

2027: The Year of European Strategic Autonomy

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While the European and East Asian theaters of operation can be seen as distant from each other, we argue that the coming years will illustrate their strong interdependence. Any viable strategy for Europe's future must take this reality into account.

The leading role played by the US in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression, illustrated by \$35 billion in US security assistance¹ to Ukraine and an increase in US forces stationed in Europe by 20,000 troops,² has led many analysts to proclaim a new US "pivot to Europe" and the premature death of the European "strategic autonomy"³ project, which aimed to reduce European states' military dependence on US capabilities. Europeans are not ready⁴ to defend their continent without strong American involvement, and Russia's war against Ukraine has led them to become more dependent on the US, not less.⁵

However, concluding that the objective of a more strategically autonomous Europe has become irrelevant is short-sighted in terms of both time and space. Since at least 2018, the Pentagon has considered that US forces are unable to prevail in two simultaneous great-power wars. This has established a geostrategic dilemma between the European and East Asian theaters of operation, with resources and capabilities invested in one theater being lost for the other, and vice versa. Although the Biden administration has prioritized support for Ukraine against Russia in recent months, it clearly sees addressing the Chinese challenge as the main strategic priority of the US in the coming decades. Rather than taking strong US support for granted, Europeans should assume that this support may vary considerably depending on future developments in the East

1 — US Department of State, U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine, Fact Sheet, April, 2023.

2 — US Department of Defense, U.S. Defense Contributions to Europe, Fact Sheet, June, 2022.

3 — Judy Asks: Is European Strategic Autonomy Over?, Carnegie Europe, January, 2023.

4 — Hugo Meijer, Stephen G. Brooks; Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back. *International Security* 2021; 45 (4): 7–43.

5 — Liana Fix, U.S. Leadership on Ukraine Is Increasing European Dependence, *World Politics Review*, February, 2023.

Asian theater.

Europeans must integrate the risk of a double front into their strategic calculations. Since Russia has already opened a first front in Europe, the Taiwan factor is becoming a more essential variable in European security. Although China is currently unable to invade Taiwan in the short term, many observers believe that it will be capable of doing so as early as 2027, which is a crucial milestone in the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernization process. The implications for European security are twofold. First, Americans and Europeans should see their military support for Ukraine not only as support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also as a means of weakening Russian offensive capabilities in the long term. The goal should be that by 2027, when China is able to open a second front, Russia should no longer be a major threat in Europe. Second, Europeans should invest in their strategic autonomy to ensure that when China is able to invade Taiwan the potential redistribution of US efforts among theaters does not leave Europe in a vulnerable position.

The Double-Front Problem

Beginning with the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the US has sought to prepare its forces for a confrontation with one great military power,⁶ China or Russia. According to this logic, the US cannot prevail in two theaters of operation at once, but it can defeat one great power while deterring opportunistic attempts from another. While proponents of this doctrine are aware of the risk of the US being forced to fight in two theaters, they argue that the best way to avoid a second major war is to produce a deterrent demonstration of strength in the first theater.⁷ President Biden appeared to follow this logic when, in May 2022, he emphasized that a strong response to Russia in Ukraine would help to deter China⁸ from attempting similar action in Taiwan.

However, because facing two simultaneous great-power wars is a formidable task, it can be argued that the ability of the US to respond strongly to one adversary says little of its ability to do the same in two theaters simultaneously; it cannot fully deter the opening of an opportunistic second front. The two-theaters dilemma is made even more acute by the return of high-intensity warfare, which consumes massive amounts of equipment and ammunition. Even if the US is not directly involved in the Russia-Ukraine war, its military support for Ukraine already exposes the shortcomings of the US defense industrial base⁹; a double front would thus risk overwhelming its capacity.

6 — Evan Braden Montgomery, Posturing for great power competition: Identifying coercion problems in U.S. nuclear policy. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45:6-7, pages 1021-1043, 2022.

7 — Brands, Hal Montgomery, Evan Braden, One War is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition, *Texas National Security Review*: Volume 3, Issue 2, Spring 2020.

8 — Seung Min Kim, Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Cleve R. Wootson, Jr., Biden takes aggressive posture toward China on Asia trip, *Washington Post*, May, 2022.

9 — Seth G. Jones, Empty bins in a Wartime Environment, the Challenge to the U.S. Defense Industrial Base, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 2023.

Certainly, the two-theater dilemma should be put into perspective, as the capability requirements in Europe are mainly land based, whereas a confrontation with China would mainly involve air and sea power. However, the US ground presence in Europe has implications for the logistical and financial support that could also be useful in Asia. Besides, any substantial reinforcement of the US army's presence in Europe would involve sealift and air support assets. Conversely, US ground capabilities play an important role in conventional deterrence in Asia¹⁰ and could be needed to prepare Taiwanese ground forces to face a Chinese invasion. Military support to Ukraine has already caused delays in weapons deliveries to Taiwan,¹¹ illustrating how a double front would impose hard choices on the US.

Priority to Asia

Europeans should consider the risk of a double front as an essential factor in their strategic calculations, especially since addressing the Chinese threat in Taiwan is clearly the number one priority of the US. The Biden administration's commitment to the defense of Europe has already led to criticism from the "Asia first"¹² camp, according to which Ukraine is a distraction from Taiwan, and US efforts should focus on deterring China. The election of a Republican House of Representatives, which is more reluctant to support Ukraine,¹³ has reinforced this argument. While many options have been proposed to enable the US to address the two-theater dilemma—for example, seeking to divide China and Russia, focusing on East Asia,¹⁴ reinforcing coordination and burden sharing among allies,¹⁵ or adopting a lighter-footprint strategy¹⁶ – there is a broad consensus on the priority that should be given to China and the East Asian theater.

The Biden administration's Ukrainian policy can also be interpreted through this premise. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's statement on April 25, 2022, that the US goal was to see Russia "weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine"¹⁷ can be seen as an expression of the desire to see the Russian threat diminish to the point of allowing US

10 — Congressional Research Service, U.S. Ground Forces in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress Updated August 30, 2022.

11 — Gordon Lubold, Doug Cameron, Nancy A. Youssef, U.S. Effort to Arm Taiwan Faces New Challenge With Ukraine Conflict, Wall Street Journal, November 2022.

12 — Elbridge Colby, Oriana Skylar Mastro, Ukraine Is a Distraction From Taiwan, Wall Street Journal, February 2022.

13 — Max Bergmann, U.S. Security Assistance To Ukraine Is Going To Get Complicated, Texas National Security Review, March 2023.

14 — A. Wess Mitchell, A Strategy for Avoiding Two-Front War, The National Interest, August 2021.

15 — Luis Simón, Bridging U.S.-Led Alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific: An Inter-theater Perspective, CSIS, May 2022.

16 — Raphael S. Cohen, Ukraine And The New Two War Construct, Texas National Security Review, January 2023.

17 — Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Secretary Lloyd Austin Remarks to Traveling Press, April 2022.

power to refocus fully on the Chinese challenge. A successful Russia in Ukraine would risk binding additional US resources to Europe¹⁸ in the long term and severely hinder the Pentagon's ability to effectively balance China's growing capabilities in East Asia. The current heavy US investment in Europe should not be interpreted as a structural "pivot in reverse" toward Europe, but rather as a form of indirect investment in the medium-term ability of the US to focus on the Chinese threat,¹⁹ following a "sequencing strategy".²⁰ The 2022 National Defense Strategy²¹ tends to validate this hypothesis. It explicitly distinguishes between a "pacing" (i.e., a long-term) Chinese challenge and an "acute" (i.e., a higher but shorter-term) Russian threat, which implies that support for Ukraine should not be at the expense of the longer-term ability of the US to respond to the Chinese threat.

Consequently, Europeans should anticipate that the potential opening of a second front in East Asia would have dramatic consequences for European security. The main knock-on effect that Europeans should consider is a reassessment of the commitment of the US to Europe. If the regional military balance in East Asia seems increasingly favorable to China,²² the US can hope to rely on its global superiority to reverse this trend, leading to the delegation of more responsibility to its European allies.²³ As a former commander of the US Army in Europe stated in 2018, "The US needs a very strong European pillar [...] The US does not have the capacity to do everything it needs to do in Europe and the Pacific to deal with the Chinese threat."²⁴ According to this logic, Europeans should invest in their strategic autonomy to be better prepared for responsibility for the effort against Russia in the event of a crisis in Asia. Conversely, if Europeans' weakness forced the US to maintain too great a commitment in Europe, thereby hampering its capabilities in East Asia, this could lead to a feeling of entrapment in Washington and threaten the transatlantic relationship.

The 2027 Turning Point

At what point should the risk of a second front in Asia lead Europeans to show more strategic autonomy in Europe? The timing is critical. The clearest manifestation of the two-theater dilemma would be a Chinese attempt to invade Taiwan. More limited military action in the Strait, such as air raids or a naval embargo, would not require the same mobilization of US forces and would pose

18 — Michael J. Green, Even an 'Asia First' Strategy Needs to Deter Russia in Ukraine, Foreign Policy, février 2022.

19 — Luis Simón, America's Indo-Pacific Strategy Runs Through Ukraine, décembre 2022.

20 — Hal Brands, Can the US Take on China, Iran, and Russia All at Once?, Bloomberg, octobre 2022.

21 — Department of Defense Releases its 2022 Strategic Reviews – National Defense Strategy, Nuclear Posture Review, and Missile Defense Review.

22 — Ashley Townshend and James Crabtree, The U.S. Is Losing Its Military Edge in Asia, and China Knows It, New York Times, juin, 2022.

23 — Andrew A. Michta, Ukraine Proves 'Asia Vs. Europe' Is A False US Foreign Policy Choice, 1945, février 2022.

24 — Vanessa Gera, Retired US general says war with China likely in 15 years, AP, octobre 2018.

a less severe double-front dilemma. A full-scale invasion of Taiwan would only be a realistic prospect when China achieves clear air and sea superiority and can transport invasion troops in a large amphibious fleet,²⁵ which it does not currently have.

According to some analysts²⁶ and intelligence sources,²⁷ China has also been surprised by the resilience and resistance of Ukrainian armed forces, despite the—at least numerical—superiority of the Russian army. The parallel with the China-Taiwan case makes the scenario of an invasion of Taiwan look even riskier for the PLA, given the specific difficulties associated with invading an island. Since the political cost of a failed invasion would likely be high for the Communist regime, Chinese leaders would be reluctant to launch an invasion unless they were confident that the PLA could successfully execute it.²⁸ According to a 2022 US Department of Defense report,²⁹ invading Taiwan would be “a significant political and military risk” for China, “even assuming a successful landing and breakout.”

However, it is clear that these material obstacles have no impact on Beijing’s fundamental desire to return the island to the Chinese fold in the longer term—an “historic mission of the party”³⁰ according to Xi Jinping. Xi’s official deadline is unclear; the 2049 date, often cited by the president’s predecessors, is no longer in his speeches³¹ or in China’s defense white papers. In terms of the means of such reunification, a recent defense white paper does not exclude the use of force.³² In fact, China’s development-security paradigm has shifted in the last few years. Recent research has shown that Xi’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has pushed security matters on a par with development goals.³³ This means that, even though maintaining growth is still a top priority for the CCP, it is no longer the priority of the country. China is now ready to sustain important economic losses if it perceives its security to be impaired.

25 — Blasko, Dennis J., China Maritime Report No. 20: The PLA Army Amphibious Force, CMSI China Maritime Reports. 20, 2022.

26 — Jeffrey Goldberg, A Russian Defeat in Ukraine Could Save Taiwan, The Atlantic, July 2022.

27 — Sophia Barkoff, CIA confirms possibility of Chinese lethal aid to Russia, CBS News, February 2023.

28 — Joel Wuthnow Derek Grossman Phillip C. Saunders Andrew Scobell Andrew N.d. Yang, Crossing The Strait China’s Military Prepares For War With Taiwan, National Defense University Press, 2022.

29 — 2022 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China.

30 — Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 2022.

31 — Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China’s Peaceful Reunification, January 2019.

32 — The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era The People’s Republic of China The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office, August 2022.

33 — Howard Wang, ‘Security Is a Prerequisite for Development’: Consensus-Building toward a New Top Priority in the Chinese Communist Party, Journal of Contemporary China, 2022.

US intelligence believes that China is actively strengthening its capabilities to invade Taiwan in the short term.³⁴ In June 2021, General Mark Milley argued that China wished to have the ability to invade the island within the next six years,³⁵ but might not intend to do so in the near term. Specifically, 2027 is often put forward as a possible date for an invasion, largely because of its symbolic value: it would be the 100th anniversary of the PLA—one of the milestones of its modernization—³⁶ and the year of Xi’s bid for a 4th term. While this does not mean that the CCP plans to invade Taiwan, Xi would like to have the option by then.

Getting Europe Ready

Europeans should assume that from 2027 onwards, the hypothesis of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan will become credible, and the US will increasingly have to refocus its attention and resources on deterring China in East Asia. This would be true with a Europe-friendly administration, but it is even likelier if a more nationalist Republican administration comes to power in the 2024 US elections. By 2027 at the latest, Europeans will have to take the lead in Western military support of Ukraine and in the defense of Europe against Russia. In the face of a major crisis in the Middle East or Africa, even if it involves Russia or China, Europeans will also have to be able to respond without relying on strong US leadership. This approach implies that Europe’s project of “strategic autonomy” is not dead but needs to be revived and phased in.

In phase one—prior to 2027—it is likely that the US can remain involved in Europe while preparing for limited Chinese action in East Asia, short of a full-scale invasion of Taiwan. However, US support for Ukraine could also wane for internal political reasons. The European and Americans’ joint objectives should be to enable the Ukrainians to defend themselves and to substantially weaken Russian capacity to wage offensive war. If Ukraine, with strong Western backing, succeeds in weakening Russian power in the next few years, the pivot that the US will eventually have to make to deal with a possible invasion of Taiwan will not leave Europe in too vulnerable a position. Russian forces in Ukraine have already suffered human³⁷ and material³⁸ losses well beyond initial projections, and some analysts believe that the erosion of Russian capabilities and the strengthening of NATO will soon allow the US to prioritize Asia.³⁹

34 — Katie Bo Lillis, Michael Conte, Jennifer Hansler and Veronica Stracqualursi, US intelligence officials warn China is ‘working hard’ to be able to take over Taiwan militarily, CNN May 2022.

35 — Sam LaGrone, Milley: China Wants Capability to Take Taiwan by 2027, Sees No Near-term Intent to Invade, June 2021.

36 — Liu Xuanzun, Xi stresses PLA centenary goals, military modernization at 20th CPC National Congress, Global Times, October 2022.

37 — Ann M. Simmons-Follow and Nancy A. Youssef, Russia’s Casualties in Ukraine Near 200,000, Wall Street Journal, February 2023.

38 — Stijn Mitzer and Jakub Janovsky, Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The 2022 Russian Invasion Of Ukraine, February 2022.

39 — Thomas G. Mahnken, Could America Win a New World War? What It Would Take to Defeat Both China and Russia, Foreign Affairs, October 2022.

The objective should be that by 2025, Europeans can offer the bulk of military support to Ukraine, and by 2027—phase two—they can deter Russian aggression with only limited support from the US. Admittedly, the task would be easier against a Russia weakened by defeat, but it cannot be ruled out that Russia would quickly rearm. In this case, Europe should be able to count on Ukraine’s unique experience, military skills, and moral strength, ideally by integrating the country into NATO and the EU. By combining European investments with strong initial US support, the weakening of Russia, and the addition of Ukrainian forces, European strategic autonomy could become a realistic prospect when the Chinese threat reaches a critical stage in East Asia.

NATO should accompany this movement by explicitly endorsing the objective of European strategic autonomy⁴⁰ as an essential condition for its resilience and effectiveness. In the context of the implementation of the New Force Model agreed on in Madrid in June 2022, which provides for the rapid availability of 300,000 troops, the debate on the progressive “Europeanization” of NATO⁴¹ or on a “European pillar” of NATO should be revived. While the presence of US troops on European soil will remain important to NATO’s cohesion, it will be critical to embed in NATO’s military planning, scenarios, and exercises the objective of being able to maintain a credible and ready first line of defense, even under severe restrictions on the availability of US capabilities. It will also be essential to send public signals about this European pillar so that even the worst-case scenario of a full-scale Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which would force the US to focus its efforts on the East Asian theater, does not affect the credibility of NATO’s conventional deterrence in Europe and is not seen as a window of opportunity for Russia.

As for the EU, it should substantially upgrade the ambitions of its 2022 Strategic Compass and by 2025 aim to become a major driver of member states’ capability-building efforts, whether for national armies or Ukrainian forces. Eventually, the EU’s objective should be to collectively balance Russia’s defense production capacity. Substantial investments⁴² should be made at the European level to support the joint procurement of the same military equipment⁴³ by several member states and the rapid adaptation of the European defense industry’s capacities. Joint procurement, in addition to allowing better spending by generating economies of scale, would promote the interoperability of European armies, facilitate the delivery of standardized equipment to Ukraine and stimulate closer ties among European defense industries. Given the challenge presented by the risk of a double front from 2027 onwards, the EU will also have to go beyond the targeted and ad hoc financial instruments currently in place—the European Peace Facility for military support to Ukraine, the European Defense

40 — Pierre Haroche & Martin Quencez, *NATO Facing China: Responses and Adaptations*, *Survival*, 64:3, 73-86, 2022.

41 — Sven Biscop, *The New Force Model: NATO’s European Army?*, Egmont Policy Brief, September 2022.

42 — Pierre Haroche, *Why the EU needs a wartime investment plan*, LSE, September 2022.

43 — Max Bergmann and Sophia Besch, *Why European Defense Still Depends on America*, March 2023.

Fund, and the European Defense Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act⁴⁴ to support the defense industry—and establish a genuine European defense budget through which the EU would be able to purchase military equipment, preferably produced by the European industry, for Ukraine, member states, or the EU itself. Only such a leap forward would make credible Europeans' ability to ensure the continuity of their defense in the event of a high-intensity war in East Asia.

Europeans are now focused on Ukraine and its immediate needs. While this is understandable, a viable strategy, even in the medium term, must be based on a global vision of space (the two-theater dilemma) and timing (2027 and the pace of the Chinese threat). By broadening the focus, it is clear that strategic autonomy is not dead; it is more vital than ever.