By Luis Simón

THE ISSUE
Although U.S. strategic competition with China and Russia is often presented as a challenge with two separate fronts, this brief argues that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters are increasingly linked. Insofar as preserving a favorable balance of power in these two regions hinges largely on U.S. power, and as long as they both continue to exercise a significant pressure on U.S. defense resources, their alliance and deterrence architectures should be looked at from an inter-theater perspective. Thus, optimally managing a two-front challenge would require a serious effort to bridge U.S.-led alliances in both regions.

INTRODUCTION
The war in Ukraine, and the need to deter further Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, has triggered a debate about the United States’ ability to adequately resource a much-needed rebalance to Asia and prioritize strategic competition with China. For some, Ukraine is a dangerous distraction: the United States should avoid getting bogged down in Europe, lest it incentivize Beijing to engage in opportunistic aggression in Asia. According to this line of thinking, deterrence in Asia, and the security of the United States’ Indo-Pacific allies, hinges on U.S. restraint in Ukraine and in Europe more broadly. Others, however, argue that a hot war and the prospect of further military aggression will inevitably compel the United States to strengthen its posture in Europe in the foreseeable future. This does not mean that Washington should take its eyes off China. Rather, it should prepare to deter and win a war on two fronts simultaneously. A Russian failure in Ukraine could conceivably change U.S. calculations over the medium term and even lay the groundwork for a proper strategic rebalance to Asia.

Should the United States establish a clear priority between Russia and China or go all in on both fronts? What are the implications of each option for U.S. defense strategy? And where do the United States’ European and Asian allies come into the picture? U.S.-allied dominance at sea and the preservation of favorable balances of power in Europe and East Asia should be seen as interdependent concepts or parts of a “geostrategic trinity” of power, upon which the open, rules-based international system largely rests. As long as preserving a balance of power in Europe and East Asia hinges largely on U.S. power, and as long as these two regions continue to exercise a significant pressure on U.S. defense resources, their alliance and deterrence architectures will probably remain intertwined. The question is not so much which region matters most or under which circumstances. The unraveling of the balance of power in one region would punch a hole in the U.S.-led forward defense perimeter in Eurasia, endanger U.S.-allied dominance at sea, and eventually threaten the balance in the other region. Hence the United States’ European and Asian allies have a stake in the preservation of favorable balances of power in each other’s region and in U.S. maritime dominance more broadly. It is also why the U.S.-led deterrence and alliance architectures in Europe and Asia should be looked at from an inter-theater perspective.
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Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has prompted the mobilization of countries such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea, who have joined the sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union and provided their own support to Ukraine. Building on such political momentum would allow to promote an inter-theater approach to deterrence and alliances in Europe and East Asia. Critically, such an inter-regional approach can allow the United States and its allies to collectively navigate the two-front problem and adequately resource deterrence in Europe and East Asia simultaneously. Even though mutual defense commitments may remain intra-regional, as opposed to inter-regional, greater coordination between U.S.-led alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific could help ensure an optimal allocation of U.S. and allied strategic resources. Specifically, both sets of alliances should upgrade consultation mechanisms at the political and military levels and apply an inter-theater lens to burden sharing, force planning, and posture.

TWO COMPETITORS, TWO FRONTS

The United States recognizes both China and Russia as “long-term strategic competitors” and warns specifically about the threat they pose to their immediate neighbors—many of whom are U.S. treaty allies—and the existence of favorable regional balances of power. This challenge is arguably further compounded by Sino-Russian military cooperation and the prospect of “coordinated probing”—the notion that Russia and China could engage in aggressive behaviour in Europe and East Asia simultaneously, so as to “outflank” the United States. Against this backdrop, there is an intense debate in scholarly and policy circles about how geostrategic developments and U.S. security commitments in Europe are likely to affect those in East Asia and vice versa.

Whatever lessons recent history may offer, they are imperfect at best. To be sure, the United States also faced the challenge of simultaneously upholding the deterrence and alliance architectures of Europe and East Asia during the Cold War. However, the main threat referent in each region at that time was the same great power competitor: the Soviet Union. If the United States felt it had to step up its contribution to one region (e.g., Europe) in response to a perceived increased Soviet threat therein, it would not need to worry too much about disattending the other region. After all, Soviet resources were also limited, and a Soviet prioritization of Europe would automatically limit Moscow’s strategic bandwidth in East Asia. Thus, the United States faced a two-front competition during the Cold War but not two significant (great power) competitors in two different regions. A key challenge today is that both competitors have more capabilities in aggregate than anything the United States and its allies faced during the Cold War, precisely because of China’s rise and Russia’s nuclear arsenal.

World War II may be a better analogy. The United States also sought to heed off the prospect of a regional hegemon in Europe and East Asia. However, this analogy is also inadequate for several reasons. First, World War II was a shooting war, while the United States is currently focused on peacetime competition with China. Second, the United States joined a war that was already under way. Third, even though the United States had wartime allies, it did not have preexisting alliances or forward-deployed forces in either region in peacetime, allowing it to focus on deterring wars. And fourth, the United States’ wartime allies (notably Soviet Russia and Great Britain) were significant powers by global standards, even comparable to U.S. adversaries. World War II may thus only offer limited clues about how Washington could navigate competition with Russia and China in peacetime, whereby preexisting alliances and U.S. force deployments in Europe and East Asia are important, even critical factors. How, then, should policymakers think about the current process of strategic competition?

ENTER UKRAINE

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has reignited long-standing debates about U.S. geostrategic priorities. At the risk of oversimplifying, there are two broad camps or prisms: “China first” and “two-front war.” Some experts and scholars argue that the United States should prioritize the China threat in Asia and warn that getting bogged down in competition with Russia in Europe would pave the ground for Chinese opportunistic aggression in Asia, most
likely in Taiwan. Others contend that the United States can walk and chew gum at the same time and should in fact be ready to deter and win “two high-intensity wars” simultaneously.

The China first vs. two-front war debate is partly misguided. Advocates of both camps actually appear to agree on some important points. There seems to be a consensus that the United States has a fundamental interest in preserving a balance of power in both Europe and East Asia—two regions that boast the largest concentration of economic, industrial, and military power in the world outside North America. With few exceptions, most experts also seem to agree that Asia should come first, regardless of whether the current crisis in Europe may require more U.S. bandwidth in the short term, for two main reasons. The first relates to China’s economic size and technological development and the fact that its bid for regional hegemony in East Asia goes beyond the military domain. Russia lacks China’s economic or technological heft, and the threat it poses to European security is primarily a military one, which for now is mainly confined to Russia’s immediate neighborhood. Second, and critically, East Asia’s security and geopolitical architecture is much more fragile than Europe’s. The U.S. defense perimeter in East Asia enjoys limited depth. China’s territory hugs the Western Pacific, and with the exception of Japan and Taiwan, there is little standing between China and U.S. forces in the Pacific. This contrasts with the surplus of strategic depth the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enjoys in Europe, encompassing much of the north European plain, Europe’s two main “internal seas” (the Mediterranean and Baltic), and approaches from the North Atlantic.

Because the China first and two-front war prisms seem to share some basic geostrategic assumptions, the crux of the matter is how much to prioritize one region at the expense of the other and what that may mean for U.S. defense strategy.

Because China and Russia share key aspects of their worldviews, have been coordinating their positions, and are pursuing similar types of capabilities and strategies, whatever steps the United States ought to take to deter one competitor will automatically reinforce deterrence vis-à-vis the other. Of course, China and Russia are different, and so are Europe and East Asia. There is no single approach to great power deterrence that is fit for all competitors or theaters—the United States and its allies will need to account for geographical and other specificities. However, the bulk of U.S. operational concepts and capabilities can arguably be leveraged against both competitors. Specifically, nuclear modernization, long-range strike assets, and dominance at sea, in space, or in the cyber realm are promising in both European and East Asian contexts, regardless of the more mundane question of whether more of those units should be deployed in one region at the expense of the other.
A China first prism puts the emphasis on “real trade-offs” and on the notion that setting clear priorities is the essence of strategy. According to such perspectives, Washington must prioritize those threats that matter most because U.S. resources are limited. This is particularly relevant in a context of alleged “relative decline.” The United States may well possess an impressive suite of global strategic capabilities that are good for all seasons, competitors, or theaters. However, those capabilities can hardly be available in multiple locations simultaneously—losses incurred in one contingency or region limit the forces available to other regions, underscoring the risks of opportunistic aggression in undefended areas.

An important element of the China first vs. two-front war debate has to do with how U.S. allies in Europe and East Asia perceive Washington’s extended deterrence commitments in each other’s region and whether uneasiness about U.S. commitments can undermine allied cohesion. Thus, for instance, calls for “European strategic autonomy” have been fueled by the perception that the United States is set to rebalance to Asia over the long term to prioritize competition with China, which raises questions about the sustainability of its security commitments in Europe. Those advancing China first arguments in the United States are probably more likely to embrace the notion that Europe can defend itself. Regardless of the obstacles that may stand in the way of a meaningful European defense effort, proponents of China first may be ready to take the risk because they believe the United States should focus on Asia anyway.

Another argument in support of China first has to do with the importance of tailoring U.S. strategy around specific competitors. The best competitive strategies leverage the proclivities and weaknesses of specific competitors and seek to design operational concepts and capabilities to exploit such weaknesses. During the Cold War, the United States invested heavily in a bomber force so as to exploit Soviet fears and incentivize Moscow to invest in expensive air and missile defenses, hoping to push it to the losing side of a “cost competition.” Because China is more advanced technologically and its population is less sparse than the Soviet Union’s, deterring or outcompeting Beijing in East Asia may require prioritizing different kinds of capabilities or operational concepts. The challenge is not just making good on commitments in different regions simultaneously but also that the capabilities required for each competitor and theater can be very different in nature.

According to a recent NATO Defense College report, “Europe and East Asia represent two different operational theaters: Europe is primarily a land theater, providing enormous strategic depth and surrounded by seas; Asia is, especially on its Eastern part, conversely a coastal, peninsular and insular area, where countries have . . . little strategic depth and depend significantly on seaborne trade.” Preserving deterrence in Europe thus “calls for some specific capabilities, where land forces play a dominant—although not unique—role,” whereas deterrence in Asia requires “long-range logistical capabilities and, overall, a force structure more based on sea and air power.” According to this logic, a U.S. military rebalance toward East Asia would “change the economics of defense in Europe as the different investments, technologies and training required for Asia reduces the room for scope and scale economies.” Such arguments can admittedly cut the other way, in that each theater having different requirements plays against the idea of trade-offs. This is particularly true given the bureaucratic tendency to ensure each U.S. armed service gets a piece of the defense pie: the Navy can prioritize Asia, the Army can focus on Europe, and the Air Force—and Marine Corps—can act as the “swing force.”

The debate on where the line falls between military-strategic synergies and trade-offs is an important one. But it should not overlook a broader point, namely that changes in the balance of power in Europe or East Asia are likely to have a pervasive effect, even if indirectly, on the other region. This is because the alliance and deterrence architectures that underpin security in each region hinge ultimately on U.S. and allied dominance at sea and over the other global commons and because preserving such dominance requires maintaining favorable balances of power in both regions. If the balance of power is upended in either region, U.S. and allied dominance at sea would be at peril, which would eventually endanger security in the other region. To grasp the importance of such links, U.S. and allied dominance at sea should be understood as the connecting tissue between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific deterrence and alliance architectures.

BACK TO BASICS:
THE ROLE OF SEA POWER

The idea that one of the main purposes of sea power is to create strategic and political effects on land runs through the work of most theorists of sea power. This means that a power that enjoys maritime dominance should be in a
position to project power into key continental environments and underpin favorable balances of power therein. Conversely, forward engagement in key continental environments helps create the conditions for sustainable sea power. After all, engaging forward and preserving a balance of power in key regions constitutes the first line of defense for a sea power. In this vein, Nicholas Spykman argued that the United States’ ability to use the seas freely—and indeed the very defense of the continental United States—hinged on two key factors: a strong navy and the preservation of a balance of power in the two most prosperous and economically dynamic regions of the Eurasian “rimland” (i.e., Europe and East Asia).

Two important concepts must be clarified: maritime dominance and balance of power. Maritime dominance implies the ability to move freely at sea in times of war and peace, as well as to project military force into key rimland regions. It also presumes the ability to deny or significantly restrict a competitor’s access to and movement at sea. This is an ideal-type concept, for a power hardly ever enjoys full freedom of access and movement at sea or the ability to fully deny such freedom to potential competitors.

A balance of power refers to a situation whereby no single power dominates a given geographical space, in this case a region. It is important to emphasise the importance of agency. Balances of power hardly ever emerge naturally. From the viewpoint of a sea power, a balance of power needs to be favorable, which essentially means it should hinge on its involvement and role. As Brendan Simms’s detailed historical account of the rise and fall of the First British Empire (1714–1783) shows, whenever Britain set its eyes on the high seas and apart from Europe—hoping a balance of power on the continent could perhaps sustain itself—other powers would fill the void and eventually threaten the balance, forcing Britain to intervene and pay a high price in power and treasure further down the line. The corollary is that forward presence and deterrence make for more economical strategies than offshore balancing, no matter how tempting the latter may be for a sea power.

U.S. allies in Europe and Asia do not just have a stake in favorable regional balances and U.S. dominance at sea—they have become critical to the preservation of both.

U.S. AND ALLIED MARITIME DOMINANCE AT PLAY

In Europe, U.S. and allied maritime dominance and the preservation of a balance of power go hand in hand. U.S. and allied dominance over the main maritime approaches to the European continent, namely the Atlantic Ocean, Baltic, and Mediterranean, provides the foundation for U.S. forward presence in Europe through a network of bases and alliances whose main institutional manifestation is NATO. Those alliances and bases are critical to the preservation of a balance of power in Europe. Conversely, the preservation of a favorable balance of power in Europe is the best way to safeguard U.S. and allied dominance over the continent’s maritime approaches as well as dominance at sea more broadly. The logic cuts both ways.

A similar rationale applies to East Asia. U.S. and allied dominance over the main maritime approaches to the East Asian rimland (i.e., through Singapore, the Philippines, Taiwan, the Ryukus, and the Japanese archipelago) has been the foundation of forward presence in the region. Japan stands out as the hub of U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps presence in Asia. So does Australia, which...
provides a secure geopolitical rear and is likely to become increasingly important for U.S. force posture in the region if China’s A2/AD capabilities continue to threaten U.S. posture in North and Southeast Asia. The system of U.S.-led alliances and bases is indeed critical to the preservation of a favorable balance of power in East Asia. Conversely, preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon is the best way to safeguard U.S. and allied dominance in the Western Pacific.

The upending of the regional balance of power in either Europe or East Asia would inevitably draw the United States to strengthen its posture therein, thus limiting its strategic bandwidth in the other region. If preserving a balance of power in Europe and East Asia remains a core U.S. and allied geopolitical objective, and if it continues to hinge mostly on U.S. military power, the security and deterrence architecture of these two regions will remain intertwined. Sino-Russian cooperation further compounds this fact. Deterrence and U.S. alliances in Europe and East Asia should therefore be thought of from an inter-theater perspective.

BRIDGING ALLIES: PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

Managing the two-front challenge optimally would require a serious effort to bridge U.S.-led alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, notwithstanding the existing asymmetries in how U.S.-led alliances in Europe and East Asia are structured, as well as the important caveat that security commitments are likely to remain intra-regional as opposed to inter-regional. Such a bridging effort could entail a number of actions:

Upgrading political consultation mechanisms between the United States and its Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific allies would enable discussion about common threats and how to address them, the sharing of relevant intelligence, and the establishment of political-strategic foundations for greater military cooperation (see below). It would also make it easier to share relevant lessons in deterrence between the two competitors.

Inter-regional initiatives such as the Australia-UK-U.S. (AUKUS) group—which brings together key U.S. allies in the Euro-Atlantic and Asia Pacific—or the UK-Australia-New Zealand-Malaysia-Singapore five power defense arrangement (FPDA) are certainly useful. So are calls to expand the role of Japan or France in Five Eyes, an intelligence partnership comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Such initiatives will remain particularly appealing for those allies that enjoy more intimate ties. However, it is important to broaden the bridging effort. NATO’s existing dialogue with its four Asia-Pacific (AP4) partners (Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand) offers much potential in this regard. Notwithstanding the relevance of bilateral, tailor-made channels (e.g., NATO-Japan, NATO-Australia), a NATO-Asia Pacific Council could provide a useful forum to bring together all the key allies in both regions. This could involve regular meetings of the foreign and defense ministers of NATO and its AP4 partners but also meetings at the ambassadorial level—that is, between the North Atlantic Council and AP4 ambassadors to NATO in Brussels.

Critically, regular political consultations should facilitate a convergence of views between both sets of alliances on Russia, China, and their evolving relationship and ideally result in a collective framework and narrative to navigate such challenges. This could help mitigate the risks inherent in the idea of “leaning on China to restrain Russia” in the short term or, for that matter, “leveraging Russia against China” in the long term. Beyond the pitfalls or merits of any such ideas, it is important that both sets of alliances have a common picture on Russia, China, and how their relationship may evolve. For one thing, and without ignoring existing frictions, if the Sino-Russia relationship remains broadly cooperative, attempts to drive a wedge may prove challenging. The broader point, however, is that whatever the United States and its allies think they can do in relation to engaging Russia or China, or manipulating their relationship, they must remain aligned. Otherwise, there is a risk they may draw different conclusions about either power’s trajectory or how their relationship may evolve and thus frame their policies on the basis of different premises. This could even conceivably trigger a competition between the United States and its allies, and among the allies themselves, thus endangering the geostrategic trinity of U.S. and allied power.

An upgrade in inter-allied political consultations could also help foster a collective approach toward challenges that are global in nature, such as nuclear or ballistic proliferation, proliferation in space and cyber, the governance of artificial intelligence and other disruptive technologies, arms control, or questions related to freedom of navigation. A joint approach toward these challenges would help preserve U.S. and allied dominance at sea and over the other global commons. Specifically, the United States and its Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific allies should
promote a joint agenda in relation to the global commons, including in key areas such as freedom of navigation and the open and responsible use of space and cyberspace.

An upgrade in inter-allied political consultations would also lay the groundwork for greater military coordination. Specifically, the United States and its allies should look at burden sharing, capability development, force structure and posture, and even operational planning from an inter-theater perspective.

**An inter-theater approach to burden sharing** would allow cooperation to move past allied demands for the United States to be more present in their respective regions or, for that matter, U.S. calls for their allies to spend more on defense. Indo-Pacific allies have a stake in Euro-Atlantic allies sharing the burden and vice versa. And they all have a stake in an adequate U.S. presence in each other’s region to ensure the balance holds. The key question is what the optimal distribution of capabilities and forces is to preserve dominance at sea and favorable regional balances of power.

Some experts have made the case for taking into account “output” metrics in the transatlantic burden-sharing debate, so as to consider allied contributions to actual operations instead of focusing exclusively on how much each ally spends on defense (i.e., input). One way would be to assess allied contributions to defense planning objectives as defined in NATO’s Defense Policy Planning Process (NDPP), which sets collective targets based on an operational assessment. This approach could also be applied from an inter-theater perspective to ensure a more efficient allocation of U.S. and allied resources within and across regions as well as in defense of U.S. and allied dominance at sea.

Because there is no NATO or anything like the NDPP in Asia, a permanent link between the AP4 partners and the NDPP would provide U.S. allies with a better idea of existing military gaps in each other’s region or at sea, help them anticipate undue pressures on U.S. strategic bandwidth, and identify ways to address or mitigate such pressures. This should also help stimulate greater inter-allied cooperation on questions related to force structure and posture. At first sight, the United States’ European and East Asian allies should increase their defense spending and efforts and probably do the heavy lifting on the front line (especially in Europe). For its part, the United States would actively support such efforts through strategic capabilities (e.g., command and control; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; strategic nuclear deterrence; ballistic missile defense; and cyber deterrence) and by maintaining a significant presence in both regions, even though Asia may require more direct U.S. resources and possibly even some European ones. Additionally, the United States would take the lead in preserving supremacy at sea and over the other global commons that enable strategic power projection over both regions, and allies would play a supporting role in that regard. While such generic concepts may appear intuitive, the devil is in the detail. An NDPP-AP4 link would ensure such generic concepts can develop and adapt on the basis of a dynamic strategic and political environment.

**An inter-theater approach to capability development** can help preserve the dominance of U.S.-led alliances in both theaters. Even though some U.S. capabilities are global, others will be theater-specific and require adaptations. For instance, “theater-range” missiles may need to adapt to specific range or platform requirements (i.e., sea-borne vs. land-borne) depending on whether they are intended for Europe or Asia. This applies to both offensive and defensive missiles. Including allies in U.S.-led capability planning initiatives can generate economies of scale and make it easier for the United States to develop skeleton concepts that can draw on allied support and participation to bring about appropriate adaptations for each theater. Moreover, the need to preserve dominance at sea and in other global commons should also incentivize inter-allied cooperation in developing naval, air, cyber, and space capabilities and technologies.

**Strengthening links between U.S.-led alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific in the area of operational planning** would give both sets of allies greater insight into the military-strategic picture in each other’s region and how such a picture may affect U.S. and allied planning in real time. It would also allow them to assess possible implications for their home region and identify opportunities to add value in each other’s region, as well as in underpinning U.S. and allied dominance at sea and in the other global commons. Thus, allies could consider the establishment of permanent liaison officers from AP4 countries in Supreme Allied Command Europe and throughout NATO’s command structure, as well as a NATO liaison cell in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and more joint exercises.

Ultimately, an effort to bridge U.S.-led alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific would help transcend...
the China first vs. two-front war dilemma and allow the United States and its allies to develop an optimal collective strategy to underpin the geostrategic trinity of their power. This becomes particularly relevant when the United States and its allies face two strategic competitors in two distant regions simultaneously and in light of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation. Should one of those competitors collapse, or should there be a breakdown in Sino-Russian ties, the need for alliance bridging may indeed become less evident or urgent. Hence, policymakers should pursue flexible and pragmatic approaches to bridging allies that eschew creating new institutions and respect the primacy of regional frameworks, which are arguably more lasting. ■

Luis Simón is a senior associate (non-resident) with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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ENDNOTES


8 See, for example, Colby and Mastro, “Ukraine Is a Distraction.”


17 Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment.”


26 Ibid.


Ikenberry makes a similar argument of why devolving some power to allies is beneficial to U.S. power in the long run, albeit emphasizing the software (i.e., norms, rules, and institutions) rather than the hardware.

On Russia's efforts to threaten such supremacy, see James Foggo III and Alarik Fritz, “The Third Battle of the Atlantic,” U.S. Army War College, *Proceedings* 142, no. 6 (2016).


Because NATO gathers all of the United States’ European allies and already enjoys a structured relationship with four key U.S. allies in Asia, it is arguably ideally suited to operationalize such bridging. However, mirror initiatives could be envisaged (e.g., through greater interaction between NATO and AP4 ambassadors in Washington, D.C., or in the four AP4 capitals). Such initiatives could seek to eventually involve India, given the existence of common values and the Indian Ocean's importance to Europe-Asia strategic connectivity.


Specifically, developing links between AP4 and to NATO cyber and maritime commands would help substantiate cooperation in relation to the sea and global commons.