

# Europe's Taiwan Dilemma

Lessons from a Tabletop Exercise

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# Abstract

This CSDS In-Depth Paper presents findings from a CSDS tabletop exercise conducted in November 2025, examining European decision-making during a simulated Taiwan Strait crisis compounded by Russian coercion in Europe. Unlike most Taiwan-focused exercises, the simulation centred on Europe's strategic constraints: limited military capacity, economic exposure to China, institutional fragmentation and reliance on US extended deterrence. Across three phases (2028–2029), the exercise demonstrated that a Taiwan contingency rapidly becomes a two-front dilemma for Europe, as US forces prioritise the Indo-Pacific while Europe must deter Russian opportunism. The exercise revealed a dynamic of progressive European entanglement, shifting from initial caution to structural involvement through industrial mobilisation, logistics, sanctions and sustainment. Its central insight is that Europe's primary contribution to a Taiwan war lies not in expeditionary combat power, but in contributing to the industrial and logistical supply lines of a US-led coalition, binding the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres into an interdependent strategic system.

This CSDS In-Depth Paper is part of a broader “Taiwan Strait Update” series focusing on European perspectives on Taiwan and China's strategic adjustment in Europe.

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# Executive Summary

In early November 2025, CSDS organised a Tabletop Exercise (TTX) to stress-test European political, economic and strategic decision-making in the face of an escalating crisis in the Taiwan Strait, compounded by simultaneous Russian coercion in Europe. Unlike most Taiwan-focused exercises, which prioritise United States (US) or Indo-Pacific allied perspectives, this exercise placed Europe's dilemmas at the centre of the simulation: limited military capacity, deep economic exposure to China, institutional fragmentation and growing dependence on US extended deterrence.

The exercise unfolded across three sequential phases (2028–2029):

- Move 1 – “The Quarantine” (October 2028): People's Republic of China (PRC) “grey-zone” coercion framed as a tax compliance regime and parallel Russian military posturing in Belarus.
- Move 2 – “The Blockade” (November 2028–January 2029): escalation to a formal naval blockade with a US counter-blockade, and coordinated hybrid attacks affecting Europe and the Red Sea.
- Move 3 – “Open Conflict” (March 2029): the PRC “Punishment Operation” (kinetic strikes and limited amphibious seizures) starts, Russia conducts airspace violations and submarine surges in the Euro-Atlantic region and there is an activation of the US “Hellscape” denial concept.

Across all three Moves, the exercise confirmed a central structural reality: a Taiwan crisis very rapidly becomes a two-front strategic dilemma for Europe. As US military resources shift toward the Indo-Pacific, Europe is forced simultaneously to:

1. help sustain a high-intensity war in Asia; and,
2. preserve credible deterrence against Russia in the Euro-Atlantic theatre. As the US downsizes its position in the European theatre, Russia becomes Europe's overarching strategic concern. NATO's bandwidth is entirely consumed by the need to deter Russian opportunism on the Eastern and Northern flanks. The crisis forced SACEUR to plan for the defence of Europe without significant US reinforcement.

A defining dynamic of the exercise was progressive European entanglement. In the early stages, European reactions were cautious, legalistic and economically risk-averse. During Move 1, internal divisions and supply-chain dependence on China constrained the European Union's (EU) willingness to impose economic costs. During Move 2, as the blockade tightened and hybrid attacks hit European infrastructure, Europe became operationally and politically implicated despite continued reluctance to confront China directly. By Move 3, Europe was structurally embedded

in the conflict – not through forward military projection into the Pacific, but through industrial mobilisation, logistics, sanctions and strategic sustainment of US and allied operations.

This trajectory produced the exercise’s central strategic insight: Europe’s main contribution to a Taiwan war is not expeditionary combat power, but industrial sustainment and logistical depth. Europe increasingly functions as the “arsenal and artery” of a US-led coalition fighting in the decisive theatre, while shouldering primary responsibility for deterrence in its own theatre.

This logic crystallised in the “Atlantic Corridor” concept: a two-way transatlantic logistics and industrial lifeline enabling Europe to supply US and Indo-Pacific forces while ensuring that Europe itself remains defensible if Russia escalates. Over time, the corridor becomes more than a supply route – it becomes a mechanism of progressive economic and strategic entanglement, binding the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres into an interdependent industrial and operational ecosystem.

In this respect, the exercise revealed a historical parallel with the Lend-Lease relationship of 1941/42: indirect support, followed by deep industrial integration and, ultimately, unavoidable strategic involvement. As in that earlier period, Europe initially seeks insulation from direct belligerence but is gradually drawn into the systemic logic of great power war by the very act of sustaining the frontline.

The TTX therefore demonstrates that Europe cannot remain a distant observer in a Taiwan conflict. Even without deploying major combat forces to East Asia, Europe becomes a central strategic actor through production, logistics, economic warfare and the defence of the Atlantic lifeline. The exercise shows that indirect involvement is not a form of neutrality – it is a pathway to structured belligerence.



# Introduction

## The Changing Strategic Balance Around Taiwan

The security environment in the Taiwan Strait is changing in concrete and measurable ways. China is rapidly expanding and modernising its military capabilities, has increased the frequency and scale of coercive military activity around Taiwan and hardened its political stance on reunification. It has also deepened its strategic cooperation with Russia. These developments directly affect the risk of a Taiwan crisis and the form that such a crisis might take. They also carry direct implications for Europe, whose economic interests, security posture, alliance commitments and burden-sharing considerations, and normative positions are all tightly linked to cross-strait stability.

For decades, cross-strait stability rested on a tacit understanding: China refrained from using force to alter Taiwan's de facto autonomy, while Taiwan avoided formal independence. This understanding is eroding. Beijing now combines sustained military pressure, economic coercion, diplomatic isolation and legal-political narratives to steadily narrow Taiwan's room for manoeuvre without crossing the formal threshold of war.

China's military expansion relevant to a Taiwan contingency is broad and multi-dimensional:

- The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has greatly enhanced its missile arsenal – not only conventional precision-guided and ballistic, cruise and hypersonic missiles, but also the logistical and command structures that support coordinated missile and air-sea campaigns. This raises the risk of a high-intensity strike phase aimed at degrading Taiwanese, US and allied airpower, air defence, logistic infrastructure, ports and command-and-control (C2).
- The PLA Navy (PLAN) continues to deploy modern surface combatants and amphibious-assault assets. The PLAN's growing fleet of destroyers, missile-armed ships, amphibious-capable and even aircraft carrier vessels increases China's capacity to enforce blockades, conduct sea-control operations and mount landing operations.
- Amphibious assault remains an integral component of China's contingency plans. The PLA is preparing for the possibility of landing operations against Taiwan – a scenario that remains among the most serious military threats to the island.

Should deterrence fail, the PLA could employ a mix of blockade, air- and missile-bombardment and amphibious assault – rather than relying solely on a single mode of attack.<sup>1</sup> The lessons drawn from recent conflicts, especially in Europe, suggest

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

that a blockade or quarantine – rather than a full-scale amphibious invasion – could be the critical first step. Such a move would aim to isolate Taiwan quickly, cut off supplies (including military supplies) and reduce the capability of third parties to intervene or resupply the island.

Beyond conventional military tools, China has been preparing other instruments to increase the coercive pressure on Taiwan:<sup>2</sup>

- Strategic doctrine analysed by some think-tanks suggests that in a Taiwan conflict, the PLA might combine conventional warfighting with threats of escalation, potentially including nuclear signalling. This could be used early in a coercive campaign to deter third-party intervention.
- A blockade or quarantine does not necessarily require a full-scale amphibious invasion. It can be implemented through naval and air exclusion zones, maritime interdiction, mines, a demonstration of missile bombardment and the control or interruption of maritime and undersea supply routes. This strategic flexibility gives China a coercive option that stops short of immediate invasion but still exerts massive pressure on Taiwan.
- The scenario of early coercion (blockade plus missile/cyber pressure) may be especially attractive to China if it judges that an amphibious operation would be too costly or risky. However, like all strategies that rely solely on coercion, this leaves the decision to capitulate in the hands of one's adversary.

In short, the PRC's military build-up around Taiwan now gives it a credible spectrum of coercive and military options (from blockade and blockade-plus-strike, to full-scale invasion) rather than only a limited capacity for show-of-force purposes. That range complicates decisions by external actors, including Europe.

### **Europe's Taiwan puzzles**

Given that China now has a credible and diversified toolbox to coerce or attack Taiwan, Europe's exposure becomes more acute and more complex:

- a blockade or limited war, not just a full-scale invasion, could severely disrupt global supply chains, especially in critical sectors like semiconductors, and would also jeopardise maritime trade through the Taiwan Strait;
- the coercive use of missile, air, naval and cyber tools means any crisis could rapidly affect global shipping, energy flows and critical infrastructure – areas where Europe has vested economic interests;
- because the PLA's capabilities allow for ambiguity and graduated coercion, a Taiwan crisis could unfold without a clear "invasion" moment, making it harder for external actors to decide when and how to react; and,

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<sup>2</sup> Montgomery E. and Yoshihara T., "Conquering Taiwan by Other Means: China's Expanding Coercive Options", *The Washington Quarterly*, 48(1) (Spring 2025): 143-163.



- the window for effective intervention could be narrow. Rapid escalation, blockade and pressure on Taiwan's ability to resist would test the readiness and political will of third-party states and alliances.

These trends reinforce the need for a focused, Europe-oriented TTX – not only to imagine worst-case invasion scenarios, but also to model blockade/quarantine, hybrid-warfare and coercion scenarios, and to help European policymakers and institutions think through timely, coherent responses.

### **Europe's current approach to Taiwan**

Europe's current approach to the Taiwan Strait has focused primarily on prevention through signalling and engagement, rather than on concrete crisis preparedness. European governments and EU institutions now explicitly recognise that stability in the Taiwan Strait directly affects European economic security, given Taiwan's dominant position in advanced semiconductor production and its nodal position within global maritime trade routes. A major conflict would also likely require the US to focus substantial military resources on the Indo-Pacific, thereby increasing Europe's responsibility for its own defence and for sustaining support to Ukraine.

Politically, Europe has expanded its engagement with Taiwan through parliamentary diplomacy, high-level visits and sectoral cooperation. The EU now reacts systematically to major PLA exercises with statements affirming the strategic importance of peace and stability in the Strait. Its language has become firmer, explicitly opposing any unilateral change to the *status quo* by force or coercion. The EU has also pushed back against Beijing's legal narratives on UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 and defended Taiwan's participation in selected international organisations.

European naval presence in the region has also increased, and EU responses to hybrid activities, such as the damage to submarine cables near Taiwan, have been framed as part of a wider effort to protect global critical infrastructure.

However, Europe still lacks a shared understanding of how it would respond in practice to a Taiwan crisis<sup>3</sup>. There is no agreed European interpretation of what legally constitutes a blockade or quarantine, and no coordinated planning for different escalation scenarios. National positions remain fragmented, reflecting differences in exposure to China, dependence on US security guarantees and domestic political priorities.

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<sup>3</sup> Tercovich G. and Comerma L., "Europe's Eyes on Taiwan: Strategic Ties, Different Perspectives", *CSDS In-Depth Paper* 2025/16.

# Chapter One

## The Tabletop Exercise: Contribution, Objectives and Methodology

Multiple TTXs on Taiwan have been conducted by leading US, Japanese and Taiwanese think tanks and research institutes. These exercises have generated detailed analyses of escalation dynamics, military options and the behaviour of the principal actors, particularly China and the US. They have also examined the role of key US allies in the Indo-Pacific, including Japan, Australia, South Korea and the Philippines. Scenarios covered include grey-zone coercion, air and maritime identification zones, blockade versus quarantine operations, limited war and broader regional conflict.

Several exercises have also addressed the risk of simultaneous contingencies, for example, a Korean Peninsula crisis or Russian escalation in Europe coinciding with a Taiwan conflict.<sup>4</sup> The central concern is that multiple crises would stretch US decision-making and military resources and thereby affect allied deterrence commitments globally.

Particularly relevant exercises have been conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Taiwan's School of Economics and Political Science and the Atlantic Council.<sup>5</sup> The present TTX does not seek to duplicate this scenario work. It explicitly builds on the existing literature and uses established escalation pathways as a baseline.

A small number of recent TTXs have focused specifically on Europe. An exercise by the European Values Foundation examined simultaneous crises in Eastern Europe and Taiwan. While analytically useful, this design placed most of the players' attention on the European theatre and Russia, leaving Europe's Taiwan-specific policy dilemmas less fully explored.

Another exercise by the Ditchley Foundation analysed European reactions to Chinese cyber-enabled economic coercion against Taiwan, with a particular focus on Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) supplies and the question of US convoy operations. That game concentrated on four actors: China, Taiwan, the US and Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Garlauskas M., Gilbert L. and Imai K., "A rising nuclear double-threat in East Asia: Insights from our Guardian Tiger I and II tabletop exercises", *Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security* (May 2025) as well as the one of Janda J., Jerzewski M., Kot O., Toman D., Málek O., "EU and NATO Decision-Making During a Potential Joint Russian and Chinese Strategic Escalation", *European Values Center for Security Policy* (April 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Cancian M., Cancian M. and Heginbotham E., "Lights out? Wargaming a Chinese Blockade of Taiwan", *Centre for Strategic and International Studies* (July 2025); Dougherty C., Matuschak J. and Hunter R., "The Poison Frog Strategy. Preventing a Chinese Fait Accompli Against Taiwanese Islands", *Center for a New American Security* (2021); "Table Top Exercise (TTX) on the Taiwan Strait Crisis", *Sasakawa Peace Foundation* (September 2024).

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## The distinctive contribution of this TTX is its systematic focus on European political, institutional and strategic dilemmas in a Taiwan contingency

The distinctive contribution of this TTX is its systematic focus on European political, institutional and strategic dilemmas in a Taiwan contingency. Rather than generating new military scenarios, it examines:

- Europe’s economic exposure to China and vulnerability to economic coercion;
- US expectations of European diplomatic, economic and potentially military support;
- the impact of a Taiwan war on US military availability in Europe;
- Europe’s vulnerability to supply-chain disruptions, especially in semiconductors and maritime trade;
- normative pressures linked to democracy and international law; and,
- diplomatic pressure from Taiwan and from like-minded Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan and Australia.

The TTX places particular emphasis on EU and NATO decision-making dynamics, including:

- simulated deliberations in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the European Council;
- the roles of the EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), the President of the European Commission and the NATO Secretary General;
- US influence efforts through NATO and bilateral diplomacy;
- Chinese influence and coercion directed at European capitals; and,
- coordination with Japan, Taiwan, Australia and South Korea.

To prevent the European theatre from dominating the exercise, Russia is assumed to engage in intensified signalling and pressure but not to launch a full-scale attack against NATO during the game.

## **TTX objectives**

The TTX is designed to move Europe from political awareness to operational and decision-making preparedness. Its objectives are to:

- improve European understanding of realistic escalation pathways;
- identify coordination gaps between EU institutions, member states, NATO and Indo-Pacific partners;
- test how early political consensus might be built under time pressure;
- assess the strategic, economic and normative consequences of different European policy choices; and,
- contribute to the development of a more structured European approach to the Taiwan Strait, potentially in the form of a future EU Taiwan Playbook.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Participants were selected from a pool of subject-matter experts drawn from academia, think-tanks and policy institutions. Their combined expertise in EU and NATO decision-making, Indo-Pacific security, coercion dynamics and crisis management ensured that player choices reflected informed strategic reasoning rather than political preferences or national advocacy. Although participants simulated institutional and national actors, all decisions were based on expert judgement regarding how those actors would likely behave under crisis conditions; no participant acted under an official mandate.

To preserve analytical value and avoid procedural paralysis, not every EU or NATO member state was represented individually. At the same time, the analysis consciously acknowledges that, in real decision-making, unanimity remains required for many EU and NATO measures and that the risk of national vetoes is therefore structurally embedded.

The game included representation from ten key European capitals – Germany, France, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK) – plus the US, alongside simulations of the EU institutions and NATO leadership. Key Indo-Pacific partners were also represented, including Japan, Australia, South Korea and Taiwan itself. Their inclusion reflected deepening Europe-Indo-Pacific strategic and economic links, growing cooperation on supply-chain resilience and critical technologies and the expectations placed on Europe by like-minded partners in a major Indo-Pacific contingency.

Participants were organised into three cells to simulate multi-actor crisis competition:

**Table 1: Three Cells**

Cell	Composition	Function
Blue Cell (Europe)	EU: HR/VP, Commission, member states.  NATO: Secretary General, SACEUR, NAC.  Key Capitals: DE, FR, PL, RO, SE, FI, NL, IT, ES, UK.	Represented political-strategic, economic-financial and military-intelligence dimensions of European power.
Green Cell (Allies)	Indo-Pacific Partners: US, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan.	Focused on aligning narratives, securing European support and managing the Asian theatre.
Red Cell (Opposing)	Authoritarian Axis: the PRC, Russia.	Simulated a simplified command structure to challenge “Blue”/“Green” responses via coercion and hybrid warfare.

### *Interaction with Indo-Pacific Partners*

The TTX was designed not only to test Europe’s internal decision-making under crisis conditions but also to examine how European institutions and capitals engage Indo-Pacific partners during a rapidly escalating Taiwan contingency. The inclusion of the US, Japan, Australia, South Korea and Taiwan within the “Green Cell” reflected the deepening strategic interdependence between Europe and the Indo-Pacific and the expectations these partners increasingly place on Europe in moments of acute tension.

Engagement with Indo-Pacific partners occurred frequently but largely through bilateral channels. European players sought information, reassurance or alignment of political messaging primarily through direct outreach – above all to the US, but also to Japan, Australia and Taiwan. This pattern mirrored existing diplomatic practice and underscored the absence of a standing European mechanism for collective consultation with like-minded Indo-Pacific actors.

NATO offered a partial alternative. Through the IP4 framework, participants could request that the NATO Secretary General brief or engage Indo-Pacific partners collectively. This created a more structured and efficient channel for multilateral consultation and highlighted NATO’s comparative advantage in convening selected partners during crises.

By contrast, no equivalent “IP4-like” mechanism exists at the EU level. While EU actors engaged Indo-Pacific partners diplomatically, conversations took place

exclusively through bilateral outreach, reflecting the absence of an established EU-led platform for collective crisis consultations with like-minded Indo-Pacific states. These asymmetries in institutional design – NATO’s emerging multilateral coordination mechanism versus the EU’s reliance on bilateral diplomacy – formed an important backdrop for subsequent crisis dynamics in the simulation.

### **Operational flow**

Each Move followed a strict procedural cycle to simulate the “fog of war” and diplomatic friction:

1. Plenary: scene-setting and intelligence updates;
2. Institutional breakouts: separate NATO and EU sessions to digest the crisis;
3. “Speed Chats”: rapid, informal bilateral consultations to simulate back-channel diplomacy;
4. Decision rounds: formal NAC (NATO) and European Council (EU) meetings to finalise positions; and,
5. Joint debrief: consolidation of “Blue Cell” and “Red Cell” actions.

### **Advisory board and external review**

The scenario design and methodological framework were refined through consultations with subject-matter experts in the US, Europe, Japan, Australia, South Korea and Taiwan. These discussions provided critical insights into Taiwanese doctrinal assumptions, US escalation planning and alternative readings of Chinese coercive behaviour. They also helped ensure that escalation pathways, injects and decision points reflected contemporary strategic realities rather than stylised assumptions.

An advisory board – including members with extensive expertise in TTXs and Taiwan – supported the design, analytical review and implementation of the TTX. Its role was to validate the internal logic of the scenario, assess the plausibility of escalation sequences and ensure that the game’s structure captured the political-institutional constraints facing European actors. The advisory process also contributed to aligning the analytical framework with emerging debates on economic security, industrial mobilisation and alliance dynamics.

Taken together, the external consultations and advisory board review strengthened the robustness, credibility and methodological coherence of the exercise. They ensured that the final design was grounded in realistic strategic behaviour while retaining the flexibility necessary for a dynamic, decision-focused simulation.

# Chapter Two

## The Three Exercise Moves

### **Move 1: “the Quarantine” (October 2028)**

Move 1 marked the opening phase of the crisis, characterised by strategic ambiguity, legal contestation and calibrated coercion below the threshold of armed conflict. The PRC initiated a so-called “tax compliance regime” on commercial shipping to Taiwan, framed by Beijing as an administrative measure but widely interpreted in Europe as a coercive maritime quarantine. Simultaneously, Russia intensified military posturing in Belarus, immediately linking developments in the Indo-Pacific with European security concerns.

From the outset, the crisis unfolded as a dual-arena challenge: China probed the limits of international tolerance in the Taiwan Strait, while Russia tested NATO’s vigilance on its Eastern Flank. Europe was forced to respond under conditions of uncertainty, constrained capabilities, and profound concern about escalation dynamics.

#### *Political and legal contestation*

European states reacted first through diplomatic and legal instruments. A broad consensus quickly emerged around taking the issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and UN General Assembly (UNGA), despite the anticipation of PRC and Russian vetoes. The priority was to contest Beijing’s legal narrative, push back against the instrumentalisation of UNGA Resolution 2758, and frame the quarantine as a coercive violation of freedom of navigation rather than a legitimate regulatory act.

Germany and France emerged as leading advocates of multilateral legal action, stressing the importance of international law, global legitimacy and engagement with the “Global South”. The UK aligned closely with Washington in calling for strong G7 coordination and explicit condemnation of PRC coercion. Across the EU, diplomatic unity was viewed as the primary instrument in the early phase of the crisis.

#### *Economic countermeasures and European caution*

The economic dimension of the response quickly became the central fault line. The US proposed a fixed reciprocal tariff on Chinese goods, supported by the UK’s call for symmetric consequences. Spain advanced a more limited, proportional option: a tax on Chinese vessels entering European ports. Italy and others argued that the PRC measure qualified as economic coercion under the EU’s Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI).



Yet most EU member states – including Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Romania – insisted that no coercive economic measures could be adopted without a comprehensive European Commission assessment of sectoral impacts. Semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, critical raw materials and port infrastructure were identified as acute vulnerabilities. Europe’s overwhelming dependence on Chinese supply chains produced a strong preference for prudence over confrontation.

Taiwan, by contrast, opted for operational circumvention. It established green maritime corridors under Coast Guard protection and encouraged shipping companies not to comply with the PRC tax, signalling a willingness to accept logistical risk rather than legitimise the quarantine.

### *NATO’s early military posture and the Russia problem*

For NATO, Move 1 was dominated by Russia rather than China. Intelligence assessments pointed to an ambiguous but concerning Russian force posture in Belarus following large-scale exercises, with potential vectors toward Ukraine, the Baltic States and the Suwałki Corridor. Crucially, there were no clear mobilisation indicators, suggesting coercion rather than imminent attack.

In response, the NAC agreed to revise NATO strategic and regional plans on the assumption that US reinforcement could be constrained by commitments in the Indo-Pacific. NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) was tasked with re-evaluating Baltic, Arctic and North Atlantic contingencies using primarily European forces. The Allied Reaction Force was placed on notice to move – an act of heightened readiness carefully calibrated to avoid escalation.

At the same time, allies explicitly rejected immediate troop deployments to Ukraine or the Baltics. The consensus favoured Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), contingency planning, exercises and resilience measures over physical reinforcement.

### *The EU framework: diplomacy, citizens and preparation*

The EU’s HR/VP advanced a three-pillar framework that became the backbone of Move 1:

- Political and strategic communication – unified EU messaging, UN engagement, coordination with G7 and Indo-Pacific partners and disciplined strategic communication to counter PRC and Russian narratives.
- Protection of EU citizens – immediate preparation for evacuations from Taiwan, contingency planning for potential repatriations from the PRC mainland, activation of crisis-response mechanisms and coordination of humanitarian air-bridge options.
- Preparation for phased escalation – tasking the European Commission with economic-impact assessments, exploring cyber-defence support to Taiwan,

preparing European Peace Facility options, planning military mobility corridors and examining potential naval missions beyond Europe.

While the first two pillars received broad support, the third exposed political divides. Many states regarded cyber support, naval missions, and early coercive measures as premature and potentially escalatory, given limited European cyber resilience and mounting concerns about Russia.

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## The economic dimension of the response quickly became the central fault line

### *National positions and strategic patterns*

Across national positions, three meta-patterns clearly emerged. First, Europe was politically united but strategically risk-averse: nearly all capitals supported diplomatic action while fearing military or economic escalation with China. Second, Russia remained the overriding military concern, and the Belarus posture consistently outweighed Taiwan in defence planning. Third, Europe's finite military capacity decisively shaped its strategy: very few states were willing or able to offer meaningful Indo-Pacific assets.

The UK stood out as the most forward-leaning European actor, openly aligning with US tariff proposals, confirming an existing military footprint in the region and preparing evacuation operations. France emphasised strategic autonomy and minimal Indo-Pacific presence while safeguarding European deterrence. Germany acted as a stabilising force, prioritising Eastern Flank security and economic diplomacy with Beijing. Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden, Finland and Poland each calibrated their positions through the lenses of proportionality, regional exposure and national capacity.

A further dynamic emerged in Move 1 regarding Europe's interaction with Indo-Pacific partners. European players instinctively defaulted to bilateral outreach – primarily to Washington, but increasingly to Tokyo, Canberra and Taipei as tensions rose. While useful for political signalling, this approach slowed situational awareness and produced fragmented understanding of Indo-Pacific perspectives. NATO's IP4 mechanism offered a more efficient multilateral pathway, but EU actors lacked an equivalent tool, leaving European coordination with Indo-Pacific partners uneven from the earliest phase of the crisis.

### *The strategic meaning of Move 1*

By the end of Move 1, Europe had successfully preserved political unity and initiated legal-diplomatic contestation, but it had not adopted coercive economic or military measures. NATO shifted quietly into a preparedness posture centred on Russia, while the EU prioritised citizens' protection and economic assessment. The quarantine phase thus revealed Europe's instinctive preference for legality, diplomacy, and strategic restraint under conditions of uncertainty – setting the stage for much harder choices once coercion escalated into a blockade.

### **Move 2: “the Blockade” (November 2028 – January 2029)**

Move 2 marked the decisive transition from a controlled political-military standoff to a full-spectrum, multi-theatre crisis. Following Taiwan's success in partially circumventing the initial “quarantine”, the PRC escalated to a formal naval blockade, authorising the use of force against any vessel attempting to reach the island. This escalation was synchronised with intensified Russian military signalling in Europe and Iranian proxy attacks in the Red Sea, creating an unprecedented tripartite coercion campaign spanning the Western Pacific, the Middle East and the Euro-Atlantic theatre.

#### *The PRC's blockade and A2/AD escalation*

The blockade was accompanied by the full activation of China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) architecture. The PLA conducted live-fire missile overflights of Taiwan, sustained electronic warfare and cyber operations against Taiwanese radars and communications and established a dense maritime interdiction and ISR posture around the island. Joint Sino-Russian strategic bomber patrols near Japan and Guam reinforced the message that the crisis had evolved into a broader coercive alignment between Beijing and Moscow. The blockade thus functioned as a high-pressure alternative to immediate amphibious invasion, designed to isolate Taiwan rapidly while deterring third-party intervention.

#### *Global coercion and strategic synchronisation*

Simultaneously, authoritarian partners opened secondary pressure points. Russia intensified submarine activity in the North Atlantic and Arctic, launched snap exercises in the Leningrad region and Belarus and expanded hybrid operations against European critical infrastructure. Iranian-backed Houthi forces escalated missile and drone attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea, threatening one of Europe's most vital maritime arteries. North Korean missile overflights of Japanese and South Korean waters further strained allied ISR and missile-defence resources. The cumulative effect was a synchronised campaign aimed at stretching Western attention, endurance and crisis-management capacity across multiple theatres.

### *US response: counter-blockade and force redistribution*

In response, the US declared its intention to militarily challenge the blockade and initiated preparations to escort LNG shipments to Taiwan to prevent an energy collapse. Washington simultaneously launched a global counter-blockade of PRC shipping through visit, board, search and seizure operations in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. Submarines surged to the theatre, long-range bombers redeployed to Australia and Alaska and mobile land-based fires units and unmanned ISR assets were dispersed across Japan's southern islands. To resource this effort, selected assets were withdrawn from CENTCOM and the European theatre and the US formally requested that Europeans backfill critical enabling capabilities in NATO's area of responsibility.

### *The backfilling dilemma for Europe*

Washington asked European allies to assume responsibility for air-to-air refuelling, anti-submarine warfare, maritime presence in the Mediterranean and North Atlantic, ISR and selected air-defence tasks. While framed as a limited request, it confronted Europe with the reality of its shallow depth in high-end enablers. The issue immediately became politically sensitive: several states signalled solidarity, while others warned that transferring scarce capabilities would weaken national and regional deterrence against Russia. The crisis thus forced Europe to confront a genuine two-theatre dilemma: supporting the US in the Indo-Pacific risked opening vulnerabilities in the Euro-Atlantic.

### *Indo-Pacific allies and Taiwan's political shock*

Japan granted full access to its territory for US force dispersal and explicitly framed the crisis as existential for the alliance, while privately seeking renewed nuclear-umbrella assurances. Australia approved bomber basing and emphasised the global economic consequences of semiconductor disruption. Taiwan entered a state of national emergency, sought US escorts for LNG shipments, reduced chip production to conserve power and coordinated contingency planning for blockade-breaking operations. Crucially, Taipei declared the blockade an act of war and formally asked European states to consider recognising Taiwan. This request sent a political shockwave through the EU: sympathy for Taiwan was high, but unity depended on rejecting recognition in order to avoid uncontrolled escalation with Beijing.

### *NATO response: deterrence under reduced US availability*

Move 2 marked a strategic inflection point for NATO. Intelligence confirmed classic Russian shaping operations: submarine surges through the Greenland - Iceland - United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, force posturing near the Baltics, intensified activity in Belarus and coordinated hybrid rehearsals. Such operations took place as US forces were increasingly committed outside of the European Area of Responsibility (AOR). On this basis, SACEUR revised regional defence plans under the assumption of constrained US reinforcement and prioritised European backfilling of critical shortfalls.

NATO elevated readiness across the force: Tier-1 elements of the NATO Force Model were placed on notice, Baltic and Icelandic air policing and Northern Sentry operations were reinforced, standing naval groups were surged to the North Sea and Eastern Mediterranean and undersea, cyber, and space-enabled C2 were hardened. Particular emphasis was placed on the GIUK gap, where the operationalisation of the NATO ISR Force in Finland improved strategic reach and real-time awareness, while recognising continued reliance on US capabilities for integrated undersea surveillance. At the political-military level, the NAC authorised “Simple Alert” measures, enabling SACEUR to increase air and missile defence of critical infrastructure, accelerate SPOD readiness, counter hybrid threats linked to critical infrastructure and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-associated nodes and prepare ARF deployments to the Baltics and the Suwałki Corridor. Concurrently, NATO signalled resolve without escalation: the nuclear readiness and deployment exercise *Steadfast Noon* proceeded as a pre-planned exercise, and Moscow was warned that further militarisation of Kaliningrad would trigger additional air and maritime control measures.

Finally, the Alliance drew a clear boundary. While supporting US-led coalition efforts where European interests were directly engaged – most notably maritime security in the Red Sea – NATO rejected any formal deployment to the Indo-Pacific. The Alliance reaffirmed that its core mission remains the defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, even as individual Allies retain freedom to participate in coalition operations beyond it.

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Several states signalled solidarity, while others warned that transferring scarce capabilities would weaken national and regional deterrence against Russia

*The EU response: diplomacy, resilience and economic shielding*

The EU emphasised a distinct set of priorities: de-escalation, protection of citizens and economic resilience. Evacuation planning for EU nationals across the Indo-Pacific and in areas affected by Red Sea attacks became an immediate concern. The European Commission launched a comprehensive assessment of the ACI to signal potential retaliation while keeping diplomatic channels with Beijing open. The European Commission activated its emergency security of supply measures under

the European Defence Industrial Programme to prepare for increased industrial output, and internal civil-protection and military-mobility measures were reviewed. Most member states urged caution on sanctions, warning that premature economic escalation could trigger uncontrollable supply-chain shocks, with estimated global losses exceeding €100 billion annually if the blockade deepened.

Move 2 amplified the structural limitations in Europe's consultation channels with Indo-Pacific partners. As Japan, Australia and Taiwan intensified their engagement and pressed Europe for clearer political signals, the EU's reliance on bilateral outreach created significant time pressure and uneven situational awareness across member states. NATO's IP4 mechanism again provided a faster pathway for partner engagement, enabling clearer articulation of allied expectations. The absence of a comparable EU mechanism contributed to fragmented diplomacy during the blockade phase, complicating efforts to coordinate messaging or develop a consolidated European approach to escalation management.

### *The Red Sea as a new European theatre*

The Houthi campaign rapidly elevated the Red Sea into a major European security concern due to its direct implications for energy supplies and global trade. The EU explored options for an EU-led maritime security mission under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which was prompted by Spain's opposition to NATO's role in the area. This led to growing institutional divergence: NATO prioritised northern and eastern waters, while the EU increasingly viewed the Red Sea as a test case for its crisis-management role.

### *Hybrid escalation inside Europe*

Move 2 also marked the moment when the crisis penetrated the European homeland. Major hybrid attacks disrupted critical infrastructure: the Port of Rotterdam was forced offline, Germany declared a national emergency and energy-grid, communications, and transport systems experienced coordinated sabotage and cyber effects. These disruptions immediately raised concerns over reinforcement routes, internal stability and the vulnerability of Europe's economic core. For the first time, several states openly debated the possible triggering of NATO Article 5 and the EU's Mutual-Assistance (Article 42.7 TEU) and Solidarity Clauses (Article 222 TFEU), signalling a qualitative shift in perceived threat.

### *Emerging division of labour and strategic strain*

By the end of Move 2, a *de facto* division of labour had emerged. NATO concentrated on territorial defence, deterrence against Russia and counter-hybrid operations in the Euro-Atlantic theatre. The EU focused on diplomacy, economic shielding, industrial resilience and the protection of citizens. Both institutions sought to preserve unity, avoid uncontrolled escalation with China and prevent Russia from exploiting any perceived vacuum.

Overall, Move 2 revealed a West that was strategically aligned but operationally overstretched, economically vulnerable and politically divided over how far to escalate against China. The US moved decisively toward confrontation in the Indo-

Pacific; NATO hardened Europe against Russian opportunism; and the EU prepared for containment, resilience and long-term economic warfare. The blockade phase thus transformed the Taiwan crisis into a truly global systemic shock for Europe – setting the conditions for the kinetic escalation that followed in Move 3.

### **Move 3: “open conflict”**

Move 3 marked the definitive transition from crisis management to major-power war. On 13 March 2029, China launched the “Punishment Operation”, striking Taiwanese military infrastructure, energy facilities and coastal defences while seizing Kinmen and the Pescadores in a limited amphibious assault. Taiwan retaliated with strikes against PRC ports and military targets. What had begun as a coercive quarantine had now become an overt, high-intensity armed conflict.

At the same time, Russia intensified drone incursions, airspace violations and submarine activity across the Euro-Atlantic theatre. NATO was forced to elevate operational readiness on its northern and eastern flanks while a major war unfolded in the Pacific. For the US, the long-theorised two-front scenario had materialised.

#### *The US shift: from maritime contest to kill-chain warfare*

By Move 3, the US assessed that defeating the PRC hinged less on breaking the visible naval blockade and more on dismantling the PRC’s fires-based reconnaissance-strike complex. The centre of gravity was no longer ships – it was the kill chain: satellites, sensors, long-range missiles, drones and targeting networks.

US strategy shifted decisively toward degrading Chinese ISR, contesting space control, striking exposed A2/AD nodes and blinding the PLA’s ability to generate targets. This reflected a fundamental transition from contesting maritime access to contesting C4ISR dominance across domains.

The operational expression of this approach was the “Hellscape” concept: a multi-domain denial architecture built around mobile Army and Marine fires on Japan’s southern islands, massed swarms of loitering munitions, autonomous surface and undersea platforms and dense sensor grids designed to impose attrition on any PLA amphibious force. Legacy carrier-centric concepts were acknowledged as increasingly vulnerable in the opening phase of high-end conflict.

#### *Hellscape’s Vulnerability and Europe’s decisive role*

Yet Hellscape suffered from a critical weakness: limited magazines. The denial architecture could only function if continuously resupplied with interceptors, loitering munitions, sensors, spare parts and secure communications components. This operational reality reshaped Europe’s strategic role.

The US made clear that it did not require European combat forces in the Pacific. Europe’s decisive contribution was industrial sustainment. Europe was needed to supply precision weapons, air- and missile-defence interceptors, drones, electronic-warfare systems, secure communications, medical stocks and dual-use components.



If Europe could help keep US magazines full, the US-Japan-Taiwan axis could hold the line militarily.

### *The “Atlantic Corridor”: a new strategic lifeline*

The most transformative concept of the entire exercise emerged in the Move 3 plenary: the “Atlantic Corridor”. Conceived by the EU’s HR/VP, the corridor was a structured two-way transatlantic logistics and industrial artery designed to sustain a global coalition in a dual-theatre war.

The logic was stark. Europe could barely fight in the Pacific, but it could supply the coalition. Europe also required guaranteed reinforcement if Russia escalated. The corridor therefore operated in two directions: from Europe through the US to the Indo-Pacific with weapons, components and supplies; and from the US to Europe as a line of communication for possible reinforcements, and their strategic sustainment.

Politically, the corridor offered Europe essential cover. It enabled material support to Taiwan and US forces while preserving diplomatic space with Beijing and avoiding direct belligerency. The EU would become a war-economy actor – mandating industrial output, coordinating allocation and shaping the defence-industrial base as a unified production system.

For NATO, the corridor was immediately recognised as a strategic vulnerability. It became a prime target for Russian submarines, cable sabotage, cyber disruption and hybrid attacks on ports and infrastructure. NATO responded by intensifying ASW, deploying naval forces to northern waters, prioritising undersea surveillance and shifting assets to protect Atlantic Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC).

In the game, the secure corridor that was eventually established across the North Atlantic was used primarily to move munitions and critical components from Europe to the US rather than vice versa. The US request for European munitions came relatively late in the conflict timeline and was effective only because the scenario assumed that European rearmament by 2029 had already delivered a significantly expanded industrial base.

### *Franco-British nuclear signalling and European deterrence*

Move 3 also revealed a new and underappreciated deterrence dynamic. With US strategic attention absorbed by the Indo-Pacific conflict and conventional forces heavily committed, France and the UK began exploring coordinated nuclear signalling as a stabilising mechanism against Russian opportunism.

This was not intended as escalation but as strategic reassurance: a calibrated message that European nuclear-armed democracies remained credible guarantors of deterrence while the US fought in Asia. Washington reacted with caution, recognising both the stabilising potential and the escalation risks, but acknowledged that Europe might require its own nuclear reassurance layer in a sustained dual-theatre crisis.

### *Taiwan's doctrinal perspective: blockade as war*

Taiwan introduced a critical conceptual clarification in the Move 3 plenary: for Taipei, blockade is not pre-war coercion – it is war. In Taiwan's strategic culture, blockade constitutes the first phase of a multi-stage PLA campaign designed to induce economic collapse, fracture logistics and prepare the battlespace for kinetic operations.

The blockade is thus the moment of total mobilisation. Reserves are activated, stockpiles dispersed, cyber defences hardened and intelligence integration with the US and Japan intensified. The Punishment Operation was therefore not the beginning of war for Taiwan – it was the transition to its next phase.

This doctrinal asymmetry exposed a persistent transatlantic gap. While Europe instinctively views blockade as a liminal, potentially containable stage, Taiwan treats it as the onset of existential conflict. As escalation progressed, Taiwan's diplomatic leverage in Europe narrowed sharply, leaving the US as its overwhelmingly decisive partner.



**The EU's role in a Taiwan war is not that of a direct military actor, but of an enabling power whose influence derives from industry, logistics and economic statecraft**

### *EU overall posture*

Move 3 clarified that the EU's role in a Taiwan war is not that of a direct military actor, but of an enabling power whose influence derives from industry, logistics and economic statecraft. As the conflict escalated, Europe's strongest instruments – sanctions, regulation and industrial coordination – also proved the most politically constrained. Member states converged only on narrow, targeted measures against critical Chinese sectors, deliberately rejecting Russia-style comprehensive sanctions in order to manage escalation risks, supply-chain shock and the extraterritorial reach of Chinese countermeasures. Economic leverage was decisive, but fragmented and slow to mobilise.

The EU's strategic response, therefore, coalesced around the "Atlantic Corridor" concept. Rather than projecting force into the Indo-Pacific, Europe became

structurally embedded in the conflict through industrial mobilisation and transatlantic sustainment. By prioritising production, coordinating allocation and securing logistics, the EU functioned as a war-economy actor helping to sustain US and allied operations while preserving diplomatic space with Beijing. The exercise demonstrated that indirect involvement is not neutrality: by helping to sustain the fight, Europe becomes an important pillar of coalition endurance, even as it seeks to limit formal belligerency.

### *NATO posture*

In Move 3, NATO's overriding task was to prevent Russian opportunism while the US fought a major war in the Indo-Pacific. With US forces heavily committed elsewhere, the Alliance shifted decisively toward deterrence by readiness and denial in the European theatre. Air and missile defence of critical infrastructure was reinforced, Tier-1 forces were positioned on the Eastern Flank, undersea infrastructure protection was intensified and air and maritime policing operated under escalatory authorities. Clear signalling accompanied these measures, warning Moscow that further escalation would trigger additional control measures without provoking premature confrontation.

The exercise confirmed that NATO's stabilising role in Europe is a precondition for any sustained US-led effort in Asia. By absorbing risk, deterring Russian exploitation, and securing the Atlantic lifeline, the Alliance enabled the US to concentrate on the decisive theatre. At the same time, Move 3 exposed a hard structural dilemma: scarce, interoperable munitions and enablers could not simultaneously meet European defence requirements and Indo-Pacific demand without prior industrial depth. The core lesson was unambiguous – deterrence in a two-front war cannot rest on de-escalation alone, but on readiness, resilience and sustained production capacity.

### *The strategic meaning of Move 3*

Move 3 revealed Europe's true role in a two-front war. Europe was indispensable – but not as a Pacific combatant. Its indispensability lay in industrial capacity, logistics, sanctions, diplomacy and the defence of the European theatre against Russian exploitation.

The Atlantic Corridor became both Europe's strategic contribution and its central vulnerability: the lifeline of a global coalition and the prime target of hybrid and submarine warfare. Europe emerged not as a power projector in Asia, but as the arsenal and the artery of a deterrence-by-denial strategy spanning both oceans.

## Europe's strategic identity and the "Atlantic Corridor": a 21<sup>st</sup> century "Lend-Lease" analogy

The "Atlantic Corridor", proposed by the EU during the TTX<sup>6</sup>, emerged as the most transformative strategic concept of the exercise. Strategically, it is a structured, two-way logistics and industrial lifeline designed to sustain the US and its Indo-Pacific allies while ensuring that Europe itself remains defensible under conditions of a two-theatre war. While the Atlantic has long served as the classic Cold War route for US reinforcements to Europe, the novelty of this concept lies in its reversal of direction: Europe becomes a primary supplier of industrial mass to the US for operations in East Asia.

This logic inevitably evokes one of the deepest precedents in transatlantic strategic history: the Lend-Lease Act of March 1941. Often described as one of the most consequential strategic decisions in modern history<sup>7</sup>, Lend-Lease was the mechanism through which US industrial power enabled, and ultimately sustained, the principal European centres of resistance to German expansion before America's direct entry into the war. While Britain received the bulk of the US\$49 billion in assistance, the Soviet Union benefitted from a more targeted but operationally decisive form of support. As Paul Kennedy<sup>8</sup> has shown, transfers of hundreds of thousands of trucks and jeeps dramatically enhanced Red Army mobility, while shipments of aluminium and other raw materials proved indispensable to aircraft production. Lend-Lease was not merely a flow of equipment; it was a transcontinental logistical ecosystem that allowed key allies to continue fighting until the US entered the war directly.

That strategic logic has unmistakable resonance today. Just as Lend-Lease enabled Britain to tie down much of the German military machine before US belligerence<sup>9</sup>, a 21<sup>st</sup> century analogue would see Europe providing the industrial strategic depth that allows the US to sustain a denial campaign in the First Island Chain. In this sense, the Atlantic Corridor functions as the contemporary equivalent of that wartime lifeline: a structured, two-way artery enabling Europe to reinforce US operations in the Indo-Pacific while receiving critical support in return should the European theatre come under acute pressure.

There is, however, a second historical echo of even greater strategic consequence. Lend-Lease initiated a slow but decisive interweaving of the British and American war economies, producing a structural dependency that effectively made the UK

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<sup>6</sup> This specific contemporary notion of an "Atlantic Corridor" finds its provenance in the work of Mattelaer, A. and Fiott, D., "Korea in Strategic Competition: A European Perspective", in Simón, L. and Pacheco Pardo, R. (eds.) "One Peninsula, Multiple Fronts: Korea in Great Power Rivalry", CSDS In-Depth Paper, 20/2025: 26.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, P., *The Strategists. Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, Mussolini and Hitler – How War Made Them and How They Made War* (London: Penguin Books, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, P., *Engineers of Victory. The Problem Solvers Who Turned the Tide in the Second World War* (New York: Random House, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> O'Brien, P., *Second Most Powerful Man in the World : The Life of Admiral William D. Leahy, Roosevelt's Chief of Staff* (New York: Dutton - an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2019).

economy a functional extension of the US industrial base<sup>10</sup>. A reversed 21<sup>st</sup> century Lend-Lease could generate a parallel transformation through the emergence of a cross-theatre defence-industrial ecosystem binding together the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific areas of responsibility<sup>11</sup>. In this logic, the Atlantic Corridor does not merely keep the frontline supplied; it gradually fuses the decisive and secondary theatres into a single, mutually reinforcing strategic system, in which Europe underwrites US operations in Asia even while defending its own theatre.

But the analogy also carries a major warning. During the Second World War, the Atlantic lifeline became the preferred hunting ground of German U-boats, whose unrestricted submarine campaign sought to sever Britain from the arsenal that sustained it. The same logic applies today. If the Atlantic Corridor becomes the backbone of a US-European denial campaign in the Indo-Pacific, then Russian undersea forces will be structurally incentivised to target, harass and disrupt this strategic highway through submarines, seabed warfare, cable cutting, cyber interference and hybrid attacks on ports and logistics hubs. As before, the survival of the corridor will depend on robust maritime protection, coordinated undersea surveillance, resilient port infrastructure and tight NATO-EU-US operational synchronisation.

In short, the Atlantic Corridor is not only a logistics mechanism. It is a grand-strategic construct that enables indirect belligerence, accelerates transatlantic economic entanglement, while simultaneously creating a new centre of gravity at the heart of the Western alliance.

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<sup>10</sup> Op.Cit., “*The Strategists*”, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> On this concept see Simón, L. and Fiott, D. (eds.), “Primed for Deterrence? NATO and the Indo-Pacific in the Age of Great Power Competition”, *CSDS In-Depth*, 14/2025; and Simón, L., “Three Alternative Approaches to Deterrence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific”, *War On The Rocks*, 19 June 2025.

# Chapter Three

## The Results

**Table 2: Institutional Responses (EU and NATO)**

Institution	Core Priority/Stance	Specific Measures Taken (Move 1-3)
NATO	Eastern Flank Priority, Deterrence, Readiness against Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic plan revision: SACEUR tasked to revise plans assuming constrained US in place forces and reinforcements.</li> <li>• Readiness: placed NATO Allied Reaction Force on "notice to move".</li> <li>• Maritime: deployed SNMG1 to North Sea (Corridor protection) and SNMG2 to East Mediterranean.</li> <li>• Surveillance: intensified ASW and undersea cable surveillance in North Atlantic.</li> <li>• Limits: explicitly refused Indo-Pacific deployment.</li> </ul>
EU (HR/VP)	Diplomacy, Economic Resilience, Protection of Citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Corridor: proposed the Atlantic Corridor for industrial sustainment.</li> <li>• Economic shield: activated the Anti-Coercion Instrument at preparatory levels.</li> <li>• Resilience: activated emergency defence supply measures to ramp up output.</li> <li>• Citizens: coordinated evacuation scenarios for Taiwan/PRC; explored humanitarian air bridges.</li> <li>• Diplomacy: engaged UNSC to contest PRC legality.</li> </ul>

## **Coordination with Indo-Pacific partners**

The TTX demonstrated that Indo-Pacific partners are not peripheral observers but direct stakeholders whose expectations shape Europe's strategic space in a Taiwan contingency.

NATO's IP4 framework offered a functional multilateral consultation mechanism, enabling faster information flow and clearer articulation of partner expectations. The EU, by contrast, relied exclusively on bilateral diplomacy, leading to duplicated efforts, slower situational awareness and fragmented messaging under crisis conditions.

The exercise, therefore, underscored the need for Europe to develop structured, collective modalities for consultation with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners – mechanisms that complement bilateral ties and approximate the coherence increasingly visible on the NATO side.

## **China policy, one China and the limits of “pariah” threats**

A further structural gap concerned Europe's long-term relationship with China. Throughout the exercise, European actors were reluctant to debate what their post-crisis or post-war relationship with Beijing should look like. Proposals to signal that the PRC's use of force had undermined the political basis of Europe's long-standing One China policy – which had rested on peaceful settlement and non-use of force – were rejected. Most European players preferred to preserve the possibility of acting as a neutral interlocutor or mediator between Washington and Beijing rather than to redefine their China policy around the contingencies of a Taiwan war.

This reluctance had direct consequences for transatlantic signalling. The US repeatedly invoked the notion that a besieged and starving Taiwan would push China towards “pariah status”. Yet, in the absence of a prior European debate on what such a post-war posture would entail, there was no shared understanding of how far Europe would be prepared to go in downgrading political, economic or institutional ties with Beijing. As a result, the threat of pariah status could not be credibly operationalised as a joint strategic signal, and Europe's China policy remained essentially reactive and cost-minimising.

Ultimately, the absence of any shared post-war vision for relations with China reflected fundamental structural differences: the US is compelled to think long-term about China given its enduring role in East Asia, while Europeans implicitly hoped for a return to business as usual. The result was strategic ambiguity at precisely the moment when clarity about the post-war order could have strengthened deterrence and allied cohesion.

## **Sources of transatlantic divergence**

The game also highlighted that transatlantic divergence in a Taiwan crisis does not primarily result from successful Chinese or Russian wedge strategies. Instead, it emerged from more prosaic but powerful factors: low US expectations of what Europe could realistically contribute in the Indo-Pacific; Europe's limited capacity to



sustain operations beyond its own theatre; and persistent internal divisions that made it difficult to agree even on non-lethal measures such as economic sanctions. Notably, this deadlock occurred with caution from only a small number of member states – above all, Spain and Germany – and without the involvement of more openly China-friendly governments. In practice, structural constraints and intra-European caution were sufficient to limit the scope of transatlantic alignment.

**Table 3: Consolidated National Positions**

Country	Primary Stance/Focus	Key Military Stance/Contribution	Economic Position/Concern
Germany	Voice of moderation, stability, legalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority: Eastern Flank reinforcement (Baltic).</li> <li>• Refused Indo-Pacific deployment</li> <li>• Declared state of emergency (Move 2).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sought prudence; opposed immediate sanctions/freezing dialogues.</li> <li>• Prioritised diplomatic channels with Beijing.</li> </ul>
France	Strategic autonomy, preventing crisis convergence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports Indian Ocean presence.</li> <li>• Hinted at minimal "resident power" presence in Indo-Pacific.</li> <li>• Nuclear signalling with UK to deter Russia.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insisted on using EU instruments first before aligning with US tariffs.</li> <li>• Opposed Taiwan recognition.</li> </ul>
United Kingdom	Most hawkish/forward - leaning European actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deployed carrier to Indian Ocean.</li> <li>• Joined US counter-blockade.</li> <li>• Nuclear signalling with France.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported "symmetric consequences" (taxes on Chinese shipping).</li> <li>• Joined US tariff push.</li> </ul>
Spain	Measured, risk-averse, favoured diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported EU-led Red Sea mission (not NATO).</li> <li>• Opposed naval ops outside Europe.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposed proportional tax on vessels.</li> <li>• Urged caution on broad sanctions; required impact forecast.</li> </ul>

Italy	Strategic prioritisation: Baltics > Indo-Pacific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opposed any military deployments outside Europe.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighted PRC tax as "coercion" triggering ACI.</li> <li>• Urged caution on sanctions.</li> </ul>
Netherlands	Strategic clarity: "Europe or Indo-Pacific"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Port of Rotterdam offline(hybrid attack) .</li> <li>• Offered personnel/ISR, not naval assets.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demanded sector-by-sector impact assessment (semiconductors, ports).</li> </ul>
Finland	Proactive, Russia/Arctic focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilised national defence resources to reduce US burden.</li> <li>• Initiated NATO contingency planning for Russia.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocated for economic coercion of China if required.</li> <li>• Supported Green Corridor concept.</li> </ul>
Sweden	Disciplined, Belarus/Baltic focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can defend Baltic Sea; opposed Arctic commitments without allies.</li> <li>• Launched snap exercises.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warned of semiconductor dependency and tech vulnerabilities (5G).</li> </ul>
Romania	De-escalation, Black Sea vigilance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offered Constanța/MK airbase as logistics hubs.</li> <li>• Warned of Black Sea vulnerabilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Called for holistic assessment of coercion.</li> <li>• Urged caution on sanctions.</li> </ul>
Poland	Forward defence, security-driven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritised Eastern Flank; welcomed US troops.</li> <li>• Demanded China-Russia intelligence assessment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported strong political signalling and coordinated diplomatic pressure.</li> </ul>

# Conclusion

This Tabletop Exercise shows that a Taiwan Strait crisis cannot be treated as a distant Indo-Pacific contingency with only indirect European consequences. From its earliest phase, such a crisis rapidly penetrates Europe's economic, political and security interests. Even in the absence of large-scale European military deployments to East Asia, Europe becomes deeply implicated in the conflict through supply chains, industrial sustainment, diplomacy and alliance commitments.

Across the three Moves, Europe's behaviour follows a consistent pattern of progressive involvement. In Move 1, European action is shaped primarily by legal diplomacy, economic caution and institutional risk management. Confronted with early Chinese coercion, European actors seek to preserve room for de-escalation and protect their economic exposure. In Move 2, the tightening blockade, US counter-measures and the spread of hybrid attacks begin to draw Europe into the operational logic of the crisis despite continued reluctance to escalate directly against China. By Move 3, Europe is no longer a peripheral stakeholder. It is structurally embedded in the conflict through industrial mobilisation, logistics, sanctions, diplomatic positioning and the protection of critical transatlantic infrastructure.

The central strategic finding of the exercise is that Europe's principal contribution to a Taiwan war is not expeditionary combat power, but industrial and logistical power. Europe emerges as a provider of munitions, components, sustainment and economic endurance for a US-led coalition engaged in high-intensity operations in the Indo-Pacific. The "Atlantic Corridor" captures this transformation. What begins as an indirect support mechanism becomes a defining feature of Europe's strategic role: a two-way artery through which Europe helps to underwrite US operations in Asia while ensuring its own resilience and defence.

In this sense, Europe's involvement in a Taiwan war is neither symbolic nor secondary. It is systemic. Industrial output, transport capacity, port and air hub resilience, financial coordination and sanctions enforcement become instruments of strategic effect comparable to forward military deployments. The exercise shows that in a modern great power conflict, the ability to sustain and supply the fight becomes as decisive as the ability to fight it.

At the same time, the TTX reveals a persistent European tension between political restraint and structural entanglement. Europe repeatedly seeks to avoid direct belligerency, to preserve diplomatic space with Beijing and to prevent uncontrolled escalation. Yet the logic of alliance support, economic interdependence and industrial mobilisation steadily narrows that space. As in earlier historical precedents, indirect support generates its own momentum. Europe becomes involved not because it chooses confrontation, but because it chooses sustainment.

The two-front dimension of the crisis – with Russia probing Europe as US attention shifts to Asia – undeniably shapes the strategic environment. It reinforces NATO's

deterrence role, constrains European military availability for Indo-Pacific operations and raises the stakes for Atlantic security and undersea warfare. Yet the exercise also confirms that Europe's central strategic dilemma is not simply how to manage two theatres simultaneously, but how to contribute meaningfully to a Taiwan contingency without possessing the instruments of a Pacific warfighting power. The Atlantic Corridor, industrial mobilisation and economic statecraft become the tools through which that dilemma is resolved in practice.

For the EU, the exercise points toward a future in which crisis management in the Indo-Pacific can no longer be separated from industrial policy, economic security and war-sustainment functions. The EU emerges not as a military commander in the Taiwan theatre, but as a producer, allocator and coordinator of strategic resources in a sustained high-intensity conflict. For NATO, the lesson is that European deterrence and Atlantic security become the essential enabling condition for any sustained US military effort in Asia.

Ultimately, the TTX underscores a fundamental shift in how a Taiwan war must be understood from a European perspective. Europe does not fight such a war at the frontline – but it cannot avoid becoming one of its central pillars. Through industry, logistics, sanctions, diplomacy and infrastructure protection, Europe becomes a decisive enabler of coalition endurance. The strategic implication is clear: Europe's future role in global conflict will be defined less by where it deploys forces and more by how long and how effectively it can help to sustain the fight of others while preserving its own political cohesion and economic stability.

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