

KEY POINTS

1. During the Trump I and Biden presidencies, the United States applied growing pressure on NATO to turn against China. Although focused on protecting Europe, these efforts also attempted to expand the alliance's prerogatives into the Indo-Pacific.
2. Should this expansion continue, it could distract NATO from Russia, the only real threat that Europe faces.
3. It could also delay the emergence of a more autonomous Europe able to defend itself, thereby perpetuating current U.S. overstretch and reducing Washington's ability to concentrate on the China challenge in Asia.
4. NATO's turn against China might generate undue tensions with the PRC, deepen Sino-Russian cooperation, and cause controversy in the Global South, all of which would work against U.S. interests.
5. Instead of trying to fold Europe and Asia together to counter the Sino-Russian axis along the Eurasian rimland, the U.S. should keep NATO focused on Russia and encourage European strategic autonomy. It should refocus its own efforts on the Indo-Pacific and reduce the risk of escalation with Beijing.

THE PUSH FOR NATO INVOLVEMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

During the Trump I and Biden presidencies, U.S. leaders increasingly pressed NATO to shift its attention to the People's Republic of China (PRC). This approach is misguided, however, and risks weakening Europe's security and preventing the United States from reorienting its attention to more pressing needs in Asia.

Despite President Trump's skepticism of the Western alliance, his administration urged NATO to align with the hardening of America's China strategy after January 2017.¹ To achieve this, Washington portrayed the PRC as a competitor seeking to "challenge American power, influence, and interests," "change the international order in [its] favor," and "displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region."² It strongly condemned Beijing's efforts to "gain a strategic foothold in Europe by expanding its unfair trade practices and investing in key industries, sensitive technologies, and infrastructure."³ More specifically, the Trump administration argued that the PRC's acquisition of leading European companies, investments in local port facilities, and construction of local 5G internet networks could one day threaten NATO's mobility, interoperability, supply chains, communications, and intelligence-sharing.⁴

For all the controversies it triggered along the way, the Trump administration scored notable successes on this front, as illustrated by NATO's decision to include the PRC on its agenda in April 2019 and Europe's growing pushback against Huawei's bids to develop 5G networks across the continent.⁵ Although it did not

specifically aim for inter-theater cooperation, the Trump administration's push against China in Europe laid the groundwork for a gradual rapprochement between NATO and Washington's Indo-Pacific allies.⁶

President Biden endorsed his predecessor's stance on the PRC and quickly sought to expand NATO's turn against Beijing. Combined with his efforts to repair the American alliance network and recommit the U.S. to the so-called "liberal order," this campaign produced swift outcomes. NATO's 2021 annual summit communiqué claimed that "China's stated ambitions and assertive behavior present[ed] systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security." Thus the organization committed to engaging Beijing "with a view to defending the security interests of the Alliance" in areas such as economic security, telecommunications, and freedom of navigation.⁷

This momentum accelerated following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. First, Washington leveraged the historic joint statement that Xi Jinping had co-signed with Vladimir Putin a few weeks earlier, which condemned NATO's enlargement (a first for the PRC), proclaimed a friendship without "forbidden' areas," and pledged cooperation "against attempts by external forces to undermine... stability in their common adjacent regions."⁸ Second, the Biden administration used its pivotal role in the West's campaign in support of Ukraine to press European leaders to further harden their policies against China, including growing restrictions on Chinese economic and political activities in Europe, a stronger endorsement of Washington's tech war on the PRC, and "an active role in the Indo-Pacific [on issues such as] supporting freedom of navigation and maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."⁹ In parallel, the Biden administration requested that its Asian allies sanction Russia and back Ukraine.¹⁰

This U.S. push led European leaders to support the development of nascent linkages between NATO and the Indo-Pacific. For example, in 2019, NATO initiated new programs in domains such as 5G and outer space with the PRC and America's Asian allies in mind.¹¹ In parallel, the EU and leading European states such as the UK, France, and Germany published their first Indo-Pacific strategies.¹² They also increased their arms sales and naval presences in the region, as illustrated in 2021 by the dispatch of a French nuclear-propelled attack submarine to the South China Sea, the patrol of a British carrier strike group across the Western Pacific, and the first German frigate deployment in two decades, which ended its six-month journey in Japan, Washington's closest ally in the region.¹³

In 2021, America's NATO allies deployed a record 21 ships (in addition to those of the U.S. Seventh Fleet) in maritime Asia. Although their modalities were varied, these deployments were designed to emphasize the need for stability in a clear, if often implicit, reference to China's assertiveness. Going even further, the UK forged the AUKUS partnership, agreeing to jointly develop nuclear submarines and disruptive technologies with the U.S. and Australia. It also committed to "project cutting-edge military power [in maritime Asia] in support of NATO."¹⁴

The new Strategic Concept adopted by NATO in June 2022 recognized how "developments" in the Indo-Pacific could "directly affect Euro-Atlantic security."¹⁵ In November of that year, the Western alliance held its first ever meeting explicitly dedicated to the threat the PRC posed to Taiwan.¹⁶ In July 2023, it launched Individually Tailored Partnership Programs (ITPPs) with Australia, Japan, and South Korea to enhance interoperability and cooperation in emerging technologies.¹⁷

European states increased their strategic cooperation with America's Asian allies and partners, as exemplified by France's announcement of a joint vision for the Indo-Pacific with India, Britain's conclusion of a reciprocal access defense agreement with Japan, and Britain's Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) with Italy and Japan, designed to produce a next-generation fighter aircraft by 2035.¹⁸

They also continued their deployments in the Indo-Pacific, which included the participation of seven European countries in the United States' Rim of the Pacific exercises (RIMPAC) in June 2024, the world's biggest multinational maritime drills.¹⁹

The NATO administration consolidated this reorientation throughout, eager to demonstrate its enduring relevance as the U.S. turned its attention to Asia.²⁰ In line with Washington's cues, then-secretary general Jens Stoltenberg declared misguided the "whole idea of... distinguishing so much between China, Russia, either Asia-Pacific or Europe. It's one big security environment, and we have to address it all together."²¹ He also evoked the threat that the PRC's nuclear buildup and the emergence of a Sino-Russian nuclear dual front could pose to the alliance.²² Expanding the agenda further, then-NATO supreme allied commander Christopher Cavoli called for European and Asian states to collaborate closely against the "interlocking, strategic partnerships" that China had forged with Russia, Iran, and North Korea during the Ukraine war.²³

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 has revived uncertainties about NATO's future as the new Republican administration initiated talks with Russia over Ukraine without the EU and signaled its interest in a significant (if not drastic) reduction of the American contribution to Europe's security.²⁴ Additionally, the new administration suggested it "would much prefer that the overwhelming balance of European investment be on that continent" to allow the U.S. to use its "comparative advantage as an Indo-Pacific nation to support" its regional partners.²⁵

However, there is no guarantee that Washington will cease its efforts to push NATO against China in both Europe and Asia. Although today's context differs from 2017–2021, NATO was strengthened in important respects during the first Trump presidency, as exemplified by Washington's efforts to enhance the alliance's readiness, its full support to the European Deterrence Initiative, and its strident calls for higher European military budgets.²⁶ Those budgets did go up, perhaps due more to growing tensions with Putin's Russia over Ukraine and other issues.²⁷ The first Trump administration fiercely opposed any hint of European strategic autonomy.²⁸ Additionally, as illustrated by its threat not to "partner alongside" the states that would authorize Huawei's 5G internet networks, it used the prospect of a potential disengagement from NATO to incentivize European leaders to endorse America's China policy.²⁹ This could continue now that Beijing is looming even more prominently on the U.S. agenda.

Despite a raucous start, the Trump II administration has gradually tempered its hostility toward NATO, which can be attributed to U.S. concerns about a potential decline in American military exports to the region, the possibility of a European nuclear buildup, but also the prospect of a China-Europe rapprochement.³⁰ Despite its statements in favor of a geographic division of labor, the Trump administration might still be tempted to promote inter-theater cooperation, as suggested by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's acknowledgment that European militaries could be "useful" to influence the PRC's "calculus" in the Indo-Pacific.³¹

Meanwhile, despite the shock prompted by the Trump II administration's relative hostility, European leaders might once again endorse expanding NATO's agenda in Asia to retain Washington's favor instead of repairing their relationship with China or making the sacrifices necessary for the emergence of a genuine EU strategic autonomy.³² This may prove counterproductive if not dangerous, as shown by several inherent problems discussed below.

PROBLEM 1: WEAKENING NATO'S COHESION

The U.S. push to strengthen NATO's stance toward China could create more tensions within the alliance, thereby weakening its cohesion.

As noted, European leaders have lately accommodated America's demands regarding NATO's approach to China and the Indo-Pacific. This is not only because they view cooperation with the United States on that topic as an acceptable price to retain the U.S. security umbrella in Europe, but also because some of them agree with the reasoning behind such calls. France and the United Kingdom have significant territories, populations, and military assets in the Indo-Pacific region.³³ EU members all have deep economic interests in that part of the world.³⁴ Moreover, a war in Asia could conceivably lead the PRC to attack the U.S. homeland, thereby triggering Article 5 of the NATO charter—an attack on one is an attack on all.³⁵ Any putative U.S. conflict with China in Asia would likely have “ripple effects throughout global supply chains” and trigger a global economic depression.³⁶

Yet despite their concerns about Beijing and their desire to appease Washington, European leaders have always had good reasons to reject U.S. alarmism. Europe's geographic distance from maritime Asia naturally softens its threat perceptions regarding the PRC's military buildup.³⁷ Moreover, despite its historic decision in March 2019 to declare China a “systemic rival” (among other designations), the EU, due in part to its greater openness to international trade and its less stringent protection mechanisms, is especially sensitive to the PRC's economic appeal.³⁸

In contrast to America's elites, eager to maintain global hegemony, the Europeans, whose international influence has been dwindling for decades, are more at ease with the idea of relative decline.³⁹ Additionally, Europe lacks a defense industry—or military-industrial complex—with anything like the political influence of the U.S. version, which is using China's rise to justify its growing funding and influence.⁴⁰ Most importantly, Europe faces recurrently unstable neighborhoods on its eastern and southern flanks. The war in Ukraine has led some of its leaders (especially in Eastern Europe) to worry that NATO's growing interest in maritime Asia could divert its attention from Russia.⁴¹

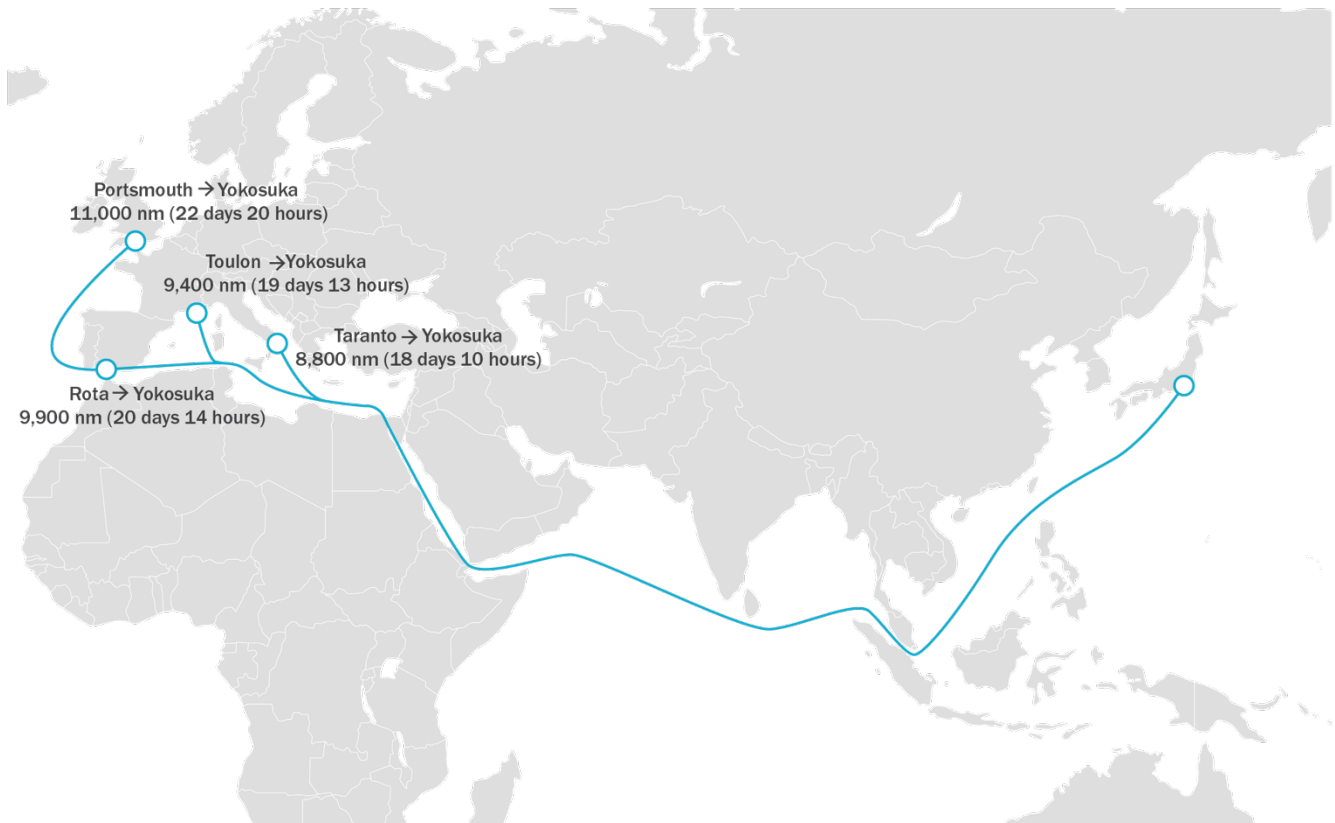
These factors have prompted European leaders to adopt a relatively calm reading of the China challenge. They've acknowledged that Beijing has not been directly involved in a war since 1979, that its defense budget is still much lower than America's, that its capacity to project power across oceans is still limited, and that it still faces powerful rivals and a complex geographic environment in its immediate vicinity.⁴²

As such, America's pressure on NATO to strengthen its China policies and become more involved in Asia has often antagonized—or at least divided—European leaders, leading them to keep a degree of distance from Washington. Their military deployments to the Indo-Pacific have consistently been more restrained than those of the United States. For instance, in sharp contrast with their U.S. counterpart, the French and British navies have refused to send patrols within 12 nautical miles of the areas contested by Beijing.⁴³

Furthermore, European leaders have frequently voiced concerns regarding Washington's assertive and military-centric Indo-Pacific policies. For example, during the NATO summit of June 2021, U.S. leaders had to exert pressure to toughen the alliance's final communiqué on China.⁴⁴ Moreover, whereas some allies (especially in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region) omitted the PRC from their respective statements, German Chancellor Angela Merkel insisted that Beijing would remain a “partner on many issues” and French President Emmanuel Macron stated that “China ha[d] little to do with the North Atlantic.”⁴⁵



EUROPEAN PORT DISTANCES FROM MARITIME ASIA



Note: Distances and travel times were calculated using sea-distances.org. Travel time assumes an average speed of 20 knots.

With its major ports thousands of nautical miles away, European nations are disinclined towards China threat inflation. (This graphic uses Yokosuka, Japan, as a destination because it hosts a U.S. naval base where European vessels have docked.)

Washington's AUKUS partnership with Australia and the UK further complicated efforts to align U.S. and European policy on China, as the deal, which was negotiated in secret, required Canberra to cancel a \$66 billion contract concluded a few years earlier to procure French diesel submarines and signaled a growing American assertiveness against the PRC.⁴⁶ AUKUS caused outrage in Paris, dismayed many other European capitals, and led Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, to condemn an attempt to "put Europe out of the game in the Indo-Pacific."⁴⁷ Moreover, the EU's first Indo-Pacific strategy announced the same week aimed to be "inclusive" and prioritized "cooperation not confrontation" with Beijing.⁴⁸ Beyond their frustrations with Washington's policies, some European leaders also considered it essential to maintain an independent line to enable the EU to gradually assert its "strategic autonomy" vis-à-vis the U.S.⁴⁹ Thus, in the following weeks, Brussels made clear it would "pursue [its] own interests, in particular, vis-à-vis China."⁵⁰

Although the shock caused by the Ukraine war initially helped both sides of the Atlantic close ranks against the PRC, tensions have persisted. For instance, European leaders complained about then-U.S. speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's provocative trip to Taiwan in August 2022.⁵¹ Paris opposed NATO's plan to open a liaison office in Japan in August 2023, a stance that received the tacit support of Germany and some Southern European states.⁵² More broadly, most of the region's NATO members remained lukewarm about the Biden administration's efforts to put Taiwan contingency scenarios on the alliance's agenda.⁵³

PROBLEM 2: WASTING LIMITED EUROPEAN RESOURCES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

From a technical perspective, greater NATO involvement could lead to a rise in the number of U.S.-friendly military assets positioned against China. In that regard, recent think tank studies have explained how France and Britain could enhance America's nuclear submarine fleet by 15 to 20 percent. They also speculated about the participation of European forces in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean region, and the Taiwan Strait in support missions such as protecting U.S. supply lines, conducting cyber operations (both defensive and offensive), and participating in a blockade against the PRC.⁵⁴

In parallel, Western strategists began discussing the steps that NATO could take to assist the United States in domains such as ballistic missile defense, intelligence sharing, and joint planning to enhance its capabilities in maritime Asia.⁵⁵ Other experts, including former American officials, advocated for including Hawaii in NATO's strategic perimeter and for inviting Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other Asian states to join the Western alliance.⁵⁶ They also discussed the possibility of an "Asian NATO," which the Trump I administration had floated in 2020.⁵⁷

Yet that approach would be unlikely to deter China or deliver useful military support in the event of a war. Inter-oceanic power projection remains a tremendously demanding endeavor from both a financial and technological perspective, two areas in which European navies have struggled to keep pace in the post-Cold War era.⁵⁸ Due to their long-standing dependency on the U.S. (and U.S. efforts to maintain that dependency), European states have largely neglected the assets necessary to meaningfully project power overseas over long periods, thereby making any naval deployments in maritime Asia mostly symbolic.⁵⁹

Moreover, although the aggregate European military budget has significantly increased in recent years (especially since the start of the Ukraine war), national rivalries and military-industrial lobbies have hindered the EU's military power from growing accordingly.⁶⁰ For instance, the bloc's militaries suffer from substantial redundancies, as illustrated by the existence of 178 major European weapon systems, compared to just 30 for the United States.⁶¹

TOP 10 NATO-EUROPE DEFENSE SPENDERS (2024 ESTIMATES)



Source: NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)," June 12, 2024.

Regardless of its military potential, the rationale for reallocating European assets to the Indo-Pacific region is flawed. One problem is the lack of military-industrial complementarities between Europe's land-based theater and maritime Asia's sea-and-air-based theater.⁶² Moreover, expanding NATO's strategic planning to Asia could exacerbate the significant intra-European differences that already exist regarding threat perceptions, weapon development priorities, and doctrinal orientations. For example, whereas Northern and

Eastern European states focus overwhelmingly on Russia, many Southern and Western European nations also closely monitor the migration-terrorism nexus in Africa and the Middle East.⁶³ In that context, adding the Indo-Pacific to NATO's agenda would undermine the alliance's internal cohesion.

Most importantly, expanding NATO's prerogatives to the Indo-Pacific would incur severe opportunity costs. Given the instability of Europe's eastern and southern flanks, along with a resurgent great power rivalry in the Arctic, any attempt to project military power toward the Indo-Pacific would make European countries even more vulnerable.⁶⁴

The Ukraine war has only compounded this problem, imposing tremendous costs on the EU's economic and industrial potential while generating significant political instability.⁶⁵ The bloc's considerable assistance to Kyiv has depleted European military stocks.⁶⁶ Moreover, thanks in large part to support from China, North Korea, and Iran, Russia has demonstrated an unexpected resilience to both battlefield losses and Western sanctions.⁶⁷ If measured in purchasing power parity, Russia's 2024 military budget surpassed the combined budgets of its European counterparts.⁶⁸ Admittedly, Russia has not performed well on Ukraine's battlefields and its capacity to wage war elsewhere in Europe is dubious (assuming Vladimir Putin ever entertained such a goal).⁶⁹ However, any NATO attempt to refocus on the Indo-Pacific would automatically erode the region's ability to deter or face future aggressions in whatever shape or form.

This exposure is even more glaring in light of recent developments. Since January 2025, the Trump administration has signaled it wants to disengage from the Ukraine conundrum and scale down the American troop presence in Europe to cut costs and refocus on the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁰ Although Washington has failed to halt the fighting between Kyiv and Moscow and signaled its growing frustration with Putin, some regional drawdown appears probable, regardless of the outcome on Ukraine's battlefields.⁷¹ Yet despite some efforts to step up, European leaders have urged the Trump administration to reconsider and have struggled mightily to assemble the agile and combat-ready military force that would be necessary to deter any future Russian aggression.⁷² With this in mind, NATO's involvement in the Indo-Pacific seems even more ill-advised.⁷³

PROBLEM 3: PERPETUATING THE EU'S DEPENDENCY ON THE U.S.

A growing NATO role in the Indo-Pacific also risks prolonging Europe's long-standing strategic dependency on the United States. The Ukraine war initially encouraged the region's leaders to take steps toward strategic autonomy. For example, the "Strategic Compass" that the EU published in March 2022 created a 5,000-strong Rapid Deployment Force, introduced faster decision-making processes, and enabled extra-budgetary tools to enhance the bloc's military responsiveness.⁷⁴ More broadly, according to the alliance, the number of NATO states that spent at least 2 percent of their GDP on defense jumped to 23 by the end of 2024, up from just three in 2014.⁷⁵ The aggregated military budget of NATO's European members plus Canada soared by 20 percent in 2024 to \$485 billion.⁷⁶

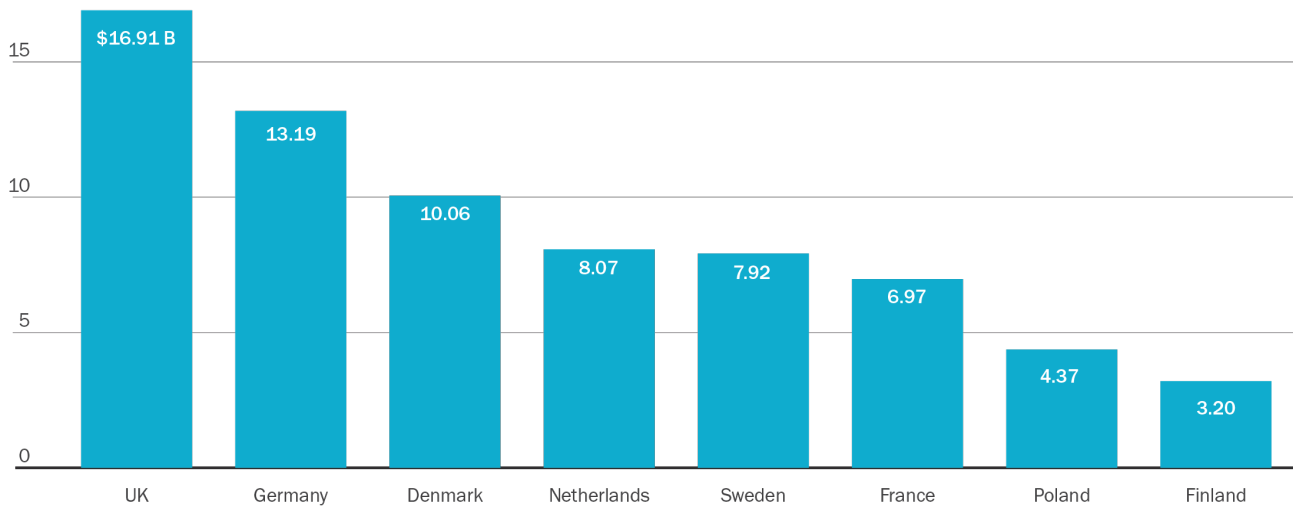
But those measures did not enhance European strategic autonomy or military capability independent of the United States. The Biden administration used the Ukraine war to reassert America's status as the cornerstone of European security. After February 2022, Washington increased its troop presence on the ground from 64,000 to 85,000–100,000 (depending on rotations) and deployed many of those troops to Eastern Europe, closer to Russia's border.⁷⁷ More broadly, America's massive mobilization in support of



Ukraine incentivized European leaders to increase their reliance on U.S. political leadership, strategic planning, and weapon systems.⁷⁸ For instance, the EU's "Strategic Compass" endeavored to expand Brussels' partnership with NATO across the board, including in outer space and with new technologies.⁷⁹ France, Germany, and Spain's plan to develop a world-class jet fighter aircraft by 2040 was questioned following Berlin's sudden decision to procure a new batch of American F-35s.⁸⁰

EUROPEAN MILITARY AID SENT TO UKRAINE

\$20 billion



Source: "Ukraine Support Tracker," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, June 16, 2025, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

Note: All Kiel Institute figures are originally in euros. All conversions to dollars made using Morningstar based on a conversion rate of 1.17 that was current as of July 21, 2025.

The Biden administration took advantage of Europe's military limitations to increase its access to European Defense Agency projects and to ensure that the EU's first-ever defense industrial strategy, adopted in March 2024, would be subsumed under the logic of Atlanticism.⁸¹ Far from representing a new trend, those moves were the latest iteration of a decades-old American opposition to any European policy that could make the region less dependent on the U.S. government and military corporations.⁸²

This dependency could persist through the Trump II administration. In June 2025, NATO's members pledged to increase their defense spending to 5 percent of GDP by 2035 (including 1.5 percent for "military adjacent" items like roads and bridges), which secretary-general Rutte described as a "quantum leap."⁸³ Yet this plan locks the U.S. in without guaranteeing that an integrated, combat-ready, and independent European military will develop by then.⁸⁴

European governments, already under heavy fiscal strain and exhausted by the Ukraine war, are unlikely to meet these prohibitively costly targets. Even if they do, they would still need to transcend their national rivalries, modernize their highly unionized military industries, address shortages of military and defense-industrial manpower, shed their long-standing preference for U.S. weapon systems, and make major advancements in miniaturized semiconductors, AI, and other critical technologies.⁸⁵ Although those objectives are not beyond reach, European leaders may continue to defer to U.S. leadership since Washington has not lowered its troop numbers, relinquished control over NATO's institutional setup, or

seriously contemplated curtailing its lucrative regional defense sales (which the 5 percent rule may take to new heights).⁸⁶

Requesting NATO take on more responsibilities in the Indo-Pacific would perpetuate this deep-seated dependency, further limiting the EU's ability to invest in its own security (and do so collectively) and increasing European leaders' desire to keep Washington as heavily involved as possible.⁸⁷ American involvement, being a known quantity, remains more appealing to politicians than the sacrifices, compromises, and uncertainties that a genuine effort towards European strategic autonomy would necessitate.⁸⁸

The risk of path dependency also exists on the other side of the Atlantic. An expansion of NATO's involvement in Asia could incline U.S. leaders to cling to the illusory belief that they can sustain their hegemony in *both* Europe and the Indo-Pacific by "growing the connective tissue" that unites Washington's "democratic allies and partners" in those two regions in the domains of "technology, trade, and security."⁸⁹

PROBLEM 4: EXACERBATING TENSIONS WITH CHINA

NATO's activities in the Indo-Pacific could also harm the West's relationship with Beijing, undermining beneficial trade and potentially even leading to conflict. NATO and China have a long history of mistrust going back to the PRC's founding in October 1949. Tensions were only exacerbated after the intervention of several Western European states in the Korean War and the participation of NATO allies in the embargo that followed.⁹⁰

Despite some cooperation and consultation against the Soviet Union after the early 1970s and against terrorism after 9/11, Chinese leaders tend to perceive NATO as designed to further America's encirclement of the PRC and worry about the alliance's post-Cold War expansion in continental Eurasia.⁹¹ They fear alliance military interventions without UN Security Council approval, remembering when U.S. B-2 bombers partly destroyed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by accident in 1999 (Beijing considered this deliberate), which led them to worry about potential hostile operations near Taiwan, Xinjiang, or Tibet.⁹² They also resent the increasingly close strategic partnerships that NATO has nurtured with Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, Mongolia, and other Chinese neighbors in the twenty-first century.⁹³

In recent years, Beijing has made it increasingly clear that it views the prospect of greater European involvement in its immediate vicinity as a hostile move dictated by the United States. For example, in March 2022, Chinese leaders warned that, "if allowed to go on unchecked," NATO's local ambitions would "push the Asia-Pacific over the edge of an abyss."⁹⁴ Three months later, they condemned how the alliance had "flexed its muscle" and "sought to stir up bloc confrontation" in the region.⁹⁵ In March 2023, Xi Jinping himself went one step further by accusing "Western countries—led by the U.S." of implementing "all-round containment, encirclement and suppression against [China]."⁹⁶

To be sure, the PRC's fierce rhetoric against the West stems partly from domestic political calculations and a desire to reach out to Russia and the Global South.⁹⁷ Chinese leaders understand that Europe is peripheral to their immediate security concerns and that the Biden administration's pressures played a significant role in the European turn against China.⁹⁸ Still, they resent Europe's mobilization against the "Sino-Russian" axis, increasingly stringent restrictions against Chinese companies, and growing (if reluctant) endorsement of



Washington's trade and tech war against the PRC, which includes drastic sanctions in the vital domain of chip-making equipment.⁹⁹

NATO's involvement in the Indo-Pacific could cause severe disruptions. The possibility of punitive Chinese economic measures is real. Although the PRC has employed conventional economic coercion for a long time, the Trump and Biden administrations' growing pressures on and sanctions against China and Russia have prompted Beijing to develop new legal and regulatory instruments to inflict potentially debilitating costs on states and companies that threaten its interests, including export controls and "property and asset seizures."¹⁰⁰

As suggested by its defiant response to threatened American tariffs in early 2025, China holds significantly greater economic leverage than in the recent past. It has reduced its dependency on Western markets, become a key supplier of critical minerals, and made breakthroughs in AI, green technology, and other high-value sectors.¹⁰¹ Although the PRC remains vulnerable in many respects, a full-fledged Sino-Western economic war would surely cripple Western nations—and the rest of the world.¹⁰²

The risk of a military conflagration cannot be dismissed either. The rise of China's capabilities and assertiveness has caused or contributed to multiple diplomatic crises near the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the Senkaku Islands, and other Indo-Pacific flashpoints.¹⁰³ Sino-Western economic tensions could lead to armed conflict.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of the military outcome, such a conflict would have catastrophic consequences for all, not to mention the possibility of a nuclear escalation.¹⁰⁵

PROBLEM 5: DEEPENING CHINA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH RUSSIA

NATO's deeper involvement in Asia could also incentivize China to strengthen its partnership with Russia. The Sino-Russian partnership has deepened significantly since the onset of the Ukraine war.¹⁰⁶ Some experts, including in the Trump II administration, have entertained a potential "reverse Kissinger" where the U.S. persuades the Kremlin to collaborate against the PRC (as Washington did with Beijing against the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s).¹⁰⁷ According to that logic, Washington could exploit the two countries' historical rivalry, their persistent competition in neighboring regions such as Central Asia and the Arctic, and Moscow's discomfort with China's rising power to its advantage.¹⁰⁸

Yet the Sino-Russian partnership is rooted in a deep fear and resentment of U.S. hegemony. It's also based on significant economic complementarities, similar authoritarian outlooks, and a strong personal bond between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Moreover, although the Ukraine war has called into question the stability of Putin's rule, regime change would be unlikely to prompt Moscow to alter its anti-Western strategic orientation.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, a growing NATO involvement in the Indo-Pacific would only further consolidate the Sino-Russian partnership.

This process could further compromise Europe's stability. Beijing's assistance has been vital to Russia since February 2022, from providing Putin's regime with a much-needed market outlet to supplying most of the dual-use technologies required by the Russian army—at tremendous cost to the European continent.¹¹⁰ Should those strategic ties deepen, it could lead Putin to prolong his campaign or resume it at a later time, especially if China agrees.¹¹¹ It could also result in new attempts to destabilize Europe through cyber-attacks, political influence activities, and other means.¹¹²



The consequences could be just as far-reaching in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, China could access new Russian military technologies. Moscow's exports have already enhanced the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as seen with its SU-35 fighter aircraft and S-400 anti-air missiles, which bolstered Beijing's defenses and the range of its air force.¹¹³ But Russia has other assets that could help shift the regional balance of power, including submarine technologies that would significantly enhance the stealth of Chinese submarines (which currently lag far behind the U.S. in this critical domain).¹¹⁴

The risk of Sino-Russian wartime collaboration would also increase. Among other contributions, the Kremlin could provide "a strategic rear" to China, interfere with U.S. surveillance capabilities, or augment the PRC's military-industrial potential.¹¹⁵ Beijing and Moscow could also coordinate (possibly with Iran and North Korea) to destabilize the Korean Peninsula, the Strait of Hormuz, Europe's neighborhoods, or other areas, thereby reducing the United States' capacity to focus on countering China in the Indo-Pacific.¹¹⁶

PROBLEM 6: LOSING SUPPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A growing NATO push in the Indo-Pacific could also degrade the alliance's image in the Global South. Although many countries have soured on China's economic dominance and abuses in recent years, the PRC retains significant appeal in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and other developing regions, with some surveys ranking it ahead of the United States in terms of popular opinion.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, the Biden administration's attempts to frame its grand strategy around the "democracy vs. autocracy" narrative and the so-called "rules-based international order" have revived the resentment that the West's military interventionism, devastating sanctions, constant political interference, and troubling double standards have left in many parts of the Global South.¹¹⁸ This rejection largely explains why Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and many other countries have refused to embrace the West's narrative against Russia and China in the Ukraine war, and why Moscow and Beijing's attempts to portray NATO as warmongering found traction in some parts of the world.¹¹⁹

Although they may appear distant at first glance, these trends could prove detrimental to the United States. For all its missteps, the PRC has deftly utilized the controversies generated by the West in the Global South to consolidate its foreign port presence; maximize access to foreign strategic minerals; contest established norms, technical rules, and technological standards in key international organizations; and promote global initiatives that present China as a force for good and the U.S. as a declining and illegitimate leader—among many other gains.¹²⁰ These benefits could help Chinese leaders mitigate some of their vulnerabilities (i.e., energy and food security), augment their capacity to inflict economic pain, and divert Washington's focus and resources, thereby reducing its ability to hold the line in maritime Asia.¹²¹

This problem is even more acute in the Indo-Pacific, where many Global South nations have been skeptical, if not openly hostile, to the prospect of a growing NATO presence. For instance, echoing China's rhetoric, the then-prime minister of Singapore emphasized in May 2022 that an arrangement where "one bloc confronts another... has not been the history in Asia." Likewise, commenting on the (then-likely) future opening of a NATO office in Japan in June 2023, a senior Indonesian diplomat wrote that the Western alliance's involvement in the Indo-Pacific would "do more harm than good."¹²² Despite being the object of ardent U.S. courtship, Indian leaders have repeatedly stressed that the "NATO template does not apply" to their country.¹²³



To be sure, China's rise continues to generate intense concerns throughout the Indo-Pacific. But NATO's growing profile would also increase tensions, helping Beijing expand its economic reach and develop closer security relations with some of the region's states while eroding America's ability to do just that.¹²⁴

A MORE RESTRAINED NATO, A MORE EFFECTIVE U.S.

Washington's push to increase NATO's profile in the Indo-Pacific is flawed and dangerous. A European pivot to Asia will not help much from a military perspective. Among other issues, it will exacerbate tensions with China, encourage further Russo-Chinese military cooperation, and distract European leaders from much-needed efforts to consolidate their own security.

The United States should refrain from transforming NATO into a full-fledged anti-China instrument and from extending the alliance's strategic perimeter into the Indo-Pacific. Instead, it should acknowledge Russia's resilience and inability to conquer Europe, and Europe's significant military potential. It should then scale down its involvement in European security.

A steady reduction of America's involvement in the region would force the Europeans to address their dependency on Washington full-heartedly. It would incentivize them to focus on the real and urgent problems they face in their immediate eastern neighborhood instead of wasting precious resources to go after China halfway across the world in the hope of keeping the U.S. heavily engaged in Europe.

As they make this necessary adjustment, transatlantic consultations and technical support would enable the U.S. to assist its allies in addressing the logistical, political, and financial bottlenecks that hinder the development of meaningful European combat capabilities. Washington could also encourage NATO to strengthen its communication channels and create new confidence-building mechanisms with the PRC to limit the risk of Sino-Western conflict.

Although it departs from America's traditional self-conception as the "indispensable nation" and may strain the transatlantic relationship, this approach would enable the U.S. to reorient its focus toward the Indo-Pacific and limit the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Washington should likewise work to free its grand strategy from the ideological and political delusions of the past. A more realistic and restrained NATO can mean a more focused and effective United States.



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