Rethinking Asia-Europe's Security and the Search for a "Third Way" for America's Allies in Europe and Asia

Dr. Michael RASKA
Senior Researcher and Section Head, Security and Defense in Europe,
Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich

American allies in Europe and Asia must find a "Third Way" that maintains their alliances with the United States while putting into place viable alternatives. Regardless of who replaces Donald Trump in the 2028 presidential election, undoing his administration's transactional policies will take enormous effort. At the same time, the United States is likely to continue to reduce its security commitments towards Europe and Asia. For NATO-Europe and America's Asian allies, the need to rethink their optimal security and defense options is greater than at any other point since the end of the Korean War. How these allies reconfigure their ties with the United States, how they build the capabilities to offset over-the-horizon threats, and how they cope with domestic political hurdles stemming from higher defense spending are issues that now lie at the center of their respective security debates.

At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, French President Emmanuel Macron called for a "positive new alliance" between Asia and Europe—anchored in shared principles, strategic autonomy, and practical cooperation—to mitigate the growing risks of strategic entanglement amid intensifying great power rivalries and "spheres of coercion." His message emphasized that Asian and European security are increasingly interconnected, whether through the global repercussions of Russia's war in Ukraine, Chinese coercion in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, or the broader erosion of norms underpinning the liberal international order.

Europe's search for new security paradigms also reflects disruptive changes in the direction and character of U.S. foreign policy. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 marked a shift toward unilateralism, transactional diplomacy, and selective disengagement from long-established U.S. security alliances and relationships in Europe, and to a lesser degree, in East Asia. According to the newly released *U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS)*, "the days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over."

For Europe, the most important consequence is greater U.S. conditionality and burden shifting, which injects strategic ambiguity into allied planning and marks a clear move away from Washington's earlier, near-unconditional support for Ukraine, and, by extension, from Europe's broader security needs. The Trump administration has renewed pressure for European "strategic autonomy" without clear commitments to collective defense. Similarly, in East Asia, long-held assumptions about U.S. extended deterrence and alliance commitments are being re-evaluated, reflecting changing strategic priorities and perceptions of uneven burden-sharing.

A key consequence of these developments is that traditional pillars of the U.S.-led transatlantic and transpacific security alliances, which were historically characterized by U.S. forward presence and "rules-based" policy frameworks, are now reconfigured into more fragmented, issue-specific, and differentiated patterns of interaction. Hence, they blur the boundaries between alliances, partnerships, and ad-hoc coalitions. As a result, European and Asian partners have to forge new policies based on uncertainties over U.S. security commitments that enable them to significantly boost defense spending and develop matching military capabilities.

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC DILEMMAS

This means that Europe and NATO countries must navigate the stark realities of U.S. disengagement, Russian aggression, and China's long-term role in Europe's economic and security calculus. While many EU/NATO countries debate the required adjustments in force structure or defense budgets, answering the question of Europe's identity lies at the core of the continent's emerging strategic mandate. What does strategic autonomy really mean for concrete defense capabilities? How will non-nuclear EU/NATO states enhance extended deterrence with or without the assistance of Europe's two nuclear-weapon states—the United Kingdom and France?

Defining strategic autonomy can no longer be filled with long-term goals and amorphous political commitments. Instead, EU/NATO must make very clear and sustainable defense spending commitments to build more integrated command structures with rapidly scalable and deliverable munitions production, more effective missile defenses, faster and more resilient intra-NATO mobility, quicker development of emerging systems such as hypersonic missiles, and shared ISR assets.

These tasks are without precedent in NATO's history. But unless members are fully committed to these goals, strategic autonomy will remain hollow.

The most important challenge is the persisting gap between EU/NATO's declared commitments and actual defense capabilities. For nearly five years after the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, EU/NATO leaders pledged to support Ukraine "for as long as it takes" to repel Russian aggression. Notwithstanding the varying efforts to ramp up defense-industrial production, EU/NATO countries have not been able to sustain Ukraine's military needs with European ammunition stocks, air defense systems, and armored platforms because key weapons systems have depleted faster than supply chains could replenish. Going forward, as the United States gradually withdraws its support from Ukraine, European policymakers will have to confront difficult questions about how much additional capacity, as well as financial resources, they are willing and able to provide to Ukraine, while revamping their own military readiness levels.

In this context, key questions remain on defense resource maximization. For example, should EU/NATO countries prioritize investments in heavy land forces and forward presence on NATO's eastern flank, or invest in emerging defense technologies such as AI-enabled decision support systems, drones, and other technologies? At the same time, how can EU/NATO focus on conventional defense requirements to deter Russia, while tackling persisting challenges on the "southern" periphery (migration and terrorism) and global commitments, such as European Indo-Pacific freedom of navigation operations, participation in multilateral exercises, and contributions to sanctions and export-control regimes? In short, Europe must define its core strategic interests since it doesn't have the financial or military capabilities to be an effective multi-task security provider.

ASIA-EUROPE SECURITY INTERDEPENDENCIES

Consequently, if the United States is no longer the binding glue for both transatlantic and transpacific alliances, then what anchors the future of Asia-Europe security cooperation? Over the past decade, Europe's forays into the Indo-Pacific have largely sought to align with the U.S. interest of maintaining a rules-based "free and open Indo-Pacific." France and the United Kingdom have deployed naval task groups; Germany has sent frigates; and the EU and select European countries have launched their own Indo-Pacific strategies. These moves were part of a broader effort to demonstrate Europe's strategic relevance in the region by supporting a "rules-based maritime order" in East Asia, i.e., often seen as complementing U.S. efforts to counter China's coercive moves in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and beyond.

Yet the actual impact of European naval deployments has been more limited, and their cumulative effects have been minimal. Despite the positive rhetoric, European navies and air forces essentially lack the resources and operational capacity to significantly enhance defenses in the Indo-Pacific. Most deployments have been symbolic, limited in duration, and have stretched European naval and air capabilities. The second Trump administration has also questioned the utility of European Indo-Pacific military deployments and defense diplomacy engagements and stressed that European allies "stay out of the Indo-Pacific" and concentrate finite forces on European defense.

However, the ongoing war in Ukraine has significantly deepened China and Russia's strategic

alignment through expanded energy trade, defense-industrial cooperation, and amplified narratives aimed at diluting international law, norms, and institutions. Specifically, China has indirectly supported Russia to sustain its war effort through expanded Russian energy imports, continued flows of dual-use technologies, from machine tools and components to electronics and vehicles, which help sustain Russia's war-economy production. Beijing has also provided financial and logistical workarounds, including non-dollar settlement mechanisms and third-country intermediaries that bypass Western sanctions and export controls.

By supporting Russia, China has gained preferential access to Russian energy and raw materials, but more importantly, has also learned to build greater resilience against potential future sanctions pressure by testing alternative payment and supply routes. China's military is learning from Russia's operational conduct in Ukraine on issues like munitions consumption, drones, air and missile defense performance, and the limits of Western industrial capacity and alliance cohesion.

Consequently, the war in Ukraine is driving the growing strategic convergence of Sino-Russian interests and mutually supportive strategies, creating new shared vulnerabilities across the Eurasian landmass and thereby linking European and East Asian security. The underlying security paradox is that at a time when Europe's bandwidth for Indo-Pacific engagement is shrinking, East Asia's demand for reliable partnerships is growing.

For Europe and East Asia, this means a two-theater problem: Russia sustains pressure on Europe while China sharpens coercive leverage in East Asia. In a scenario where conflict escalates in both regions simultaneously, the United States would be forced into strategic triage, reallocating scarce high-end assets, like advanced ISR, long-range strike systems, and key stockpiles, to the theater it deems most decisive. Yet neither Europe nor East Asia can continue to assume near-automatic U.S. support and must hold the line on their own while simultaneously managing shocks from cascading non-military crises like disruptions in global trade, supply chains, and defense production.

LESSONS FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Nearly five years of attritional warfare in Ukraine have shattered assumptions that future conflicts would be swift, high-tech, and low-casualty events. Instead, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated the brutal reality of protracted, high-intensity warfare marked by mass mobilization, drone swarms, long-range missile strikes, and an ongoing battle to maintain logistics, morale, and infrastructure under constant attacks.

Crucially, Ukraine's resilience has not been solely military. Its ability to integrate Western weapons systems, ensure command, control, and communications under electronic warfare, and coordinate intelligence across domains has underscored the importance of adaptability, decentralized decision-making, and whole-of-society resource mobilization. In other words, the core of Ukraine's strategy is to create conditions of "reverse asymmetry" against a conventionally stronger adversary—not by matching Russia tank-for-tank, but by leveraging defense agility, innovation, and societal resilience to offset numerical and material disadvantages. From battlefield improvisation with commercial drones to the rapid repair of critical infrastructure under fire, Ukraine's defense effort illustrates how flexibility and endurance can become core assets.

For East Asia, where few militaries have seen large-scale combat since the Vietnam War, the Ukrainian experience offers an important strategic blueprint: resilience is a key enabler of deterrence and defense. The main challenge is to prepare for sustained, complex, and multi-domain conflicts that test the endurance of entire societies, from grey-zone coercion to high-intensity combat. In this context, European nations offer valuable lessons on strengthening and sustaining national resilience, civil-military integration, and whole-of-government approaches to hybrid and grey-zone threats.

For example, Finland's model of national readiness provides a compelling reference point for East Asia. Its doctrine of societal resilience and defense preparedness is gaining relevance, offering practical lessons for states grappling with regional instability and non-linear threats. For decades, Finland—a relatively small country of 5.5 million—has maintained a comprehensive approach to national defense, blending universal conscription, territorial defense, decentralized logistics, and robust civil-military integration. Its ability to absorb and adapt under pressure has long been central to its strategic culture—now even more so, as a full NATO member sharing the longest NATO border with Russia. Whether in cyberspace, energy security, or defense infrastructure, Finland's integrated readiness model reinforces a broader observation: deterrence is not only about projecting force, it is more about sustaining it under duress, across multiple domains.

POLICY PRIORITIES: TOWARD ASIA-EUROPE NETWORKED SECURITY ARCHITECTURES

The next phase of Asia-Europe security cooperation therefore must be defined not by symbolic gestures, but by practical mechanisms that reflect new strategic realities of a more contested multipolar world. This means shifting focus toward the critical arenas that will shape deterrence, resilience, and technological advantage in the coming decade: cybersecurity, space, AI-enabled military applications, and resilient technology supply chains.

Each of these areas reveals shared vulnerabilities but also opportunities for deeper coordination, norm-setting, and capability development. First, Asia-Europe cybersecurity cooperation must evolve beyond ad hoc information exchanges toward institutionalized frameworks for threat intelligence sharing, joint incident response, and resilience-building exercises. Estonia's NATO-aligned cyber defense posture and Singapore's ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence, for example, can serve as scalable models for cross-regional initiatives that enhance cyber threat intelligence and operational responsiveness.

Second, space is emerging as a contested strategic sphere. The expansion of civilian and military satellite constellations raises the risks of congestion, collision, and deliberate interference. Europe's efforts to advance space norms at the United Nations, together with Japan's and South Korea's expanding space capabilities are creating openings for new confidence-building measures, crisis communication protocols, and shared domain awareness, especially if connected to regional efforts such as the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).

Third, AI governance in the military arena remains a critical but underdeveloped area. As militaries integrate AI into surveillance, targeting, and command-and-control systems, Asia and Europe must work together to define frameworks for ethical use, human accountability, and interoperability. Countries such as France, Germany, South Korea,

and Singapore are already advancing military AI strategies. Structured collaboration on explainable AI, testing protocols, and human-in-the-loop requirements could lay the foundation for a responsible rules-based regime in this emerging domain.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, technology supply chains have become a frontline security concern for both Europe and East Asia. The strategic weaponization of semiconductors, rare earths, and other critical inputs highlights the urgency of diversification and supply chain resilience. The EU's Critical Raw Materials Act and Japan's Economic Security Promotion Act both seek to reduce systemic dependencies on politically vulnerable sources. In this context, Asia-Europe security can bridge operational capacities, aligning technological standards and building trust across regions. In doing so, East Asia and Europe can redesign flexible, forward-looking, and enduring networked security architectures that can adapt to evolving geopolitical and technological shifts, before others redefine or break the rules of the game.

Europe will never be a central security provider in Asia and vice versa. But countries such as South Korea and Japan, with advanced economies, critical technologies, strong alliances with the United States (despite rough waters), and interoperable weapons systems, can become very important out-of-area partners for NATO. In an era when governments don't have the bandwidth to do everything on their own, selective military R&D partnerships, joint weapons development, and sharing critical supply chains such as munitions between techno-democracies can provide niche strategic benefits. Building the infrastructure for such a system lies at the heart of future NATO-Asia security cooperation.

Dr. Michael RASKA

Dr. Michael RASKA is Senior Researcher and Section Head of Security and Defense in Europe, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Hague Center for Strategic Studies.