAN EUROPEANS FIGHT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC? THE CASE OF TAIWAN BY LUIS SIMÓN AND TOSHI YOSHIHARA	31
CONCLUSION	43

Abstract

The United States appears to be consistent on the idea that “great power” or “strategic” competition and, more specifically, “competition with China” stands out as its overriding national security priority. Insofar as Trump administration’s strategic approach towards Ukraine and Europe appears to be significantly informed by China and Indo-Pacific-related considerations, the US is operating under the assumption that there is a high-degree of interdependence between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategic dynamics. This CSDS In-Depth Paper tries to make sense of how strategic dynamics in Europe and the Indo-Pacific intersect with each other, what that means for US strategy and the implications for US allies in both regions. The paper offers key US allies such as European states and Australia a pathfinder into how dynamics within and between strategic theatres may play out, and, more importantly, what are the repercussions of these dynamics for key Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific actors such as Australia, Europe, Japan, South Korea and others.

Foreword

As national security practitioners, we often fixate on attempting to “solve” the strategic priority of the day, rather than placing it in its historical context. In stepping back to appreciate the evolving strategic environment, we are reminded of how small our world has become. Notwithstanding technology’s central role, the system of alliances and cooperative partnerships built over hundreds of years of diplomacy have forged strong relationships that have effectively shrunk the globe, bringing nations within reach as never before.

Australia occupies a unique strategic position, balancing a variety of relationships and interdependencies in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Geographically embedded in the Indo-Pacific, but with deep ties to our northern hemisphere allies, Australia’s security environment is defined by strong partnerships and an unwavering commitment to peace in the region.

This report is a timely reminder of the underlying strength of global partnerships, underscoring the requirement for close cooperation across regional groups to address today’s complex strategic challenges. This report exemplifies Australia’s commitment to independent, policy-relevant research that helps chart new directions in a turbulent international environment.

I thank the authors for their insightful analysis, and look forward to future opportunities to collaborate in expanding our collective strategic imagination.



Dr Sheridan Kearnan

First Assistant Secretary Strategic Policy
Department of Defence

Introduction

During his first visit to NATO Headquarters in Brussels on 12 February 2025, United States (US) Defense Secretary, Pete Hegseth, argued that as the US prioritises ‘deterring war with China in the Indo-Pacific’, Europeans would need to ‘lead from the front’ in Europe, and Americans and Europeans should aim for ‘a division of labour that maximises (their) comparative advantages in Europe and the Pacific respectively’¹. Hegseth’s vision underscores the importance of strategic prioritisation in a context of resource scarcity, and echoes critiques of the war in Ukraine as a drag on US financial and defence-industrial resources.² Such thinking stands in sharp contrast with that laid out by the Biden administration, who insisted that in supporting Ukraine the US could derive strategic pay-offs vis-à-vis China. Concretely, by standing up for global norms whenever and wherever they might be challenged, the US and the international community would send a powerful signal that will make Beijing think twice before deciding to violate the sovereignty of another state (e.g. Taiwan), or so said the Biden administration.

It would therefore appear that the Biden and Trump II administrations feature different – even opposite – perspectives on how Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic dynamics intersect in the context of US-China rivalry. President Biden underscored the need to defend global norms, treated Russia and China as a more or less coherent bloc and fostered cross-regional cooperation between US allies in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific. President Trump, for his part, appears to be challenging each of these premises. So far, he has emphasised the need to establish a clear ranking of priorities, with China – and more specifically the challenge posed by China in the Indo-Pacific – coming first, and everything else being secondary or even superfluous. President Trump also appears to reject the logic of treating China and Russia as a bloc, and could even look for wedges between those two powers. Last but not least, it is unclear to what extent the Trump administration may be interested in fostering cooperation between US allies in distant regions (e.g. Europe and Australia) or even within the same region, as he prefers to deal with allies bilaterally. The Biden administration focused on facilitating connections between and within the regions, but it is not yet clear whether the Trump administration prefers to develop more of a “hub and spokes” model.

¹ US Department of Defense, “Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Contact Group (As Delivered)”, 12 February 2025, Brussels (Belgium).

² See Delfeld, A.R. and Colby, E., “Broadening the Base: A Blueprint for Expanding Defense Industrial Capacity”, The Marathon Initiative.

There are, however, two important – even critical – issues the Biden and Trump administrations seem to agree upon. The first is the notion that “great power” or “strategic” competition and, more specifically, “competition with China” stands out as America’s overriding national security priority. Secondly, and relatedly, insofar as Trump’s strategic approach towards Ukraine and Europe appears to be significantly informed by China and Indo Pacific-related considerations, we can safely argue that both administrations operate under the assumption that there is a high-degree of interdependence between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategic dynamics.

This CSDS In-depth Paper tries to make sense of how strategic dynamics in Europe and the Indo-Pacific intersect with each other, what that means for US strategy and the implications for US allies in both regions. The paper offers key US allies such as European states and Australia a pathfinder into how dynamics within and between strategic theatres may play out, and, more importantly, what are the repercussions of these dynamics for key Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific actors such as Australia, Europe, Japan, South Korea and others.

The paper is divided into four distinct chapters. The first chapter seeks to unpack the balance between trade-offs and payoffs as it relates to US and allied strategy towards Europe and the Indo-Pacific. The second chapter zooms in the two sets of adversarial geopolitical alignments that appear to have consolidated on the coattails of the Ukraine war: one structured around China, Russia, North Korea and Iran; the other around the growing partnership between America’s European and Indo-Pacific allies such as Australia, Japan and South Korea. It discusses the rise and consolidation of such adversarial alignments, but also their potential demise and fall, as it relates to the Trump administration’s seeming interest in driving wedges within the so-called authoritarian camp. The third chapter discusses how the need to prioritise the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific has impinged on debates on US defence strategy in Europe, and discusses how Europeans help free up US strategic bandwidth in Europe so as to enable a proper US prioritisation of China without weakening Europe’s deterrence architecture. Finally, taking Australian, Japanese or South Korean efforts to support Ukraine as a point of departure, the fourth chapter adopts a role reversal prism and asks what specific role Europeans could play in the case of a Taiwan war. In the conclusion, we outline some of the main challenges and opportunities ahead for cross-regional cooperation.

The Three Dimensions of Prioritisation: Understanding the Trade-offs between Europe and the Indo-Pacific

By Luis Simón and Zack Cooper

How should the US and its allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific prioritise across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions? Prioritisation is central to any strategy, but today too many experts act as if US strategy must be all or nothing. Some argue that Eurasia now comprises a single region³ and that standing together against Russia in Europe is necessary to deter China in Asia. Others insist that there is little tying the two regions together and that the war in Ukraine is distracting Washington from addressing the long-term systemic challenge posed by Beijing⁴. But instead of arguing over whether the US should prioritise, the right question is how best to do so. Europe and the Indo-Pacific are separate but increasingly interconnected theatres that require prioritisation across three dimensions: time, capabilities and policy areas. In this chapter, each of these inter-related dimensions is considered.

On prioritising across time, addressing Russia's threat to European security, degrading Russian military power and stimulating Europe's remilitarisation can help to set the foundations for a sustainable US prioritisation of the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific. If simultaneous contingencies involve both regions, the paper argues that Washington should be prepared to hold in Europe and shift its main focus to first defeating China. Better integrating European and Indo-Pacific allies into US defence planning can help to square such a two-front predicament. On prioritising with regard to capabilities, the paper argues that Washington should emphasise new capabilities that are China-focused, while leveraging legacy assets to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian aggression. This means creating a mixed force but with a focus on the maritime and air capabilities most needed in the Pacific. Finally, in prioritising areas of competition, Europe may not be a primary military player in a China contingency, but it can still play an important diplomatic, economic and technological role. The US should therefore ensure that its European and Indo-Pacific allies and partners are cooperating on issues ranging from an anti-coercion instrument to diplomatic messaging.

³ Wei, L. "Blinken China Speech to Affirm Beijing as Main U.S. Rival", The Wall Street Journal, 4 May 2022.

⁴ Colby, E. and Skylar Mastro, O. "Ukraine is a Distraction From Taiwan", The Wall Street Journal, 13 February 2022.

Prioritising across time

The war in Ukraine has led to much speculation about whether Europe and the Indo-Pacific constitute a single theatre⁵. Thus far, the imperative of supporting Ukraine's defence seems to have brought US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific closer together⁶. Nonetheless, the fact that stability in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific revolve around the same factor – US military power – underscores the existence of strategic trade-offs between both regions. Russia's underwhelming performance in Ukraine suggests it may not be in a position to overturn the European balance of power anytime soon, let alone the global one. However, Moscow has formidable nuclear capabilities, and can still threaten US allies in Europe with its conventional forces. Beyond Europe, it can continue to act as a strategic spoiler⁷ and undermine US and allied interests across the globe. The US recognises the growing disparity between Russia and China, calling Russia an 'acute threat'⁸, while describing China as the 'pacing challenge'⁹. This puts the Indo-Pacific on a higher level strategically¹⁰. But ultimately, temporal trade-offs depend on whether China and Russia probe or strike simultaneously. The fact that China has opted not to use Russia's war in Ukraine as a window for opportunistic aggression against Taiwan does not mean that Russia would act similarly if the tables were turned.

Determining whether simultaneous aggression in Europe and the Indo-Pacific might occur requires a careful and systematic assessment of the evolving Sino-Russian relationship. The 2022 US National Defense Strategy warns that China and Russia 'could seek to create dilemmas globally for the joint force in the event of US engagement in a crisis or conflict with the other'¹¹. Russian and Chinese views of the war in Ukraine could go a long way in determining the likelihood of them launching simultaneous challenges in each region. China may calculate that a protracted war in Ukraine could push the US to pivot back to Europe¹², undermine transatlantic and Atlantic-Pacific political cohesion and erode America's defence industrial capacity. However, this is by no means a foregone conclusion.

⁵ See Holmes, J. "Europe and East Asia: All Part of the Same 'Theater' for America?", 1945, 9 May 2022; Brands, H. "Defeating Russia is the Best Way for the West to Defend Taiwan", Bloomberg, 31 March 2023; and Mohan, R. "Europe and Asia are not Separate Theatres", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 7 June 2022.

⁶ Legarda, H. "China and Russia Bring NATO and the Indo-Pacific Together", Internationale Politik Quarterly, 14 July 2022.

⁷ Beaulieu, B. and Keil, S. "Russia as Spoiler: Projecting Division in Transatlantic Societies", German Marshall Fund of the United States, No. 23, 2018.

⁸ US Department of Defense, "Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks Remarks in a Fireside Chat at the Special Competitive Studies Project's Virtual and In-Person Global Emerging Technology Summit", 16 September 2022.

⁹ Vergun, D. "China Remains 'Pacing Challenge' for U.S. Pentagon Press Secretary Says", DOD News, 16 November 2021.

¹⁰ Dobbins, J., Shatz, H.J. and Wyne, A. "Russia is a Rouge, Not a Peer: China is a Peer, Not a Rogue", RAND Commentary, 28 January 2019.

¹¹ US Department of Defense, "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America", 27 October 2022.

¹² Charap, S. and Priebe, M. "Avoiding a Long War: US Policy and the Trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict", RAND Commentary, 25 January 2023.

The war could also revive US and allied defence industrial capacity, strengthen a transatlantic/transpacific front against autocratic revisionism and generate important operational lessons for the US and its allies¹³. Ultimately, the critical question of whether the US, China or Russia will benefit or lose more from the war cannot be answered with any degree of certainty.

So far, the war appears to have impacted the Sino-Russian relationship in two main ways. First, it has strengthened ties between Moscow and Beijing¹⁴. Far from backing away from Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping appears to be doubling down¹⁵ by visiting Russia and echoing Moscow's talking points¹⁶. Second, the war appears to have altered the balance within the relationship, underscoring Russia's growing dependence on China for diplomatic support, energy supplies and economic diversification¹⁷. Indeed, the notion that China has all the leverage in the relationship and Russia has become the junior partner is increasingly widespread¹⁸. Some have even argued that China is leveraging its influence over Russia – and supporting its actions in Ukraine – to get Moscow to deplete US national security resources¹⁹. While such considerations may well inform Chinese calculations, we should also avoid falling into the trap of assuming that Russia is completely beholden to China.

If Beijing sees itself as Washington's main competitor, then it should have a strong interest in preserving an amicable relationship with Moscow. The fact that a junior status is antithetical to Russia's foreign policy tradition – let alone Putin's own inclination – raises questions about the sustainability of this model. Conversely, Europeans cannot rule out the possibility of further Russian aggressive behaviour, should a contingency in Asia pull away America's attention. If two simultaneous conflicts occur, the US would likely put Asia first. Washington would work with its European allies to hold a Russian advance while turning its main focus to terminating a conflict with China, before shifting attention and resources back to Russia. The acknowledgment that the Indo-Pacific would likely come first may lead some to reach the conclusion that US force structure should be designed only to deal with China, and China's challenge in the Indo-Pacific more specifically. But as the paper argues below, this logic is problematic.

¹³ Mitre, J. "How the Ukraine War Accelerates the Defense Strategy", War on the Rocks, 21 March 2023.

¹⁴ Ellyatt, H. "Russia and China are Being Driven Together as the Chasm with the West Deepens", CNBC, 21 March 2023.

¹⁵ Sim, D. "Xi, Putin Pledge More Cooperation in 'New Era' of China-Russia Ties", South China Morning Post, 22 March 2023.

¹⁶ Dwoskin, E. "China is Russia's Most Powerful Weapon for Information", The Washington Post, 8 April 2022.

¹⁷ McDonald, J. "Russia's Reliance on China Rises Amid Ukraine Sanctions", Associated Press, 21 March 2023.

¹⁸ Gabuev, A. "China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow into Beijing's Junior Partner", Foreign Affairs, 9 August 2022.

¹⁹ Event, "Winning in Ukraine is Critically Important for Deterring a War in Taiwan", Hudson Institute, 24 April 2023.

Prioritising military capabilities

Just as important as prioritising across time is prioritising across capabilities. After all, a war with Russia in Europe would primarily be a ground conflict with a significant air component²⁰, while a contingency with China in the Indo-Pacific would revolve around allied maritime and air capabilities²¹. The fact that many of the ground forces that the US has parked in Europe are unlikely to be required in a Taiwan contingency suggests that trade-offs can be avoided in certain areas. On the other hand, the debate over how the US should spend its defence dollars highlights important trade-offs regarding the extent to which Washington should prioritise Asia-specific assets over Europe-specific ones. To what extent should the US prioritise fungible assets over theatre-specific ones? Some assets, such as bomber aircraft and nuclear-powered ships, are highly fungible – they can be transferred relatively quickly across theatres. Others, like heavy ground units, are logistically intense and less easily moved. In addition, some assets are moveable but are likely to have more operational impact in one region – such as anti-ship missile launchers, which are more critical in an Indo-Pacific contingency.

Some experts are tempted by the idea that the US should invest in a “global swing force”, while its European and Indo-Pacific allies prioritise in-theatre capabilities and logistics-intensive assets²². From a pure efficiency standpoint, this may make good sense. But it raises questions about the willingness of US allies to trade security for autonomy by accepting a functional division of labour that reinforces their dependence on the US. This dilemma becomes particularly acute as allies worry about being de-prioritised by Washington, or the unlikely but not unimaginable prospect of US abandonment²³. Others argue that Washington’s current approach to Ukraine could be an attractive model moving forward²⁴. The logic is that preparing to fight simultaneous high-intensity wars against two major competitors is far more challenging than preparing to fight one war directly and another indirectly. Thus, the US would provide military and security assistance to European allies and partners but limit the involvement of its own forces in this secondary theatre. Yet it takes time to train and equip other militaries, so this approach could not be implemented overnight. Ukraine was not ready to fight effectively in 2014 – it took years of training and close cooperation to prepare its military appropriately.

²⁰ Mazarr, M.J. “Why American Still Needs Europe: The False Promise of an ‘Asia First’ Approach”, *Foreign Affairs*, 17 April 2023

²¹ Gilli, A. et al. “Strategic Shifts and NATO’s New Strategic Concept”, *NATO Defence College Research Paper*, no. 24, 21 January 2024.

²² Colby, E. and Thomas J. “Don’t Scrap America’s Alliances: Fix Them”, *The National Interest*, 29 June 2016.

²³ Cha, V.D. “Abandonment, Entrapment and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan and Korea”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 44(2) (2000): 261-291.

²⁴ Cohen, R.S. “Ukraine and the New Two War Construct”, *War on the Rocks*, 5 January 2023.

Even if Washington decided to prioritise preparing for one war, there is still the question of whether it should be a war against China or any war involving a great power more generally. The former would require Pacific-centric capabilities, the latter all-purpose war capabilities. Due to Washington's global responsibilities, US force structure will probably strike some balance between the two. The US military's large legacy force will ensure that many existing capabilities (e.g. armoured brigades, artillery, etc.) continue long into the future, even if defence strategists adopt the "divest to invest" logic advocated by some in the past Biden administration²⁵. This implies that the US will remain capable of playing a meaningful strategic role in Europe for decades²⁶. As a result, Europe is likely to count on US capabilities to deter and defend against threats to European security. Beyond this legacy dimension, the US will probably shift its focus towards enabling European operations through command, control and communications, as well as the provision of strategic cover via missile defence, cyber defence and nuclear deterrence. As the 2022 US National Defense Strategy notes, US posture in Europe 'will focus on command and control, fires, and key enablers that complement our NATO Allies' capabilities and strengthen deterrence by increasing combat credibility'²⁷.

Prioritising areas of competition

Although the security domain is important, it is by no means the only area of competition, nor arguably the most important. America's European and Indo-Pacific allies have important roles to play in each other's regions and around the world when it comes to diplomacy, economics, technology, global governance and other issues. Indeed, NATO may not have a major direct role in the Indo-Pacific, but that does not deny the importance of addressing China's actions in the Euro-Atlantic area, the potential value of European cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners or the importance of European engagement in non-military domains. All three will be critical in the years ahead. So just because Europe and the Indo-Pacific do not constitute a single military theatre does not mean that the interdependencies across the regions are unimportant. Beijing's coercive actions against a number of transatlantic allies have helped to consolidate a unified front from NATO. Lithuania has been the top target recently, but Czechia, Canada, the United States and others have all had to deal with various forms of economic coercion, risky military behaviour and political pressure²⁸.

²⁵ Carberry, S. "Budget 2024: Air Force Budget continues Divest to Invest Strategy", National Defense, 14 March 2023.

²⁶ Hoffman, F. "American Defense Priorities After Ukraine", War on the Rocks, 2 January 2023.

²⁷ Op.Cit. "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America".

²⁸ Cha, V. "How to Stop Chinese Coercion: The Case for Collective Resilience", Foreign Affairs, 14 December 2022.

To tackle this challenge, Euro-Atlantic allies should speak with one voice, coordinating closely on China policy in the years ahead. In a Taiwan contingency, European allies would likely be asked to take part in an economic campaign to compel Beijing to cease the use of force²⁹.

European leadership on trade, technology and values will remain critical. The EU, and individual member states, have a central role to play in determining the global economic rules of the road³⁰. Many European players are vital to technological innovation in key sectors, as is the case with the Netherlands on advanced semiconductors. And Europe's support for the rules-based international order and international law plays an important role in setting expectations for behaviour worldwide. Diplomatically, Europe also plays a key role in the Indo-Pacific, and vice versa³¹. Regular political consultations should facilitate a convergence of views between both sets of alliances on Russia, China and their evolving relationship. Ideally, these efforts would result in a collective framework and narrative to navigate such challenges. A shared set of economic responses to coercive practices are needed, building on the EU's anti-coercion instrument, among other initiatives. The G7 has an important role to play in this regard³².

Finally, when it comes to the security domain, there are still many questions left unanswered. To the extent that the European and Indo-Pacific theatres are linked³³, it makes sense for countries to deepen their alignment on defence cooperation³⁴. Even though mutual defence commitments may remain intra-regional, regular consultations on burden-sharing³⁵, force planning and force posture could optimise the allocation of US and allied resources. In particular, the US and its European and Indo-Pacific allies should achieve greater economies of scale and efficiencies in formulating regional strategies, procuring shared capabilities and conducting combined exercises³⁶. This would help to align their strategic approaches.

²⁹ Reynolds, M. and Goodman, M.P. "Deny, Deflect, Deter: Countering China's Economic Coercion", Center for Strategic and International Studies Report, March 2023.

³⁰ Kilcrease, E. "How to Win Friends and Choke China's Chip Supply", War on the Rocks, 6 January 2023.

³¹ Nouwens, V. and Mohan, G. "Europe Eyes the Indo-Pacific, But Now It's Time to Act", War on the Rocks, 24 June 2021.

³² Kim, T. and Simón, L. "Greater Security Cooperation: US Allies in Europe and East Asia", Parameters, 51(2) (2021): 61-71.

³³ Weber, G. and Tam, E. "Moving on After AUKUS: Working with France in the Indo-Pacific", War on the Rocks, 8 August 2022.

³⁴ Simón, L. "Bridging U.S.-Led Alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific: An Inter-Theater Perspective", Center for Strategic and International Studies Policy Brief, 12 May 2022.

³⁵ Laird, R.F. "America Pivots to Asia: Europe Arms It", The Diplomat, 16 August 2013.

³⁶ Siebold, S. "First German Warship in Almost Two Decades Enters South China Sea", Reuters, 15 December 2021.

But what, specifically, might Europe contribute in a Taiwan contingency? The deployment of small numbers of European assets³⁷ is unlikely to shift the military balance in a decisive manner in the Indo-Pacific, even if it may be helpful to the US and its Asian allies. That being said, the provision of certain high-demand, low-density items could be critical, such as undersea capabilities, basing access and intelligence gathering³⁸. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between two Europes: one that will decisively prioritise theatre-specific capabilities to hold the line against Russia, and the other that will complement theatre-specific capabilities with global power-projection ones. In a protracted war, much emphasis would also be placed on resupplying Taiwan³⁹. Europeans could play an important role in this regard by helping to protect vital supply lines, which could be critical to operational success. In addition, Europeans could help to ensure that the US and its regional allies and partners have the munitions, supplies and equipment needed to effectively prosecute a protracted conventional conflict in Asia⁴⁰. All in all, Europe could play an important set of roles in an Indo-Pacific contingency. As such, a strong European signal of commitment to peace and stability in the region could affect Beijing's cost-benefit analysis, and help to contribute to deterrence.

Conclusion

Europe and the Indo-Pacific are by no means the only theatres of importance in the world today. But they are the theatres that draw the bulk of US military attention and capabilities, so the trade-offs between them are particularly difficult. Under Putin, Russia once again presents a direct threat to US allies in Europe. NATO should reinvest in its ability to collectively deter and defend allied territory and populations, which will require the sustained focus of its European members. But the solidarity shown by Japan, Australia and South Korea – not to mention China's tacit support for Russia – underlines how European security is increasingly intertwined with Indo-Pacific dynamics. Moreover, the willingness of some Asian partners to sanction Russia and provide assistance to Ukraine will no doubt spur European debates about taking reciprocal action in the event of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific, particularly one involving Taiwan.

³⁷ Wang, A. "France Sends Warships to South China Sea Ahead of Exercise with US and Japan", South China Morning Post, 19 February 2021.

³⁸ Green, M.J., Hicks, K.H. and Cooper, Z. "Federated Defense in Asia", CSIS Report, December 2014.

³⁹ Brands, H. "Getting Ready for a Long War with China: Dynamics of Protracted Conflict in the Western Pacific", American Enterprise Institute, 25 July 2022.

⁴⁰ Jones, S.G. "The U.S. Defense Industrial Base is Not Prepared for a Possible Conflict with China", CSIS Report.

It is therefore high time to shift the discussion from whether Europe and the Indo-Pacific are interdependent or not to how interdependence in different areas should alter strategic decision-making. Doing so can help to inform decisions about how to strike an appropriate balance between the need to set priorities on the one hand, and the existence of cross-theatre synergies on the other. This chapter has argued that analysts have heaped too much responsibility on the US, without paying adequate attention to how European and Indo-Pacific allies can help alleviate the challenge of strategic simultaneity by stepping up their roles in their respective regions and assisting efforts in each other's regions. To get the mix right, leaders in the US, Europe and the Indo-Pacific should collectively reflect on how best to prioritise across these two regions in terms of time, capabilities and policy areas. This is no easy task, but the time to have these debates is now, before like-minded countries are confronted by a more serious risk of simultaneous two-front contingencies.

The Ukraine War and the Rise (and Decline?) of Adversarial Geopolitical Alignments

By Luis Simón

The war in Ukraine appears to have catalysed the consolidation of two sets of adversarial geopolitical alignments, however loose or imperfect they might be: a pan-Eurasian group of authoritarian powers comprising Russia, China, North Korea and Iran on the one hand; and the growing alignment between the United States and its European and Indo-Pacific allies on the other. The image of two sets of adversarial alignments pitting continental and authoritarian powers against maritime democracies is a powerful one, and is very much in line with the Biden administration's emphasis on revamping US-alliances and stressing the cleavage between democracy and autocracy. However, uncertainty around the Trump administration's commitment to furthering ties between US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific or alleged temptation to drive wedges between China, Russia and North Korea warrants grappling with some fundamental questions⁴¹: 1) How deep and broad are these adversarial geopolitical alignments?; 2) How far do they extend geographically?; and 3) to what extent can they be manipulated?

⁴¹ See Boswink, L., Simón, L., Lanoszka, A. and Meijer, H. "Alliance Networking in Europe and the Indo-Pacific", War on the Rocks, 17 December 2024; Gabuev, A. "Can Trump Split China and Russia?", Foreign Affairs, 6 December 2024; and Kroenig, M. "Can Trump Drive a Wedge Between Russia and North Korea?", Foreign Policy, 11 November 2024.

Not so tight, nor so loose

International security scholars spend much time debating the differences between alliances⁴², alignments, partnerships, non-aggression pacts⁴³, axes, blocs, etc. These and other concepts are typically distinguished on the basis of their depth or cohesion and breadth. Depth alludes to the nature of the parties' commitment to assist each other in the case of an armed attack, their degree of institutionalisation and military integration (or lack thereof). Breadth alludes to whether the ties between two parties are confined to a particular domain, like security, or are broader in scope. How do our two adversarial alignments score in terms of depth and breadth? Starting with the authoritarian powers: the existence of significant frictions within this group is rarely lost on anyone. Sino-Russian suspicions over Central Asia, the Arctic or Mongolia are well known. So are China's worries about the reputational costs that come with being associated with Russia or, for that matter Russia's obsession with eluding a junior partnership status, not least by strengthening its own ties with North Korea⁴⁴, India or Vietnam, all of which are problematic for Beijing⁴⁵. For their part, North Korea and Iran – well aware of Sino-Russian issues – constantly strive to maneuver between Beijing and Moscow to maximise their own leverage.

The authoritarian grouping is indeed characterised by a weak degree of security commitments, institutionalisation and military integration, certainly if compared with the US-led alliance ecosystem. The fact that China and Russia are allergic to integrated military commands – a critical barometer of military integration and cohesion – and that they are not committed to or seem to be preparing to fight together is quite telling⁴⁶. Russia and North Korea – who have recently signed a comprehensive strategic partnership⁴⁷ – are probably an exception, in that they arguably present a higher degree of cohesion (more on this point below). Indeed, one important feature associated with the revisionist powers is that the degree of cooperation between China, Russia, the DPRK and Iran varies substantially across different pairs. General Cavoli, SACEUR, has spoken of a series of interlocking partnerships⁴⁸, which arguably captures better the disparity of links between these powers than the words "axis" or "bloc". With some caveats, it could even be argued that Russia remains the main hub within the revisionist camp when it comes to military cooperation, and China when it comes to economic cooperation.

⁴² Snyder, G.A. *Alliance Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁴³ Lupu, Y. and Poast, P. "Team of Former Rivals: A Multilateral Theory of Non-Aggression Pacts", *Journal of Peace Research*, 53(3) (2016): 344-358

⁴⁴ Cha, V.D. and Kim, E. "The New Russia-North Korea Security Alliance", CSIS Report, 20 June 2024.

⁴⁵ Wintour, P. "China Unnerved by Russia's Growing Ties with North Korea, Claims US Official", *The Guardian*, 24 November 2024.

⁴⁶ Skylar Mastro, O. "Sino-Russian Military Alignment and its Implications for Global Security", *Security Studies*, 33(2) (2024): 254-290.

⁴⁷ Dashdorj, Z. "The Global Ramifications of the Russia-North Korea Pact", *GIS Reports*, 14 January 2025.

⁴⁸ Garamone, J. "U.S. Commander in Europe Says Russia Is a 'Chronic Threat' to World", *US Department of Defence*, 10 April 2024.

The Sino-Russian relationship will likely continue to be characterised by a good dose of tensions and mistrust. But a key takeaway from the Ukraine war is that what unites them is greater than what divides them⁴⁹. Indeed, their shared interest in rolling back US power appears to be animating an alignment that seems to be getting deeper – as evidenced by the scale, scope and frequency of exercises as well as meetings – and broader or more comprehensive – as it encompasses energy, technology, diplomacy, trade and monetary policy⁵⁰. Arguably, the main competitive advantage the US-led alliance ecosystem bears, specifically if compared to the China-Russia partnership, is actually that it is asymmetric. Scholarly research shows that asymmetric alliances tend to last longer and be more cohesive than symmetric ones⁵¹, ultimately because the allies or partners are not constantly looking over each other's shoulder. European and Indo-Pacific allies may worry about mitigating their dependence on the US⁵², but are all aware that there is no security outside the alliance with the US. The same principle does not apply to the Sino-Russian partnership, even though their shared animosity towards the US incentivises them to prevent their frictions from disrupting their collaboration.

In practical terms, this means that the US and its allies can go further in terms not only of extending mutual defence commitments to each other (i.e. alliances) but also of a functional division of labour, operationally, and when it comes to capability development, defence industrial or technological collaboration. Hence their greater degree of integration and institutionalisation⁵³. Importantly, this logic extends beyond the realm of security. Moreover, the fact that this group has the same hub when it comes to security and economic cooperation underscores both the broader reach of their relationship and results in greater cohesion too⁵⁴. In this regard, the spectre of trade and geo-economic frictions between the Trump administration and its allies could damage the cohesion of the US-led alliance ecosystem⁵⁵. Insofar as they all recognise the centrality of the US to their security and way of life, the bond between America's Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific

⁴⁹ Manea, O. "Interview with Andrea Kendall-Taylor", CSDS-SWJ Strategy Debriefs, 7, 9 December 2024.

⁵⁰ See Fong, C. and Merrow, W. "Where the China-Russia Partnership is Headed in Seven Charts and Maps", Council on Foreign Relations, 12 December 2024; "The State of China-Russia Cooperation Over Natural Gas", IISS Strategic Comment, 29(4), February 2023; Phillips, H. "The Rising threat of China and Russia's Deepening Technological Partnership", Stanford International Policy Review, 4 December 2023; Saxena, A. "75 Years of China-Russia Relations: Indeed a 'No Limits' Partnership", ISDP Voices, 27 May 2024; Zuo, M. "China-Russia Trade Inches up as US Sanctions and Payment Issues Strain Growth", South China Morning Post, 18 September 2024; Prokopenko, A. "What are the Limits to Russia's 'Yuanization'?", Carnegie Politika, 27 May 2024; and Midlarsky, M.I. *The Onset of World War* (Routledge, 1988).

⁵¹ Lanoszka, A. *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁵² Simón, L., Lanoszka, A. and Meijer, H. "Nodal Defence: The Changing Structure of U.S. Alliance Systems in Europe and East Asia", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 44(3) (2021): 360-388.

⁵³ Poast, P. "Issue Linkage and International Cooperation: An Empirical Investigation", *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 30(3) (2013): 286-303.

⁵⁴ Cha, V.D. "How Trump Sees Allies and Partners", CSIS Commentary, 18 November 2024.

⁵⁵ Kim, T. and Simón, L. "A Reputation versus Prioritisation Trade-off: Unpacking Allied Perceptions of US Extended Deterrence in Distant Regions", *Security Studies*, 30(5) (2021): 725-760.

allies is stronger than it may appear at first sight. They may indeed have different short-term priorities and even compete over the allocation of US resources⁵⁶. But such differences are tactical in nature. Strategically, they all have a stake in the efficient management of US power. As such, a US focus on Asia and outcompeting China is actually in their collective interest – even that of Europeans. After all, that is where the main threat to America's power base – and the broader economic and security ecosystem formed around it – comes from.

How far do adversarial alignments reach geographically?

The implications of these adversarial alignments surely go beyond the war in Ukraine. Dispersing US resources far and wide is surely in the interests of the revisionist powers. For China, a protracted war in Europe offers an opportunity to haemorrhage US resources and prevent a concentration of overwhelming American power into the decisive theatre. Keeping the US indefinitely mired in subsidiary theatres is certainly a key consideration for Beijing. Indeed, a similar logic suggests China's influence in animating turmoil in the Middle East. Hence the usefulness of partners and proxies. Indeed, a set of interlocking strategic partnerships with Russia, North Korea and Iran allows China to 'gain advantages and avoid disadvantages in chaos'⁵⁷. Russia is similarly aware of the importance of spreading US resources far and wide, not least as it has recently experienced how overfocusing on one front (e.g. Ukraine) can lead to losses elsewhere (e.g. Syria).

When thinking about how far these geopolitical alignments may reach geographically, an interesting perspective might be that of role reversal: how would Russia or, for that matter, America's European allies respond should a local conflict in the Indo-Pacific become internationalised as did the war in Ukraine? Officials and experts have speculated about the new Russia-DPRK alliance being "forged in blood", and allegedly committing Russia to fight side-by-side with North Korea in the event of a Korean peninsula contingency. But caution may be warranted. First, direct military engagement in a hypothetical Korean contingency is a much higher bar for Russia than engaging in Ukraine is for North Korea. The US is not directly involved in the latter, and would most probably be in the former. That means that the costs of engaging in Korea are much higher for Russia than those of engaging in Ukraine are for the DPRK.

⁵⁶ US House Armed Services Committee, "Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli", 10 April 2024.

⁵⁷ Pottinger, M. "China has Crossed Biden's Red Line on Ukraine", *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 April 2024; and Fix, L. and Harris, B. "North Korean Troops in Russia: A Dangerous New Phase in the Ukraine War", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 October 2024.

Moreover, a war in Asia that draws the US offers an opportunity for Russia in Europe, which means that expending too many Russian resources and energies in North East Asia could be a waste. That said, some form of support would probably be unavoidable. In addition to providing equipment, intelligence, and critical war materiel, Russia may also contribute by way of sabotaging South Korean defence industrial plants – which could be used to enable Europe’s own warfighting capabilities – and even provide a direct (token?) military contribution.

A similar, “support but keep your powder dry” logic would probably apply in the event of a China-centric, first island chain contingency, although the pressure for Russia to intervene directly would arguably be lower than in a Korean peninsula contingency. As convincingly argued by Oriana Skylar Mastro⁵⁸, while Russia is systematically assisting China’s challenge to US hegemony in Asia through the provision of high-end military goods, there is little evidence that these two powers are actually preparing to fight together.

When it comes to Europeans, as argued in a recent article with Toshi Yoshihara⁵⁹, five factors would probably determine the likelihood and degree of their engagement in a Taiwan or any other first island chain contingency: context (i.e. whether a war in Asia breaks out in isolation or while there’s another war or credible threat of war in Europe?), length (is the war short or long and protracted?), the nature of US involvement (direct or indirect?), geographical scope (confined to Taiwan’s offshore island or Strait or extends rapidly?) and timing (is it in two years or in ten?). All in all, Europeans are more likely to engage militarily if they are not focused elsewhere, if the conflict becomes protracted, if the US intervenes directly, if the war escalates horizontally beyond the Taiwan Strait, and if the war breaks out in the 2030s.

To what extent can adversarial alignments be manipulated?

International security scholars are paying much attention these days to wedge strategies⁶⁰, namely, a state’s efforts to prevent hostile alignments from forming or disperse those that have formed. Debates on whether the US could or should attempt to drive a wedge between China and Russia – a popular topic amongst Cold War historians⁶¹ – have indeed resurfaced in recent years.

⁵⁸ Op.Cit. “Sino-Russian Military Alignment and its Implications for Global Security”.

⁵⁹ Simón, L. and Yoshihara, T. “Can Europe Fight for Taiwan?”, *War on the Rocks*, 8 January 2025.

⁶⁰ Crawford, T.W. “How to Distance Russia from China”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(3) (2021): 175-194.

⁶¹ Radchenko, S.S. “The Soviets’ Best Friend in Asia: the Mongolian Dimension of the Sino-Soviet Split”, *The Wilson Center, Working Paper*, 42, November 2003.

To be fair, this discussion has evolved significantly, and become much more nuanced and granular⁶². The point is not about a flipping Russia against China, but rather about incrementalism and damage limitation (i.e. minimising the extent of Russia's support to China in certain instances). Some experts may argue that, even with that caveat, it is still naïve to think that the Sino-Russian relationship can be manipulated by the United States⁶³. That any conversation about driving wedges is actually likely to play into Russia's hand (or for that matter China's), and potentially give them an opening to drive wedges both between America and Europe and between America's Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific allies. That is a serious risk indeed.

Yet, since the debate on driving wedges between China and Russia is unlikely to go away anytime soon⁶⁴, it is important to try to scope it. In that spirit, a few considerations might be in order. First, it will be far easier to drive wedges between peripheral and core members of the authoritarian axis (i.e. between DPRK and China, Iran and China or even DPRK and Russia or Iran, than between China and Russia)⁶⁵. Second, other actors are much better positioned to both get a better sense of which elements of the Sino-Russian relationship (if any) are potentially open to manipulation (however modest). India stands out⁶⁶. Third, clarity about the goals of any potential wedge strategy is of the essence. Concretely, the goal should not be to drive China and Russia apart but to pull Russia away from China. Russia is the direct target, because China is the ultimate competitor. Two implications stem from this reasoning. First this idea of getting China to help to get Russia to "behave" – whether in Europe or elsewhere – is naïve at best, and dangerous at worst. Second, any serious US or broader attempt to peel Russia away from China carries high risks for Europeans, as it could entail some form of recognition or accommodation of Russian interests in Europe – or the Middle East. Lastly, any wedging attempt should include coordination or at least consultation among the US and its European and Indo-Pacific partners. Otherwise the risk is that their own alignment will be pulled apart. The US and its allies should therefore leverage their competitive advantage (i.e. a greater degree of cohesion and institutionalisation) to have a permanent exchange of views on how to approach the Sino-Russian partnership. After all, decoupling and dispersing the resources of the US-led ecosystem is in the collective interest of the revisionist axis.

⁶² Lee, E.S. "Countering Chinese and Russian Alliance Wedge Strategies Summary", CNA, 23 June 2022.

⁶³ Radchenko, S. "Driving a Wedge between China and Russia Won't Work", War on the Rocks, 24 August 2021.

⁶⁴ Wang, O. "Will Next US President be Able to Drive a Wedge Between Russia and China?", South China Morning Post, 29 October 2024.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Singh, G.A. "The 'India' Factor in China-Russia Ties", ORF Essay Series, 30 May 2024.

Europe's Role in Alleviating the “Two Front” Predicament

By Luis Simón, Daniel Fiott and Octavian Manea

Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and the Biden administration's significant effort to assist that country's defence – has triggered an intense debate in the United States about how to reconcile the immediate demand to help Kyiv defend itself with the need to focus on the China threat in the Indo-Pacific. This feeds into broader strategic discussions about how the US ought to navigate its so-called “two-front” predicament, and uphold deterrence in Europe and Asia or, should deterrence fail, fight two wars on concurrent or roughly concurrent timelines⁶⁷.

US partners and allies have a direct stake in debates about the “two-front” predicament. Europeans, in particular, cannot afford to think of the two-front predicament as a uniquely American problem. Europe's security and geopolitical architecture is still inextricably linked to US military power. Today, the main threat to the US' “command of the commons” – and to US global military power more broadly – comes from the Indo-Pacific, not Europe. Should Washington fail to meet the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific, the entire architecture built around US military power would collapse. This means that America's prioritisation of China is in the European interest. And this is why the question of how Europeans can contribute to a better management of the two-front predicament is likely to be so central to European strategy and transatlantic relations in the coming years.

Engaging directly with the two-front predicament, and focusing specifically on the military domain, this chapter revolves around the following question: how can Europeans help free up US strategic bandwidth in Europe so as to enable a proper US prioritisation of China without weakening Europe's deterrence architecture? Answering this question, this chapter shows how Europeans can contribute to a better management of the two-front predicament.

⁶⁷ Mitchell, A.W., “A Strategy for Avoiding Two-Front War”, *The National Interest*, 21 August 2021; Mahnken, T.G., “Could America Win a New World War? What It Would Take to Defeat Both China and Russia”, *Foreign Affairs*, 27 October 2022; Simón, L. and Cooper, Z., “Rethinking Tradeoffs Between Europe and the Indo-Pacific”, *War on the Rocks*, 9 May 2023.

Rebalancing Europe?

The question of what Europeans can do to alleviate US military pressure in Europe is inevitably tied to debates about US force posture and defence strategy. To be sure, the imperative of rebalancing to Asia has dominated debates about US force structure and posture for the past decade⁶⁸, and this has created a structural pressure on US military presence in Europe⁶⁹. However, the withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, and an uptick in Russian revisionism – beginning in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and reinforced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – have actually led to an increase in the US' military presence in Europe. Indeed, the US military presence in Europe went up from around 65,000 personnel in 2014 to some 80,000 in 2022⁷⁰, but this number has crept up to 100,000 personnel in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine⁷¹. Much of these increases have gone to NATO's Eastern Flank – with approximately 10,000 US troops stationed in Poland and around 3,000 troops in Romania⁷².

The expansion of the US force posture since Russia's invasion of Ukraine has elicited a number of expert reactions. Some argue that the post-February 2022 increases are insufficient in light of Russia's aggressive behaviour. For instance, Ian Brzezinski and Alexander Vershbow argue for the permanent stationing of substantial NATO combat forces in the frontline states around brigade-size units enabled by ISR, air and missile defence and long range-fires⁷³. Such changes, they contend, would both help strengthen deterrence but also lay the foundations to enable a Ukrainian victory against Russia. More importantly, perhaps, any US retreat into an indirect role could undermine deterrence in Europe⁷⁴. Any US drawdown could make aggression more likely, and this could mean a return to Europe by America, but at a much higher material and security cost (especially should war break out)⁷⁵. Such problems underscore the value of some form of US conventional military presence in Europe.

⁶⁸ See, Flournoy, M. and Davidson, J. "Obama's New Global Posture. The Logic of U.S. Foreign Deployments", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012.

⁶⁹ See, Simón, L. "Understanding US Retrenchment in Europe", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 57(2) (2015): 157-172; Lanoszka, A. and Simón, L. "A Military Drawdown in Germany? US Force Posture in Europe from Trump to Biden", *The Washington Quarterly*, 44(1) (2021): 199-218.

⁷⁰ For an overview see, O'Hanlon, M.E. "Strengthening the US and NATO defense postures in Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine", *Brookings Institution*, 21 June 2022; Holland, E. "Strategic Competition and Basing in Central and Eastern Europe", *Brookings Institution*, February 2023.

⁷¹ Karlin, M. Acting Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans and Capabilities, 1 March 2023.

⁷² Belkin, P., Nelson, R.M. and Welt, C. "Russia's War on Ukraine: U.S. Policy and the Role of Congress", *Congressional Research Service*, January 2023.

⁷³ Brzezinski, I. and Vershbow, A. "Decisive action needed at NATO's Vilnius summit on Ukraine and the completion of Europe", *Atlantic Council*, April 2023.

⁷⁴ See, Lanoszka, A. and Hunzeker, M. *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe*, (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2019); Conley, H.A., et al. "Evaluating Future U.S. Army Force Posture in Europe: Phase II Report", *CSIS*, June 2016.

⁷⁵ For a similar argument in relation to the Middle East see Yoshihara, T. and Holmes, J.R. *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Military Strategy* (Naval Institute Press, 2013).

Alternatively, however, an important number of experts warn that continuing to ramp up US military presence in Europe defies strategic logic, because it undermines the decision to prioritise the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific⁷⁶. Russia's military underperformance in Ukraine lends credibility to this point. In this vein, advocates of a "China first" approach contend that Europeans have enough economic and military resources to deal with the Russian threat with limited US assistance, and that Washington should radically rebalance its forces – including those allocated to fulfil NATO commitments – towards deterring China⁷⁷. But what would this mean precisely? What would a significant retrenchment or near-full withdrawal mean concretely for US force posture and defence strategy in Europe, and for US NATO commitments? On this point, we find different views even amongst those who embrace the "China first" logic.

Raphael Cohen⁷⁸ has advocated for a minimal US military role in Europe, structured around the preservation of the extended nuclear deterrence guarantee, and the adoption of an indirect, supporting role limited to arming European allies so that they can balance against Russian military power by themselves. For their part, Elbridge Colby and Alex Velez-Green – two prominent proponents of the "China First" doctrine and now members of the Trump administration – argue that the US should keep the extended nuclear deterrent and select conventional capabilities in Europe⁷⁹. Frank Hoffman has advocated for a precision-fires and artillery-centric strategy of deterrence by denial, whereby Europeans would provide the bulk of combat forces and be augmented by US strategic enablers⁸⁰. Others, like Colin Wall and John Christianson, warn that Europeans made relative progress in acquiring some of the capabilities suited for permissive military environments (especially airlift) but still show significant shortcomings in enablers like airborne ISR, electronic warfare or suppression of enemy air defences, all of which are critical in light of Russian Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) networks⁸¹. America's provision of such capabilities thus remains essential for the preservation of deterrence in Europe.

⁷⁶ See, Porter, P. "How Europe can defence itself: Washington will soon have to prioritize Taiwan", Unherd, 27 April 2023.

⁷⁷ Similar arguments are made by so-called restrainers or offshore balancers, who contest the very logic of US forward military presence in Eurasia in the first place, and advocate for US retrenchment across the board, and not just in Europe. See, Ashford, E. "Strategies of Restraint. Remaking America's Broken Foreign Policy", Foreign Affairs, September/October 2021 Posen, B.R. Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press); 2014); Mearsheimer, J.J. and Walt, S.M. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy", Foreign Affairs, 95(4) (2016): 70-83.

⁷⁸ Op.Cit., "Ukraine and the New Two War Construct".

⁷⁹ Colby, E.A. and Velez-Green, A. "To avert war with China, the U.S. must prioritize Taiwan over Ukraine", Washington Post, 18 May 2023.

⁸⁰ Op.Cit., "American Defense Priorities after Ukraine".

⁸¹ Wall, C. and Christianson, J. "Europe's Missing Piece: The Case for Air Domain Enablers", CSIS, April 2023. For a discussion of Russian A2/AD capabilities see, Dalsjö, D. and Jonsson, M. "More than Decorative, Less than Decisive: Russian A2/AD Capabilities and NATO", Survival, 63(5) (2021): 169-190; Frühling, S. and Lasconjarias, G. "NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge", Survival, 58(2) (2016): 95-116.

The remainder of our analysis rests on two broad assumptions. The first is that Europeans should prepare for a US approach to force structure and force posture that prioritises the China threat in the Indo-Pacific and deprioritises Europe, regardless of whether current developments in Eastern Europe may hinder or delay that prospect. The second is that Europeans have to either step-up their contribution to deterrence or otherwise put up with more insecurity (the latter being a very likely scenario).

Taking these assumptions as a point of departure, the next section identifies what this means for transatlantic burden-sharing debates in the context of two military-strategic functions critical for the operation of deterrence in Europe: 1) strategic enablers; and 2) a direct contribution to conventional deterrence and defence, especially in and around the front-line.

Europe, in Europe: providing strategic enablers and enhanced deterrence

Strategic enablers are vital to prevailing in war, which is itself a key foundation for credible deterrence. Nuclear weapons remain central in this context, but strategic enablers also relate to state of the art C2, ISR, electronic warfare and cyber-defence capabilities, as well as supremacy over Europe's maritime and air approaches (i.e. to supply and sustain Europe militarily) and a deep defence manufacturing base (to sustain Europe industrially).

We expect the US to continue to play a leading role in the provision of strategic enablers and enhanced deterrence in Europe, for at least three reasons. The first relates to the enormous gap that exists between US and European capabilities, forces and infrastructure in these areas, and to the fact that developing state-of-the-art capabilities in many of these areas requires multiple decades' worth of investments, even though it has become cheaper and easier to develop certain cyber or ISR capabilities. The second is that for Europeans to develop equivalent capabilities jointly would require a level of military integration that has hitherto proved elusive, not least as many countries are not ready to accept European rather than American leadership. Nuclear weapons are the most pertinent example here, despite ongoing debates about a European nuclear umbrella. Third, we should also recognise that even if Europe does invest in sizeable military capabilities it may not have the requisite infrastructural or personnel resources required to sustain them – again, here the US continues to play a key role in the Euro-Atlantic region.

Nevertheless, Europeans should prepare to step up their role when it comes to strategic enablers without undermining the principle of US leadership, which is a precondition for any rebalancing effort in these areas to be strategically credible. The notion that Europeans should contribute to the development of strategic enablers is not new, though. Europeans have in fact been doing so for years, even at the higher end of the spectrum (i.e. nuclear deterrence). Britain and France have their own independent strategic nuclear forces, and a history of trilateral nuclear cooperation with the US, which NATO recognises as a valuable contribution to European security⁸². Moreover, through the nuclear-sharing arrangement, several allies such as Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands host US forward-deployed nuclear weapons on their territory and provide dual capable aircrafts ready to deliver them if warranted. This provides a powerful instrument to prevent nuclear coercion.

Recently, Poland, Denmark, and Germany have expressed their intention to engage in discussions regarding the potential for enhancing the role of the French and UK nuclear umbrellas in the defence of Europe⁸³. While a fully-fledged role for Europe in the area of nuclear weapons is not on the cards⁸⁴, there are ways in which Europeans can step up their contribution to nuclear security. This includes the production of more British and French nuclear submarines and the renewal and strengthening of the US-led nuclear sharing arrangements by ensuring the broadest possible participation. F-35 users could envisage certification for nuclear missions and this could help offset the advantage Russia currently possesses at the level of theatre-level nuclear capabilities. In addition, nuclear-certified F-35s flown by European air forces also free up scarce US Air Force assets useful for nuclear signalling in the Indo-Pacific theatre. France, in particular, could also play a more ambitious role. Short of joining the Nuclear Planning Group, which seems unlikely today, it could nevertheless engage in strengthened consultations through the North Atlantic Council and conceivably take part in joint nuclear exercises with the US or NATO⁸⁵. These exercises could ensure greater coherence between the conventional and nuclear components of NATO's overall deterrence and help showcase the extent to which any conventional shortfalls will entail a greater reliance on nuclear escalation management.

⁸² See, Tertrais, B. "Entente Nucleaire. Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation", BASIC Trident Commission, June 2012. In its official documents, NATO recognises the value of British and French nuclear arsenals: the 2022 Strategic Concept acknowledges that 'the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance'. Similar language is used in the Alliance's 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review which also embraces 'the importance of the independent and unilateral negative security assurances offered by the United States, the United Kingdom and France'.

⁸³ Kayali, L. and Weizman, J. "Poland, Denmark Open to Macron's Nuclear Deterrent Proposal", Politico Europe, 6 March 2025.

⁸⁴ See, Kunz, B. "Switching Umbrellas in Berlin? The Implications of Franco-German Nuclear Cooperation", The Washington Quarterly, 43(3) (2020): 63-77.

⁸⁵ Horowitz, L. and Wachs, L. "France's Nuclear Weapons and Europe", SWP Comment, 2023/C 15, 2023.

Second, if Europeans are to strengthen their capabilities and contribution to upholding deterrence in Europe, they should expand their presence and influence within NATO's Command and Control (C2) architecture. For example, Europeans could take on greater responsibility for NATO's joint operational (Naples, Norfolk, Brunssum) and component commands (land, air, sea), with four out of six currently falling under US command. However, any effort to expand Europe's influence in NATO's C2 architecture should respect the overarching principle of US leadership, embodied in the position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Two reasons stand out in this regard. First, US extended nuclear deterrence guarantees across the Euro-Atlantic region – and US strategic cover more broadly – would become less credible if the United States were to yield the position of SACEUR, especially as SACEUR is also a theatre-level nuclear force commander. Relinquishing command authority to another ally could not be reconciled with the US' nuclear command and control structures or its commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Second, it would be very difficult for Europeans to agree to be under the permanent military command of any other European country in a NATO context. Taking those assumptions as a point of departure, any rebalancing within NATO's C2 structure would need to mirror a broader rebalancing in terms of allied contributions to deterrence. In this regard, and in line with the other recommendations offered throughout this essay, such rebalancing would need to give greater space to Britain, France and Germany at the strategic level of C2, and Germany and Poland at the theatre level.

Third, NATO Europe and the European Union (EU) should take on more responsibility for ISR, outer space, cyber-defence and electronic warfare capabilities. European nations are already stepping up investments and capacities to counter space-based threats, as observed in NATO through the Space Operations Centre and the EU's moves to develop space domain awareness capabilities⁸⁶. The EU is also modernising its observation (Copernicus) and positioning (Galileo) satellite constellations, as well as building the next-generation space-based secure communication network (IRIS2)⁸⁷. On cyber-defence and electronic warfare, European investments are being made in early-warning structures (e.g. ENISA) even if the costs of fully digitalising Europe's armed forces is somewhere in the order of US\$ 120 – US\$ 140 billion⁸⁸.

⁸⁶ Fiott, D. "In Orbit: The European Union, Defence and Space Domain Awareness", CSDS Policy Brief, No. 22, July 2023

⁸⁷ Fiott, D. "A Stellar Moment? Spain, Strategy and European Space", Elcano Royal Institute Analysis, February 15, 2023.

⁸⁸ Munich Security Conference/McKinsey, "More European, More Connected and More Capable: Building the European Armed Forces of the Future", Special Report, 2017.

Third, the return of war in Europe has highlighted the need to re-assess the defence industrial base across the Euro-Atlantic region. The experiences of the war on Ukraine show that high-attrition warfare is back in Europe. Euro-Atlantic leaders are rightfully calling for a “war economy” footing that would see Europeans significantly upgrade their defence manufacturing capacities. For Ukraine, this has been largely framed in terms of a need to produce and deliver more ammunition. Over the long-term, however, Europe’s industrial capacity must address the need to produce military capabilities jointly and ensure that European armed forces can rapidly replenish military stocks and inventories. In practice, European countries are already stimulating increased manufacturing through greater equipment orders but more time will be needed for industry to meet demand (i.e. labour and skills, raw materials, delivery times)⁸⁹.

Linked to the broader issue of industrial policy is also all of the ways that Europeans can help manage the proliferation of harmful technologies and investments by Russia and China. In particular, Europe is learning that as it develops its own defence industrial base it cannot afford to haemorrhage industrial capacity to China. This is one of the reasons why the EU has invested in developing semiconductor technologies in Europe, while also curtailing through regulation the roll-out of Chinese 5G technologies and diversifying its industrial resource base. Such decisions highlight Europe’s role in responding to risks from China in the Euro-Atlantic region, which itself is a contribution to the US’ own strategy of tackling the non-military challenges emanating from Beijing⁹⁰. This is also a crucial element of Europe’s ability to alleviate the US’ “two-front” burden.

Direct contribution to conventional deterrence

The second key area of interest is the direct contribution to conventional deterrence and defence in the Euro-Atlantic region. Here is where we see more potential for a serious rebalancing in terms of burden-sharing. In fact, this is in line with the expectations of a US focused primarily on deterring war with China in the Pacific. As US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth made clear in his first visit to NATO Headquarters in Brussels on 12 February 2025, Europeans should increasingly ‘take ownership of conventional security on the continent’. In this sense, the key priority of the transatlantic relationship will be about creating the conditions for ‘empowering Europe to own responsibility for its own security’.

⁸⁹ Fiott, D. “Strategic Competition: Toward a Genuine Step-Change for Europe’s Defense Industry?”, *Economics of Peace and Security Journal*, 18(1) (2023): 7-17.

⁹⁰ See, Simón, L., Desmaele, L. and Becker, J. “Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition with China and the Future of America’s European Strategy”, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15(1) (2021): 90-115.

We would argue, though, that it is important for the US to maintain some sort of role and presence in the conventional space, not just for strategic assurance purposes, which is a persistent structural Eastern European need, but also to manage escalation dynamics, avoid deterrence gaps and avoid entanglement risks. Cha makes the argument that in designing its alliance system in the East Asia, the US interest of keeping certain allies from going rogue was an important consideration⁹¹. A similar logic would apply to contemporary Europe, i.e. preventing European allies from over-reacting to a perceived Russian weakness or signals, and thereby risking entangling the US in a war with Russia at a time when the Indo-Pacific needs to be prioritised.

A European-led effort in conventional deterrence would need to revolve around a Polish-German core within NATO, which would help structure a conventional deterrent posture along the eastern flank. This would also include three other critical nodes: Sweden and Finland in the north, the Baltic states in the east, and Romania in the South, with Ukraine ideally acting as a shield limiting the flank, and the U.K. and France playing important support functions in the north-east/Baltic and south east/Med-Black Sea continuum through upgraded links to the Baltics-Nordics and Romania respectively. The NATO link is key to facilitating the channelling of resources and capabilities from other allies in western and southern Europe to augment those core nodes. By leveraging Polish-German capabilities, Europe should be ready to provide the great majority of Army capabilities while still counting on the logistical depth of the United States. In this regard, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium could focus specifically on theatre enablement and long range strike.

Poland has clearly been doing its homework, with contracts signed for 1,000 K2 and approximately 500 Abrams tanks, 672 K9 howitzers, 3 missile frigates, 32 F35 fighter aircraft and more⁹². However, the single most important factor is for Germany to step up its defense modernisation efforts and for Poland and Germany to step up their military-to-military cooperation, especially in the land and air domains. The announcement by Germany to permanently station 4,000 soldiers in Lithuania is a good start⁹³, but Poland and Germany can also do more together. As a start, a substantially enhanced German presence in the Multinational Corps Northeast (MCNE) would send an important signal of how far Poland and Germany want to provide the conventional force backbone for Europe.

⁹¹ Cha, V. D. *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁹² See, Ministry of Defence of Poland, "Modern military – safe homeland", 1 March 2023.

⁹³ "Germany to station 4,000 troops in Lithuania", Deutsche Welle, 26 June 2023.

Such steps should work in parallel to a substantial increase in the level of high readiness forces – a core need for NATO’s new force model. However, two big obstacles to a more ambitious approach are Germany’s sluggish efforts and divergent threat perceptions⁹⁴. This means that we risk going by default with the next best solution, which is the US replacing Germany. This is not sustainable, especially if and when Russia recovers. Here, there is a political imperative to ensure that Germany and Poland develop a coherent response to defending the eastern flank.

Secondly, any credible European-led effort in conventional deterrence presupposes a substantial shift in the way that Europe invests in skills, capabilities and technologies. In recent years, NATO Allies have indeed enhanced their defence expenditures, with two-thirds now allocating a minimum of 2% of their GDP towards defence⁹⁵. However, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte asserts that the evolving context necessitates boosting defence spending by ‘considerably more than 3 percent’⁹⁶. Without adequate spending on defence, Europeans will not be able to sustain a meaningful contribution to conventional deterrence and it will make it harder for Europeans to ensure deterrence and any military tasks that may arise in geographical regions such as the Indo-Pacific, Africa and the Middle East.

Nevertheless, at the theatre level Europeans can play a more important role in missile defence, especially with collective investments in air defence systems through the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI)⁹⁷ and the joint investments being made via the EU in ballistic missile detection and interception systems.

It also calls for more focus in the EU-NATO relationship on deterrence, with a need for NATO to continue to focus on the defence planning and operational aspects of deterrence and the EU to concentrate on the industrial and technological aspects of deterrence⁹⁸. This could entail establishing a direct connection between the EU’s defence instruments and NATO’s deterrence strategy and defence planning system. NATO has a competitive advantage downstream, when it comes to the operational aspects or the direct implementation of deterrence. Conversely, the EU’s strength lies in its upstream capabilities related to the resourcing and enabling of deterrence.

⁹⁴ Gotkowska, J. “The Zeitenwende and Germany’s Unsatisfactory Stress Test: A View from Poland”, *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 24 February 2023.

⁹⁵ NATO, “Remarks by the NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Security and Defence”, 14 January 2025.

⁹⁶ McLeary, P. and Posaner, J. “Rutte: NATO Spending Target will be ‘Considerably More than 3 Percent’”, *Politico Europe*, 15 February 2025.

⁹⁷ Barrie, D. and Giegerich, B. “European Missile Defence – Right Questions, Unclear Answers?”, *IISS Military Balance Blog*, 10 February 2023.

⁹⁸ See, Simón, L. “The Ukraine War and the Future of the European Union’s security and Defence Policy”, *CSIS*, 30 January 2023.

Its operation of a substantial multiannual budget, its ample competences in areas like research, technology or industry, and its ability to mobilize instruments like the European Defence Fund, the European Investment Bank, European Peace Facility underscore the EU's potential to help finance and generate the technologies, capabilities, and skillsets needed for deterrence.

Finally, no discussion about NATO-EU cooperation is complete without mention of "military mobility" or the ability to transport military capabilities and weapons across the Euro-Atlantic space. Even though the US is working directly with the EU on military mobility today under the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation, far greater investment is required to develop the transport links and nodes required to manoeuvre NATO forces. The regional plans adopted at the Vilnius Summit help to quantify the operational needs of sustaining forward defence in Article 5 scenarios. Yet, even here, significantly greater efforts are required especially given the imperative to develop new ballistic missile, air defence and air force basing infrastructure in Europe.

Can Europeans Fight in the Indo-Pacific? The Case of Taiwan

By Luis Simón and Toshi Yoshihara

As already argued, the geopolitical alignments following the Russian invasion of Ukraine show that Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific defense are increasingly intertwined. On one side, a pan Eurasian axis of authoritarian powers comprising Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea has colluded in armed aggression and territorial conquest in Europe. On the other side, America's Asian allies, including Australia, Japan, and South Korea, have rallied to support Ukraine and have strengthened their institutional ties with NATO⁹⁹. The flow of financial and military aid from Asia to a beleaguered European country would have been unthinkable a few years ago and has spurred fresh thinking about the potential for future inter-theatre cooperation.

One line of thought concerns the prospect of a role reversal: how Europeans could contribute to the Indo-Pacific should a local conflict there become internationalized as did the war in Ukraine. This idea has gained salience as the conditions surrounding the uneasy China-Taiwan standoff continues to deteriorate. The debate in Europe had centred on assistance to Taiwan, and for good reason.

⁹⁹ Simón, L. "NATO Should Think Big About the Indo-Pacific", War on the Rocks, 1 July 2024.

Taiwan is a democratic island nation of systemic importance. It is the most consequential flashpoint in the Sino-American military rivalry, it sits astride critical sea lanes essential to global commerce, it occupies prime real estate in the Western Pacific, and it is a major economic player by virtue of its dominance in the semiconductor supply chain.

Yet this debate has largely avoided serious discussion about Europe's potential hard power role in a possible war over Taiwan. Conventional wisdom has it that Europe's military involvement in a cross-strait conflict would be highly unlikely, and most probably irrelevant. Some of the arguments typically invoked point to Europe's reluctance to confront China, the fact that Europeans have bigger fish to fry, like countering the Russian threat to Eastern Europe, a lack of meaningful military capabilities to bring to the table or, often, all of the above.

But such conventional wisdom is coming under strain. A war over Taiwan that drew in the United States and its Asian allies would likely become a bloody drawn-out fight that geographically expanded beyond the Western Pacific. The strategic repercussions of a local conflict that assumed global characteristics, including fighting on the world's oceans, would likely compel European military involvement in one form or another.

To advance understanding of Europe's potential role in a Taiwan war, this essay lays out the conditions that would incline Europe to assist the island militarily and tests the various direct military contributions that Europe could make to an allied effort. It sets a high bar by focusing on high-end conventional combat, the hardest case among many plausible cross-strait scenarios. It postulates the likely shape of a full-blown Taiwan war to determine the kinds of European forces that could meaningfully participate alongside American and other allied militaries. This essay finds that, far from being strategically sidelined in the event of war, Europe could prudently offer operationally relevant capabilities tailored to the warfighting environment, thereby tipping the scales in favor of an allied campaign.

The debate

In recent years, there has been a flurry of wargames and table-top exercises trying to ascertain the likelihood and possible consequences of a potential People's Republic of China attack on Taiwan¹⁰⁰.

¹⁰⁰ See Pettyjohn, S., Wasser, B. and Dougherty, C. "Dangerous Straits: Wargaming a Future Conflict over Taiwan", CNAS Report, 15 June 2022; Cancian, M.F., Cancian, M. and Heginbotham, E. "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan", CSIS Report, 9 January 2023; and "Table Top Exercise on the Taiwan Strait Crisis", Sasakawa Peace Foundation, September 2024.

These exercises have focused primarily on unpacking alternative scenarios, including blockade, intensified hybrid attacks, seizure of offshore islands, full invasion and so forth – and discussing what they may entail for the US, Japan, Australia and other relevant regional powers. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the implications of a war over Taiwan for Europe¹⁰¹, or Europe's potential role therein. To be sure, some recent analyses have pondered on such factors as the legal basis for a possible NATO response to a war over Taiwan¹⁰², the implications of a Taiwan war for US capability requirements and NATO's posture in Europe or how the EU can help prevent an aggression through diplomatic engagement or sanctions¹⁰³. More recently, others have pointed to Europe's potential contribution to a broader arsenal of democracy¹⁰⁴. As European defence spending continues to pick up, Europeans could indeed help supply munitions, drones and other relevant systems to Taiwan, the US or Japan, and thus indirectly assist a broader allied effort in defence of Taiwan. They could also help with other critical non-military goods such as energy supplies and raw materials, even if the logistical challenges of supplying Taiwan are admittedly much more acute than in Ukraine¹⁰⁵.

Most discussions on Europe's potential contribution to Taiwan's security focus on peacetime and highlight the non-military and indirect nature of European assistance. This is understandable. First, Europeans are divided on China¹⁰⁶. While China's image in Europe may have taken a hit in recent years¹⁰⁷, going to war with Beijing over Taiwan might be a bridge too far for some. Second, European military capabilities are scarce.

In the event of a war over Taiwan such capabilities would likely be devoted to shoring up deterrence in Eastern Europe, especially as the US turns its attention to the Indo-Pacific. In fact, both Washington and its Indo-Pacific allies may actually encourage Europeans to focus on plugging force gaps in Europe so as to free up as much US strategic bandwidth as possible in the Indo-Pacific¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰¹ Le Corre, P. "Europe must prepare militarily and economically for a Taiwan", Nikkei Asia, 25 July 2024.

¹⁰² Lee, J. "NATO and a Taiwan Contingency", NDC Outlook, 15 April 2024

¹⁰³ Kaushal, S. and Suess, J. "The Impact of a Taiwan Strait Crisis on European Defence", RUSI Report, 20 November 2024; Op.Cit. "Two-Theater Tragedy: A Reluctant Europe Cannot Easily Escape a Sino-American War Over Taiwan"; Tercovich, G. "Narratives and Interests: The EU's Position on Taiwan Before and After the War on Ukraine", CSDS Policy Brief, 17 (2023); and "Lessons from Ukraine: Mapping Out EU Sanctions Options for a Taiwan Conflict", ECFR, 1 October 2024.

¹⁰⁴ See Bergmann, M. and Johnstone, C.B. "Europe's Security Role in the Indo-Pacific: Making it Meaningful", CSIS Report, 26 June 2024; and Cook, C. "Reviving the Arsenal of Democracy: Steps for Surging Defense Industrial Capacity", CSIS Report, 14 March 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Suorsa, O.P. and Puri, S. "Why Resupplying Taiwan in a Future War will be Harder Than Resupplying Ukraine", Asia Policy, 19(1) (2024).

¹⁰⁶ Meunier, S. "Divide and Conquer ? China and the Cacophony of Foreign Investment Rules in the EU", Journal of European Public Policy, 21(7) (2014): 996-1016.

¹⁰⁷ Oertel, J. "The New China Consensus: How Europe is Growing Wary of Beijing", ECFR Policy Brief, 7 September 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Colby, E.A. "How We Can Help Ukraine While Genuinely Prioritizing Asia", Time Magazine, 14 July 2023; and Op.Cit. "U.S. Indo-Pacific Power Depends on Restraint in Ukraine".

Undeniably, Europe could wield other coercive tools, such as the threat of sanctions, to influence Beijing's cost-benefit calculation on whether to invade Taiwan. It is also true that Europeans are likely to prioritise threats closer to home, particularly given the salience of Russian revisionism. That said, there are good reasons to believe that the global spillover effects of a cross-strait war could radically shift Europe's calculus. Therefore, it is sensible to examine the conditions that could overturn Europe's prevailing preferences and to assess the kinds of direct military contributions that Europeans could offer in the event of conflict.

Under what conditions would Europe fight for Taiwan?

Arguably, Europe's response to a war over Taiwan would be significantly conditioned by at least five sets of interrelated factors: context, length, the nature of US involvement, geographical scope and timing. The first condition relates to the broader strategic context. Does a war over Taiwan break out in isolation or while there is an ongoing war – or credible threat of war – in Europe? Would Russia use the distraction of a Taiwan war to strike or double down on aggression in Europe? Relatedly, would Russia directly or indirectly assist a Chinese attack on Taiwan? A war in Europe would no doubt significantly constrain the ability of Europeans to engage in a war over Taiwan, at least militarily. Conversely, a multi-theatre or global war could incentivise European military engagement in the Indo-Pacific¹⁰⁹. The second condition is length. Would a war over Taiwan be short or long and protracted¹¹⁰? Indo-Pacific Command's "hellscape" concept and Taiwan's own total defence concept stress the importance of ensuring the war is not quickly lost by disrupting the Chinese military's operational tempo to buy time for a more organised – and collective – response¹¹¹. The longer the war, the higher the chances that European countries will have an opportunity to contribute to Taiwan's defence.

The third condition has to do with the nature of US involvement. Would the United States provide significant but indirect assistance to Taiwan, or would US forces engage the Chinese military directly? This is a critical question for Europeans, who have an alliance with Washington – though confined to the Euro-Atlantic area – and see the security of the US and that of Europe as indivisible. A fourth and critical factor, which is very much related to the nature of US involvement, has to do with the geographic scope of the war.

¹⁰⁹ Harman, J. et al. "Commission on the National Defense Strategy", July 2024.

¹¹⁰ Montgomery, E. and Ouellet, J. "American Defense Planning in the Shadow of Protracted War", War on the Rocks, 18 November 2024.

¹¹¹ Hsi-min, L. and Lee, E. "Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept, Explained", The Diplomat, 3 November 2020.

A contingency confined to Taiwan's offshore islands or main island is not the same as a broader Sino-American war spreading across the first and second island chains, and into the Indian Ocean. The fifth factor relates to when the war breaks out (i.e. whether in 2027 – a date often noted in intelligence and expert estimates¹¹² – or a decade from now). If it is assumed that European military spending will continue on an upward trajectory, Europeans would be in a position to provide a more significant military contribution in 10 years than in two.

There is growing consensus that a great-power war between China and the US would produce profound disruptions that span the globe¹¹³. It is therefore likely that a cross-strait war that drew in the United States, that went long and that expanded beyond Asia would compel European intervention, even if it took place in the next five years and even if Russia menaced on Europe's eastern front. It is thus useful to sketch the attributes of such a war to map out where Europe's contributions might be most efficacious.

What are the pathways?

There are various pathways to a widened conflict over Taiwan that draws in Europe. It is possible that Chinese attempts at coercion short of war either fail and compel Beijing to escalate further, or backfire and spur third-party intervention¹¹⁴. It is also possible that a military assault confined exclusively to Taiwan nevertheless spirals into a wider regional war. Another possibility is that Beijing would start a war that targeted US and allied military forces and bases at the outset to level the playing field and to seize the battlefield initiative¹¹⁵. China may even threaten the American homeland with cyber and other kinetic weapons against critical infrastructure¹¹⁶.

There is no need to render judgments about the likelihood of these pathways in this chapter. The point is that China could find itself in an expanded conflict even if its initial strategy was precisely meant to avoid one. Moreover, our aim is to identify some constant features of an expanded war that would be most relevant to how Europe considers its military role should it choose to help resist Chinese aggression.

¹¹² Robertson, N. "How DC became Obsessed with a Potential 2027 Chinese Invasion of Taiwan", DefenseNews, 7 May 2024.

¹¹³ Krepinevich, A.F. "The Big One: Preparing for a Long War with China", Foreign Affairs, 12 December 2023.

¹¹⁴ Montgomery, E. and Yoshihara, T. "Leaderless, Cut off, and Alone: The Risks to Taiwan in the Wake of Ukraine", War on the Rocks, 5 April 2022.

¹¹⁵ Shugart, T.H. "Deterring the Powerful Enemy: China's Counter-Intervention Capability in a Regional Conflict", CNAS Report, 21 March 2024.

¹¹⁶ VanHerck, G. and Fesler, P. "The U.S. Homeland Stands Unguarded", Wall Street Journal, 28 November 2024.

To fight and win a cross-strait war, Chinese military doctrine specifies three types of campaigns¹¹⁷, namely an air and missile campaign, a blockade and an amphibious invasion against Taiwan. These operations would not necessarily be mutually exclusive. For example, a bombardment and a blockade could precede an invasion. To maximise its chances of success, the Chinese military would seek to seize local command of the air, seas and other domains and deny those same commons to the enemy¹¹⁸. Its land-based missiles, airpower and naval forces as well as a thicket of modern air and missile defence systems would support a range of operations against the island. The Chinese military's A2/AD network would be densest and most lethal to hostile forces around Taiwan, the Taiwan Strait and the island's surrounding air and sea spaces¹¹⁹.

In a hypothesised regional war against the United States and its allies, the Chinese military would mount a forward defence by targeting regional bases along the first and second island chains and rendering the approaches to mainland China hazardous to the enemy¹²⁰. Chinese military doctrine and the large-scale deployment of long-range strike capabilities suggest that Chinese military commanders would conduct air and missile bombardment against major bases, such as Kadena airbase, Yokosuka naval base and facilities located on Guam¹²¹. Shore-based airpower, submarines and land-based anti-ship missiles would contest access to and operations from the Philippine Sea¹²². Defenders in southern China, on Hainan Island and on the man-made Spratly Island bases would threaten passage through and movement in the South China Sea. There is strong evidence that Beijing would challenge allied undersea operations there¹²³.

Beyond the Western Pacific, the mostly likely theatre of hostile contact would be the Indian Ocean, where the Chinese navy has kept a rotating naval flotilla since 2008, and where China maintains a permanent military base in Djibouti¹²⁴. The Chinese navy's globalising posture and its doctrinal intent to stage a global presence suggest that horizontal escalation that leads to a multi-theatre conflict is a distinct possibility¹²⁵. Mike McDevitt suggests that if a cross-strait war involved the US, the conflict would likely escalate rapidly

¹¹⁷ Wuthnow, J., et al. *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan* (National Defense University, 2022).

¹¹⁸ Garafola, C.L. "The PLA Airborne Corps in a Joint Island Landing Campaign", *US Naval War College China Maritime Report*, 19 (2022).

¹¹⁹ Thomas, J., Stillion, J. and Rehman, I. "Hard Roc 2.0: Taiwan and Deterrence through Protraction", *CSBA Report*, (2014).

¹²⁰ Shugart, T. "Has China been Practicing Preemptive Missile Strikes Against U.S. Bases?", *War on the Rocks*, 6 February 2017.

¹²¹ Komori, Y. "Expert on China's PLA Says It's Mulling First Strike on Bases in Japan", *Japan Forward*, 15 May 2023.

¹²² Rittenhouse Green, B. and Talmadge, C. "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan", *International Security*, 47(1) (2022): 7-45.

¹²³ Clark, B. and Walton, T.A. "Fighting into the Bastions: Getting Noisier to Sustain the US Undersea Advantage", *Hudson Institute Report*, 2 June 2023.

¹²⁴ Blasko, D.J. "Recent Changes in the PLA Navy's Gulf of Aden Deployment Pattern", *US Naval War College*, 13 August 2024.

¹²⁵ Yoshihara, T. and Bianchi, J. "Seizing on Weakness: Allied Strategy for Competing with China's Globalizing Military", *CSBA Report*, (2021); and Martinson, R.D. "Deciphering China's 'World-class' Naval Ambitions", *US Naval Institute*, 146(8), August 2020.

into a global naval war, with the US Navy and Chinese navy clashing wherever they met around the world¹²⁶. As Aaron Friedberg further observes, the Chinese navy's relative weakness in the Indian Ocean might tempt it to "get in the first blow" to knock the United States off balance and thereby compel US forces to divert resources from the central front in the Pacific to that secondary theatre¹²⁷. China's military campaigns would be waged by the largest navy and the largest conventional missile force in the world¹²⁸, the largest air force in the region and a massive industrial base located near the frontlines. China thus possesses the mass to inflict heavy damage at the outset, to "flood the zone" in certain areas close to the mainland, to sustain operations and to absorb significant losses without these triggering strategic paralysis.

Implications for Europe

A widened conflict of the kind depicted above would shape European decisions about how they could make the best use of their scarce military resources. Consider, for illustrative purposes, how the war would intersect with high-end combat systems, such as fighters and warships, that Europe could contribute to the fight. The immediate zone of conflict surrounding Taiwan and the Western Pacific area that covers US and allied bases on the first and second island chains would be highly contested. China's A2/AD network would thus place an extraordinary premium on survivability. Generally, large-signature platforms, such as major surface combatants and non-stealthy airframes, would be vulnerable when operating within range of China's reconnaissance-strike complex. This explains arguments for keeping high-value American assets, such as carrier strike groups, east of the second island chain¹²⁹.

Even stealthy F-35 fighters, although expected to be widely available in European air forces, might not be suitable for such a deadly environment. Owing to their limited range, the F-35s would rely excessively on regional airbases located well inside the Chinese military's weapons engagement zone, and on vulnerable large-signature aerial refueling tankers to conduct operations. In the widened war hypothesised here, China will have attacked and possibly knocked out major airbases along the first island chain upon

¹²⁶ McDevitt, M.A. "China's Navy Will be the World's Largest in 2035", US Naval Institute, 146(2), February 2020.

¹²⁷ Friedberg, A.L. "What's at Stake in the Indo-Pacific", US Naval Institute, 147(10), October 2021.

¹²⁸ "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress", Congressional Research Service, 16 August 2024; and Cohn, J. et al. "Leveling the playing Field: Reintroducing U.S. Theater-Range Missiles in a Post-INF World", CSBA Report, (2019).

¹²⁹ Brands, H. and Cooper, Z. "Dilemmas of Deterrence: The United States' Smart New Strategy has Six Daunting Trade-offs", CSIS Report, 12 March 2024.

which F-35s would depend¹³⁰. Moreover, the fighters might be badly needed in Europe and are already in service among allies in the Indo-Pacific¹³¹. Extra-regional theatres like the Indian Ocean, by contrast, are largely beyond the reach of China's land-based A2/AD network, although the Chinese navy maintains a presence there and theatre-range missiles, such as the DF-26¹³², could in theory threaten shipping in the Bay of Bengal. As such, Europe's carrier strike groups and surface action groups could be quite effective in performing escort missions and conducting interdiction and anti-submarine warfare operations across wide swathes of the Indian Ocean, a major thoroughfare for allied power projection, and a region where France and the UK have overseas territories and bases¹³³.

Beyond exquisite systems, Europe would likely be well positioned to offer lower-end capabilities tailored to the operational environment. For example, special operations forces, missile-armed fast attack craft and other tactical units designed to better elude China's sensors could be employed for the close-in fight along the straits and narrow seas of the first island chain. The bottom line is that the warfighting scene, both near and far from China, offers parameters for Europeans to make informed decisions about what platforms to rule out and what capabilities could be offered to join the fight.

Submarines as the most decisive European contribution

Among the various exquisite systems that Europe could offer, its undersea capabilities, particularly nuclear-powered attack submarines and, to a lesser extent, diesel-electric attack submarines stand out. As shown in the previous chapter, European navies boast a combined fleet of 66 submarines.

The mobility, range, and endurance of nuclear-powered attack submarines would allow Britain and France to swing the attack boats from European waters to the Indo-Pacific, even if the persistence of the Russian threat in the North Atlantic may limit their availability. It is also worth noting that the weeks it would take for these submarines to reach their stations in Asia, if they began their transits in Europe, mean that the warring sides have likely settled into a protracted war. A network of homeports and support facilities, especially

¹³⁰ Heginbotham, E. et al. "The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017", RAND Report, 14 September 2015

¹³¹ Mazarr, M.J. et al. "U.S. Major Combat Operations in the Indo-Pacific", RAND Report, 16 May 2023.

¹³² US Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", Report to Congress, (2023).

¹³³ Rogers, J. and Simón, L. "The Status and Location of the Military Installations of the Member States of the EU and their Potential Role for the European Security and Defence Policy", European Parliament Report, February 2009.

those located outside the Chinese military's weapons engagement zone, such as Hawaii and Diego Garcia, would be available to European nuclear-powered attack submarines. Although Guam and Yokosuka would almost certainly come under attack in a widened conflict, they may offer some degree of support in wartime. Moreover, starting in 2027, Australia's HMAS Stirling will be home to Submarine Rotational Force-West¹³⁴, comprising forward-staged US and UK nuclear-powered attack submarines. In other words, leaning more on submarines would build on existing infrastructure and ongoing initiatives, thereby reducing duplication of effort.

The submarines' greatest strength is their survivability, which will be especially superior to their naval surface and air counterparts for the foreseeable future. Aside from the most contested areas, such as China's coastal waters, they will likely be able to operate with near impunity inside the Chinese military's weapons engagement zone. Short of some revolutionary breakthrough that rendered the seas transparent, competent undersea forces will be very hard to find¹³⁵. European submarines would exploit China's longstanding structural weakness in anti-submarine warfare – one that, admittedly, China has begun to address¹³⁶. Nevertheless, American and allied undersea forces will likely be unmatched for at least another generation. Indeed, the promise of enduring underwater superiority was one reason behind Australia's big bet on a nuclear-powered submarine force under the AUKUS framework¹³⁷.

Perhaps most importantly, European nuclear-powered attack submarines would meet two urgent American needs. First, the US military, including its submarine force, has descended into a capacity trough that will run through the remainder of the 2020s into the early 2030s¹³⁸.

Owing to bad political decisions, fiscal constraints and an atrophied industrial base, the US Navy has been unable to maintain the production rate necessary to meet its force structure target¹³⁹. As such, the silent service will field an older and smaller force than it has ever done in decades. Tellingly, although the US Navy estimates that it needs 66 submarines to fulfil its global missions, it currently has about 49.

¹³⁴ Australian Ministry of Defence, "Submarine Rotational Force – West", 2 October 2024.

¹³⁵ Gilli, A. et al. "Climate Change and Military Power : Hunting for Submarines in the Warming Ocean", *Texas National Security Review*, 7(2) (2024): 16-41.

¹³⁶ Tirk, E. and Salisbury, D. "PLAN Anti-Submarine Warfare Aircraft – Sensors, Weapons and Operational Concepts", *US Naval War College China Maritime Report*, 38 (2024); and Gale, A. "The Era of Total U.S. Submarine Dominance Over China is Ending", *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2023.

¹³⁷ Babbage, R. "Deterrence and Alliance Power: Why the AUKUS Submarines Matter and How They Can be Delivered", *Lowy Institute*, 29 July 2024.

¹³⁸ Eaglen, M. and Coyne, H. "The 2020s Tri-Service Modernization Crunch", *American Enterprise Institute*, March 2021.

¹³⁹ Hendrix, J. "Sunk at the Pier: Crisis in the American Submarine Industrial Base", *American Affairs*, 13(2) (2024).

This fleet is expected to dip further to 47 nuclear-powered attack submarines in 2030¹⁴⁰ – the bottom of the trough – before clawing its way back to 50 boats in 2032 and rising slowly to 64 or 66 submarines three decades hence. Relatedly, and critically, US allies in the region thus far lack this capability.

Yet, such an undersized fleet will be expected to shoulder a heavy burden in war. American submarines will be tasked to hunt down China's aircraft carriers and surface combatants as well as the amphibious ships crossing the strait, conduct strikes ashore against various land targets, trail Chinese strategic ballistic missile submarines and sink enemy submarines. Those that have exhausted their weapons would need to return to port to rearm, taking them temporarily out of action. Despite their tactical superiority, losses will likely be inevitable. Hence, given the enormous demand for submarines, allied contributions through nuclear-powered submarines would do much to offset the operational load. Although the Japanese military boasts a fleet of modern submarines and would play an important role in a cross-strait conflict, its diesel boats lack the kinds of qualities, such as endurance, that nuclear-powered submarines possess. European attack submarines would thus add flexibility and options – in addition to numbers – to the coalition campaign.

Second, as noted above, a war over Taiwan could quickly spread to the Indian Ocean. Given the decline in numbers, it is unclear the extent to which the US military can adequately deal with a secondary front where China might be inclined to employ its expeditionary maritime forces as a diversion. Moreover, US decision-makers have not had to think seriously about waging a multi-theatre war since the height of the Cold War and it is doubtful that they have relearned the atrophied skills of fighting a globalised conflict against a peer adversary. In short, the US will likely need all the help it can get in the undersea domain. If European submarines were deployed to the Indo-Pacific in a major conventional conflict, they could be used to defend the wide perimeter along the exterior lines of the first island chain.

They could keep open the main access routes into the theatre of operations for US and allied forces, while bottling up the Chinese navy within the first island chain. Acting as gatekeepers, European submarines could intercept Chinese surface and submarine forces seeking to break out of the South China Sea through the Malacca Strait in the west, the Luzon Strait in the east and everywhere in between.

¹⁴⁰ "Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine (Pillar 1) Project: Background and Issues for Congress", Congressional Research Service, 10 October 2024.

The attack boats could also play offence. Armed with long-range land-attack cruise missiles, the European nuclear-powered submarines could launch strikes against Chinese targets, including its bases in the South China Sea, from stand-off distances. To balk attempts by China to open a new diversionary front, the boats could sever the lines of communication connecting China's expeditionary forces in the Indian Ocean from their home bases on the mainland, thereby isolating them from reinforcements and resupply. The submarines could also hold at risk China's access to and use of the critical sea lanes so essential to fuelling its economic engine. Indeed, such threats would exploit a deeply embedded Chinese psychological fear of being cut-off from the seas¹⁴¹. Some of these potential missions, such as enemy interdiction across the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, would be capital-intensive, requiring mass to fulfil. As such, Europe's contribution should conform to the number of attack boats that it could realistically deploy to the Indo-Pacific. Assume that European navies follow a four-to-one availability ratio, meaning that the routine cycle of deployment, extended overhaul and workups requires four submarines to keep one ready for action at any given time¹⁴². Assume also that submarines going through exercises, training and inspections can be surged in an emergency. If so, then a combined Anglo-French fleet could in theory dispatch three to four nuclear-powered attack submarines to Asian waters in wartime.

This may appear to be a limited contribution that would be inadequate to tilt the correlation of forces, but several choices would sustain the operational value of nuclear-powered European submarines. First, the attack boats could fight alongside surface fleets in clearing the seas of threats. Current and future European warships could also combine their firepower with undersea forces to launch cruise missile salvos against land targets. There is precedent for this: HMS Triumph, a Trafalgar-class nuclear-powered submarine, together with the US Navy's two destroyers, two fast-attack submarines and a cruise-missile-armed submarine, fired more than 120 missiles to take down Libya's integrated air defences during Operation Odyssey Dawn in 2011¹⁴³.

Second, British and French nuclear-powered submarines could be augmented by diesel-powered and air independent-powered hunter-killer submarines in service with other European navies¹⁴⁴. Although less versatile than their nuclear brethren, demand for such boats from other oceangoing navies suggests that they would be tactically relevant in places like the Indian Ocean.

¹⁴¹ Pillsbury, M. "China's Seven Fears When it Comes to America", Real Clear Defense, 11 February 2015.

¹⁴² Allison, G. "Britain Finally has Attack Submarine at Sea After 100 Days", UK Defence Journal, 7 October 2024.

¹⁴³ Foggo, J. "A Promise Kept", US Naval Institute, 138(6), June 2012.

¹⁴⁴ Waters, C. "Blue Water Submarines: Capabilities and Requirements", European Security & Defence, 9 April 2024.

Indeed, the French Scorpène, the German Type 214 and the Spanish S80 submarines are being – or have been – considered by the Australian, Canadian and Indian navies¹⁴⁵. To compensate for the long transit times necessary to reach the Asian theatre of operations, these boats could be forward staged on a rotational basis at bases in Western Australia and Diego Garcia where facilities are equipped to support them. Thus, a core of Anglo-French nuclear-powered attack submarines combined with other European diesel-electric attack submarines could generate the numbers necessary to make a difference in wartime.

Third, insofar as numbers define the mission, the European nuclear-powered submarines could be dedicated to chokepoint defence around geographically confined bottlenecks like those along the Indonesian archipelago. A more sedentary gatekeeping role would ease the demand for more hulls in the water and might be better suited for a small fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, if it were to fight without the help of other assets. In this regard, even a few exquisite systems could have an outsized impact on the enemy's calculations by dissuading them from assuming certain risks in the first place¹⁴⁶. Fears of being ambushed by lurking European submarines could convince China's navy not to transit certain straits or to take time-consuming detours.

Whatever roles that British and French nuclear-powered submarines might play, from perimeter defence to strikes ashore, these submarines would likely help advance allied burden-sharing. They could mitigate or neutralise threats that, if unaddressed, could divert and tie up scarce American resources. Put another way, European boats would enable the United States to concentrate its efforts on the main fight near Taiwan and on other priority missions elsewhere. If the US military were heavily committed in the central front around Taiwan, easing painful trade-offs between theatres and between sub-theatres may be one of the most salutary contributions that Europe could make to this hypothetical war effort.

¹⁴⁵ Sheftalovich, Z. "Why Australia Wanted Out of its French Submarine Deal", Politico, 16 September 2021; Yeon Eom, T. "Canada's New Submarine Project and the Geopolitical Stakes of the Arctic and Indo-Pacific", Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 23 October 2024; and Alex Philip, S. "Germany, Spain await Key Decision as Navy Seeks Proven Tech for Submarines to Stay Underwater Longer", The Print, 9 October 2024.

¹⁴⁶ Montgomery, E., Sharp, T. and Hacker, T. "Quality has a Quality all its Own: The Virtual Attrition Value of Superior-Performance Weapons", War on the Rocks, 19 June 2024.

Follow the logic

Although there is a strategic and operational logic for Europe to make a meaningful military contribution to a war over Taiwan, the diversion of scarce resources, such as nuclear-powered submarines, will likely be a significant undertaking, requiring forethought and preparations. Defence planners would need to consider calculations of acceptable risk on the home front should submarines be surged to Asia. After all, Russia still boasts a formidable undersea force that Europe would need to contend with, especially if Moscow were to exploit the opportunities presented by an America engaged in large-scale fighting in Asia. Access agreements and arrangements with allies and partners would need to be established in advance of a crisis or war. Indeed, routine peacetime submarine deployments to the Indo-Pacific might help to shore up deterrence. Europe would need to devote intellectual capital to develop concepts of operations, roles and missions, a proper division of labour, interoperability with allied undersea forces, water space management to avoid fratricide between allied submarines operating in close quarters and so forth. Should Europe heed this logic, then it should get to work now.

Conclusion

In this In-Depth Paper it has been argued that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions are separate but increasingly interconnected theatres that require increased prioritisation across time, capabilities and competition. However, these interlinkages across theatres increasingly pose geopolitical questions including how China-US-Russia-Europe relations will evolve. The current US administration appears, on the face of things, to be seeking to reset and improve its relations with Russia. In this respect, it could be said that the US is trying to drive a wedge between Russia and China. While peace negotiations over Ukraine are still in their infancy, it remains unclear to what extent the US will offer Russia an opportunity to build Russian-American ties in exchange for Moscow to lessen its partnership with Beijing. Such a move by Washington would not be without its consequences for European security, not least because enhanced US-Russia ties may fan the flames of transatlantic disunity. China, for its part, would likely seek to exploit such disunity. Such “wedging” dynamics would only strengthen the interlinkages between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres, but in a more hostile and unpredictable manner.

In this context, the paper has shown that if the US is to prioritise the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific, and if indeed Washington succeeds in rebalancing its relationship with Russia, there needs nevertheless to be a decisive response to Russian military power over the longer-term. This is consistent with the Trump administration's emphasis on trusting and verifying, and peace through strength. In essence, even if we were to assume that a more positive US-Russia relationship is achievable in the short or medium term, NATO and Europeans would still need to bolster their defences. Through a greater European effort to remilitarise, Russia can be deterred (at least conventionally) and this can take away the bulk of the pressure on the US to underwrite European security. Being militarily responsive to Russian aggression in Europe – now and in the future – would also stave-off any Chinese attempt to aggravate tensions in Ukraine in order to avoid a sustained focus on the Indo-Pacific.

What is more, a stronger Europe, if it can be achieved, would be better protected against Chinese overtures or wedging strategies, even though a stronger Europe could also decide to align with Beijing on certain policy issues (e.g. trade and renewables). Additionally, this paper has also shown how Europe could play a military and economic role in the case of any war over Taiwan and other contingencies, as European involvement would be necessary one way or another. Here, it has been argued that Europe can play a military role in the supply of ammunition and equipment, as well as using its military capabilities such as nuclear submarines and drones in specific ways. Europe also has a strong hand to play in the area of economic sanctions. Should we see an improvement in US-Russia relations, this need not necessarily affect the US and European allies working together in the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, should a US-Russia rapprochement fail – and it may well do – it is worth recalling that Russia is not completely beholden to China. Indeed, the US and its allies should not give the growing revisionist partners any oxygen in exploiting strategic space and time across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. It has been shown in this paper that the broader geopolitical alignment underway between China, Russia, North Korea and Iran is based on a weak level of military integration, especially when compared to the US' alliances. There is still mistrust between this revisionist alignment of states, especially between Russia and China. It has been shown that Russia faces its own important military trade-offs between the European and Asian theatres, with Moscow not so easily being able to play any decisive military role in case of a military contingency in the Indo-Pacific. That said, there are ways in which China and Russia are able to spoil and challenge US interests and alliances.

Still, the main competitive advantage of the US-led alliance ecosystem is the degree of operational, technological and military cooperation.

However, even in the case that military contingencies do occur simultaneously across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, the US needs to be able to -contribute to- holding Europe while first defeating China. There is no question that the US would put “Asia first” in this scenario, rather than Europe. Here, Europeans should be ultimately responsible for conventional defence in Europe, but Europeans can also play an important diplomatic, economic and technological role in the Indo-Pacific (not least in relation to any war over Taiwan through supply provisions). This paper has shown that China, Russia, North Korea and Iran have a vested interest in forcing the US to disperse its forces globally and to implicate Washington in prolonged military engagements in places such as Europe and the Middle East. This paper is less hopeful that any US-led attempt to wedge the revisionist alignment can succeed in the short-term, but we have underlined the importance of ensuring that other states are not brought into their geopolitical orbit. Here, working with countries such as India may prove a shrewd way of lowering any revisionist efforts, although this would have its own unique challenges.

What are some of the practical implications of this paper’s analysis? First, that US allies need to be better integrated into US defence planning. For many US partners and allies this means moving early on access agreements and arrangements in preparation for any war or crisis (which itself would have a deterrence effect). This paper has outlined the need for European allies to better prepare for a variety of military contingencies in the Indo-Pacific, which will require planning for available capabilities and the provision of military equipment in times of war, in addition to other European resources. All of this will require far more planning communication across allies and partners in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. Second, the US and its allies need to focus on capabilities that can both defeat Russian aggression and respond to China. Europe, in particular, will have to increase its military productive capacities and capabilities if it is to play a significant and sustained role in the Indo-Pacific and any military contingency. Third, beyond the US, allies and partners need to strengthen the sinews of their economic, military, diplomatic and technological cooperation. At the very least, partners across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions need to speak with one voice on matters related to China. Fourth, there is a need to better understand the possibilities and limitations inherent in the growing revisionist alignment.

Acknowledgements

The paper condenses the main findings of a two-year project funded by the Australian Department of Defence under its Strategic Policy Grants Program (SPGP). This project has been developed by CSDS in cooperation with USSC, SPGP and CSIS. It has benefitted from expert workshops in Brussels and Sydney, which brought together officials and experts from Europe, Australia, Japan, South Korea and NATO. We thank all the experts that were present at the meetings, and which have subsequently provided comments on this draft, in particular Benedetta Berti, Antonio Calcara, Victor Cha, Peter Dean, Michael Green, Angus Lapsley, Peter Lee, Alexander Mattelaer, Ashley Townshend and others that supported the meetings and logistics of the project including CSDS staff Paula Cantero and Natalia Martín. Previous versions of some of the chapters in this paper have appeared in War on the Rocks and the Marathon Initiative. We thank those two outlets for allowing us to reprint and Ryan Evans, Wess A. Mitchell and Elbridge Colby for their comments.

This research was supported by the Australian Government through a grant by the Department of Defence. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or the Department of Defence.

Authors

Luis Simón



Director, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy - VUB

Daniel Fiott



Head, Defence and Statecraft Programme, CSDS – VUB

Octavian Manea



Researcher, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy - VUB

Zack Cooper



Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

Toshi Yoshihara



Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

The Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the key contemporary security and diplomatic challenges of the 21st century – and their impact on Europe – while reaching out to the policy community that will ultimately need to handle such challenges. Our expertise in security studies will seek to establish comprehensive theoretical and policy coverage of strategic competition and its impact on Europe, whilst paying particular attention to the Transatlantic relationship and the wider Indo-Pacific region. Diplomacy as a field of study will be treated broadly and comparatively to encompass traditional statecraft and foreign policy analysis, as well as public, economic and cultural diplomacy.

www.brussels-school.be/research/security-diplomacy-and-strategy



BRUSSELS
SCHOOL OF
GOVERNANCE

The Brussels School of Governance is an alliance between the Institute for European Studies (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Vesalius College.

Visitor's address:
Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Mailing address:
Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
info_bsog@vub.be
www.brussels-school.be