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UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA'S CALCULUS ON OPPORTUNISTIC AGGRESSION IN EUROPE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **NUMEROUS FACTORS ARE WORKING** to dissuade Russia from directly challenging NATO, but once Moscow reconstitutes its military, one scenario stands out as a plausible path to a NATO-Russia war: The United States becomes involved in a major crisis in the Indo-Pacific. Russian President Vladimir Putin could view this as his last best chance to undermine the alliance, judging that Washington would have neither the political interest nor the resources to rapidly come to Europe's defense, and that absent the U.S. capabilities being redeployed to the Indo-Pacific, the European members of NATO would be vulnerable.¹ In the event of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific, the United States would likely fulfill some of its requirements by drawing on capabilities already in Europe and/or those in the United States that NATO expects would be used to reinforce Europe in the event of a conflict there, generating gaps in European defense. Even a lower-intensity crisis in the Indo-Pacific, like a blockade, would likely create gaps in Europe because the United States would probably view such a crisis as the opening phase of a larger conflict and would flow military assets to reinforce the region. The military requirements in the Indo-Pacific—and therefore the gaps in Europe's defenses—would grow as any crisis worsened.
- The resources required to defend Taiwan are different to the largely land-based forces that are required to bolster European security, but there are significant areas of overlap where resources are in short supply, giving rise to challenges in

the following areas: space-based assets and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms; strategic enablers; maritime support; ground-based air and missile defense; long-range precision fires; drones; and combat aircraft. There are also likely to be shortages in the pool of ready forces (in Europe), sustainment units, munitions stockpiles, specialist personnel, and special operations forces.

- These gaps in European security would erode the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defense, leading Moscow to perceive a golden opportunity to accomplish its aims: to divide the United States and Europe, expand its sphere of influence, and relitigate the post-Cold War security order in Europe. The greater the gaps and vulnerabilities in NATO's conventional forces that Russia perceives, the greater the risk Moscow is likely to accept in pressing its ambitions. Moscow is likely to assume that, with hostilities in Asia, the imperative for the United States and Europe would be to de-escalate, creating a context that the Kremlin would view as exceptionally permissive.
- A shortage of U.S. ISR capabilities in Europe would, for example, degrade NATO's situational awareness of Russian activity and early warning, leaving the alliance more vulnerable to missing Russian hybrid attacks.
- Beyond hybrid actions, U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific would also heighten the risk of a kinetic Russian action against a NATO member state. Moscow could come to judge that the absence of key U.S. capabilities would slow a NATO response, giving Russia time enough to

seize territory and then use coercion to compel NATO to accept the result. A shortage of key capabilities like long-range precision fires that can hold high-value targets inside Russia at risk and a reduction in NATO maritime power would erode deterrence, with limited air and missile defense leaving allied forces and nations within striking distance of Russia particularly vulnerable. A shortage of strategic enablers, such as C-17s, or sealift could slow reinforcement.

The greater the gaps and vulnerabilities in NATO's conventional forces that Russia perceives, the greater the risk Moscow is likely to accept in pressing its ambitions.

- The good news is that the gaps the United States would leave are identifiable. But it will take time for NATO member states to ramp up the specific capabilities needed to fill those gaps. As European countries are increasing defense spending, it is critical for allies to invest some of their greater spending on the capabilities the United States may have to redeploy if its military is engaged elsewhere. The allies should also discuss other approaches to offset the vulnerabilities that would emerge in the event of a crisis in Asia, for example, by determining what more it should pre-position in Europe to avoid the challenges that would emerge from delays in reinforcement. Washington and its allies must think beyond the current war in Ukraine and start making plans and investments now to prevent Russian opportunistic aggression later.

INTRODUCTION

RUSSIA DOES NOT CURRENTLY SEEK a direct war with NATO, especially given the extent to which its military has been degraded by the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Moscow has mobilized its defense industrial base and significantly increased defense spending.² Senior U.S. and European officials now assess that Russia could reconstitute its battle-hardened forces in as little as two to five years.³ The Kremlin is also learning important lessons in Ukraine and plans to increase the size of its military beyond prewar levels.⁴ Since its invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has grown ever more dogmatic in its intent to not only subjugate Ukraine but also to revise the security order in Europe, including rolling back NATO's borders, if not undermining the alliance altogether. The intensification of Russian aims to challenge NATO and the West, along with the renewal of its capacity to do so, means that NATO must continue—and accelerate—its efforts to prepare for and prevent a future conflict with Russia.

One scenario stands out as a particularly plausible pathway to a NATO-Russia conflict: The Kremlin comes to underestimate NATO's, and most importantly, the United States' resolve to fight under certain conditions. Among the mounting reasons that could lead the Kremlin to believe the United States and NATO lack the will to fight, America's involvement in a major crisis in the Indo-Pacific would be among the most likely to shape the Kremlin's calculus. This is because U.S. forces in Europe, or those designated to reinforce Europe, may instead

be committed to the Indo-Pacific theater, which the United States has identified as its priority theater, eroding NATO's conventional deterrence. In this case, Russian President Vladimir Putin could be tempted to test NATO in an effort to undermine the alliance once and for all, judging that Washington would have neither the political interest nor the resources to rapidly come to Europe's defense and that absent the U.S. capabilities redeployed to the Indo-Pacific, the European members of NATO would be vulnerable.⁵

Since January 2025, the challenge of deterring Russian opportunistic aggression in Europe has taken on even greater salience, given the possibility that President Donald Trump's administration could downsize America's presence in Europe. Statements and actions by the Trump administration have called into question the U.S. commitment to defending Europe, and President Trump has repeatedly stated the United States might not come to the aid of European allies if they were attacked.⁶ In his first term, he attempted to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Germany by almost 10,000.⁷ In April 2025, the Pentagon was reportedly considering removing up to 10,000 U.S. troops from eastern Europe, and has made clear that Washington will deprioritize Europe.⁸ It is plausible, therefore, that the reduction of U.S. support for European security may not come about only as a result of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, but may also be a deliberate policy choice. In either scenario, the Kremlin may look to take advantage

of a Europe it perceives to be more vulnerable with reduced U.S. assets and a questionable security guarantee from Washington.

This report focuses on the first of these challenges: the threat of Russian opportunistic aggression in the event the United States is involved in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific, while recognizing that similar dynamics could emerge because of political decisions in Washington. The goal of the report is to articulate the effects of U.S. involvement in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific on European security, including

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identifying the defense gaps and vulnerabilities that could emerge in Europe and how Russia might seek to exploit these perceived vulnerabilities to advance its aims. To these ends, the paper first briefly outlines the dynamics surrounding a plausible scenario for Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific—a Chinese blockade of Taiwan—and identifies in broad terms the U.S. military requirements that would arise because of China's aggression. Next, the report assesses the gaps this would create in European

defense and the resulting impact on NATO's ability to deter and defend against Russia. Finally, the paper posits how Russia could seek to exploit any such perceived gaps to advance its geopolitical aims. To inform the analysis, the authors conducted an in-depth literature review on the challenges for the United States of facing two simultaneous conflicts with adversaries that are increasingly cooperating, along with holding in-depth interviews and two expert elicitation workshops with former senior U.S. military officials, U.S. defense experts, and experts on Russian political and military thinking.

A conflict in the Indo-Pacific is not inevitable. But it is plausible enough that the United States and Europe must prepare, not least because it could create conditions that significantly increase the risk of direct Russian action against a NATO member state. The good news is that the gaps the United States would leave are foreseeable. However, it will take time for NATO member states to ramp up the capabilities needed to fill those gaps. As European countries are increasing defense spending, it is critical for allies to invest some of this spending on the capabilities the United States wouldn't be able to provide if its military were engaged elsewhere. NATO may very well remain a superior force capable of defeating Russia in a war, but given the very high costs of war, the goal for the United States and Europe is to maintain a credible enough deterrent that Moscow never tries.

A CRISIS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Understanding the Dynamics That a Taiwan Crisis Would Create for Europe

TO ASSESS THE IMPLICATIONS for European security of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific theater, researchers from the Center for a New American Security's (CNAS) Transatlantic Security Program convened an expert elicitation workshop that included former senior U.S. military officials and U.S. defense experts. For the purpose of the workshop and to provide context for the assessment of the U.S. military requirements that would emerge in the Indo-Pacific, the authors posited a scenario in which the People's Republic of China imposed a blockade on Taiwan in 2030.⁹ This is three years past the 2027 deadline that Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping set for China's military to be ready to invade Taiwan and allows enough time for Russia to reconstitute its conventional forces, at least in part, given the further assumption that the war in Ukraine has ended.¹⁰ The purpose of using a blockade scenario, rather than an invasion, is to underscore that even this less kinetic crisis will create challenges that affect Europe's security—challenges that would only grow more acute as any crisis worsens.

There remains significant uncertainty about how the United States would respond to a blockade situation, in large part because U.S. policy toward Taiwan is based on the concept of "strategic ambiguity," which aims to ensure that the details of American military and diplomatic support for Taiwan in the event the

island is attacked by China are left unclear.¹¹ Therefore, assessments of the exact capabilities that the United States would draw on and deploy to the Indo-Pacific are also uncertain.¹² The force requirements would vary depending on factors, such as the exact Chinese actions taken against Taiwan, whether the United States focuses solely on aiding Taiwanese self-defense or if it seeks to break the blockade itself, and the overall duration and intensity of the crisis.

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defense.**

Despite the questions surrounding the likely U.S. response to a blockade of Taiwan, several relevant points for European security are worth noting. First, the United States would likely view a Chinese blockade of Taiwan as the opening phase of a larger conflict. As such, the United States would likely respond by moving more military assets into the region and establishing a "combat-credible, visible, and continuous forward presence in the western Pacific."¹³ Actions the United States could take include exercises in the region to demonstrate U.S. commitment to deter Chinese aggression and defend

Taiwan, and/or a counterblockade in the Strait of Malacca—both of which would require significant American maritime and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.¹⁴ U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) would probably also seek to retain resources, including those scheduled to be used for the reinforcement of Europe, based on the assumption that they will be needed should the crisis escalate. Therefore, even a lower-intensity crisis in the Indo-Pacific would likely generate gaps in European defense.

Second, regardless of how the scenario unfolds, any engagement in the Indo-Pacific will involve large air and maritime components, including the use of drones.¹⁵ These force requirements would grow if the crisis were to escalate, especially if China moved to a full-scale amphibious invasion of the island. Based on the expert elicitation workshop and author interviews, in the maritime domain, the United States would rely on attack submarines, Aegis

destroyers and/or cruisers, two or more carrier battle groups, unmanned surface and subsurface vessels, and maritime patrol aircraft. In the air and space domain, military requirements would include combat aircraft like the F-35 and F-16, ISR—both the equipment to gather the data and the personnel to process the data and aid with targeting selection and decision-making—air-to-air refueling tankers, long-range bombers, airborne early warning and control aircraft, and strategic and tactical lift assets. If the conflict escalated, the United States would rapidly expend munitions, especially air and missile defense munitions.¹⁶ U.S. decisions on striking targets onshore in China or reinforcing partners in the region would also dramatically affect the extent and type of U.S. resources needed. A decision to reinforce partners, for example, would likely draw in additional land-based resources that are needed in Europe. The appendix includes a more detailed inventory of potential U.S. requirements in the Indo-Pacific.

THE IMPACT OF A CRISIS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC ON EUROPEAN DEFENSE

THE PULL OF U.S. CAPABILITIES to the Indo-Pacific in the event of a crisis would likely create gaps in European defense. The gaps could emerge in two ways. First, it is plausible that the United States would meet some of its requirements in the Indo-Pacific by redeploying capabilities already in Europe. Second, gaps in Europe's defense could also arise because some U.S. capabilities based in the United States that NATO expects to reinforce Europe in the event of a conflict would not be available as planned, weakening the credibility of NATO's conventional deterrence if Russia understands that those assets would not be on hand. This section briefly discusses the current state of U.S. forces in Europe and the capabilities that the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe (SACEUR) would likely request in the event of a crisis or conflict in Europe. It then identifies the key defense gaps that would most likely emerge in the event of a crisis with China over Taiwan. The analysis was informed by the authors' assessments, the expert elicitation workshop, and interviews with former senior military officials and defense experts.

U.S. Posture and Requirements to Reinforce Europe

In early 2025 there were around 85,000 U.S. forces from all services in the European theater, either permanently deployed or on rotation. (See Figure

1 for detail.)¹⁷ Major combat forces and enablers are based in allied countries across the theater, usually in joint bases commanded by the host military. For the U.S. Army, Germany hosts many support facilities; the only major Army combat unit deployed there is a Stryker brigade combat team. In Poland, headquarters of the Army's V Corps, permanent Army forces include one combat aviation brigade and two rotational armored brigade combat teams. Romania hosts one Army infantry brigade combat team on rotation and Italy hosts the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vicenza. U.S. naval operations, commanded in the European theater by the 6th Fleet headquarters in Naples, Italy, are focused on five Aegis-class destroyers currently homeported in Rota, Spain, with naval aviation flying P-8s out of Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy. The U.S. Air Force (USAF) has its combat and enabler squadrons located in the UK (F-35s and F-15s at Lakenheath and tankers at Mildenhall) as well as F-16s based at Aviano Air Base in Italy and Spangdahlem, Germany. USAF airlift and other support aircraft are based at Incirlik in Türkiye, Ramstein in Germany, and Moron in Spain.

In the event of conflict with Russia, NATO would likely request additional U.S. capabilities. While the United States meets many of its requirements with its forces already in Europe, it would also fly in forces from the continental United States that would take the pre-positioned equipment to reinforce U.S. European Command at the outbreak of hostilities.¹⁸

Figure 1: United States Military Posture in Europe in 2025⁴⁹



In early 2025, there were around 85,000 U.S. forces from all services in the European theater, either permanently deployed or on rotation. This map shows the location of U.S. forces and bases in Europe.

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If not already assigned to NATO, the following are also capabilities that the SACEUR is most likely to request to be deployed to reinforce NATO forces, according to the authors' own assessments and interviews with former senior U.S. military officials and defense experts:

- Intelligence assets (indications and warning)
- Access to U.S. space-based assets, including satellite time for communications
- Additional ISR platforms, both space-based and aircraft
- Additional joint fires forward
- Additional integrated air and missile defense systems
- Cyber, command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence assets
- Electronic warfare
- Additional combat aviation brigades
- Armored brigade combat teams assigned to pre-positioned equipment already in Europe
- Carrier strike group
- Additional fighter squadrons which could include F-15, F-16, F-35, and possibly A-10 aircraft
- Bomber sorties from the United States—including B-52, B-2, or B-21 aircraft
- Additional enablers, such as air refuelers, airborne warning and control systems, C-17s, Rivet Joint signals intelligence aircraft, and tactical lift

Understanding How NATO Determines the Capabilities It Asks Allies to Provide

U.S. forces in Europe fall under U.S. European Command unless assigned to NATO, when they would be under the command of SACEUR. These forces are available not just for NATO operations, but also for non-NATO U.S. military requirements as well—such as operations in the Balkans or to fill an operational request made by another U.S. combatant command, such as Central Command. Since the 1990s, NATO's command structure and force arrangement have been focused on crisis management and response. During the subsequent decades, NATO has gone through various force posture changes as the alliance struggled both to define a threat against which to plan and respond to strategic surprises, such as the Balkan Wars and terrorism. At the same time, European allies took advantage of the “peace dividend,” resulting in a drop in defense spending and major cuts in national force structure.²⁰ Despite alarming events, such as Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, NATO was slow to respond to growing Russian aggression.²¹ It took Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 for

the alliance to recognize that Russia under President Putin was, once again, a threat to European peace and security.²²

The changing perception of Russia as a threat caused NATO to rethink its existing force structure, and in June 2014, the alliance approved the Readiness Action Plan to improve readiness.²³ Allies were also tasked to increase defense spending to 2 percent of GDP and focus on the procurement of new capabilities. In the following years, the United States also began to rebuild its force posture in Europe—adding nine-month rotations of two armored brigade combat teams, rebuilding pre-positioned equipment sites, and designing larger and more robust exercises across Europe.²⁴ NATO forward-deployed three multinational battle groups to the Baltics and one to Poland (led by the United States).

In June 2020, defense ministers approved a new military concept to rebuild NATO deterrence to a level not seen since the Cold War. Endorsed at

the 2021 Madrid Summit, the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) reorganized alliance deterrence and defense on a strategic scale that was built on new posture, plans, command and control, and force models.²⁵ In addition to the DDA, there is a family of collective defense plans that include a strategic plan for the overall defense of Europe, regional defense plans for regions within Europe, strategic plans for individual military domains (air, land, maritime, special operations forces, cyber, and space), and planning for a range of contingencies.²⁶

Allies must provide the forces to fulfill the DDA plans, so NATO identifies the minimum military requirements needed and assigns capability goals to allies in case NATO activates the DDA war plans. The United States already meets many of those capability goals by virtue of U.S. forces stationed in Europe and elsewhere, making the U.S. military integral to NATO force planning. Should any ally's capability be removed from the plans, others must fill the resulting gap.

Gaps and Resulting Vulnerabilities

The resources required to defend Taiwan are different to the largely land-based forces that are required to bolster European security, but there are also significant areas of overlap where resources are in short supply. Such “low-density, high-demand” assets are capabilities that are needed across theaters in the event of a conflict (or to deter adversaries), but that are only available in limited quantities.²⁷ Should the United States prioritize responding to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific (or choose to reduce their presence in Europe overall), gaps would emerge in Europe that would likely erode NATO's ability to deter and defend against Russian aggression. Many of these capabilities have also long been in short supply in European defenses—shortages that are now even more acute because of Europe's military contributions to Ukraine.

To determine the gaps that could emerge in European defense in the event of a crisis over Taiwan in 2030, the authors assumed that active conflict in Ukraine had ended, that the front lines were frozen as they were in early 2025, and that there was no U.S. troop presence inside Ukraine.²⁸ The authors also assumed that allied forces remained at the current 2025 levels. Even though the authors recognize that U.S. and allied forces must make commitments and purchases to increase their capabilities over the next five years, there is still uncertainty about how fully these decisions will be implemented. The assumption carries the added benefit of exposing where the biggest gaps would emerge if left unaddressed and therefore pinpoints those areas where allies most need to invest to maintain the credibility of NATO's conventional deterrence if the United States is engaged in Asia.

Space-based assets and ISR platforms, including support personnel. The redeployment of ISR platforms and support personnel, such as repositioning space-based satellite systems or redeploying drones and manned aircraft—like Rivet Joint signals intelligence aircraft or P-8 maritime patrol aircraft—from Europe to the Indo-Pacific, would impact alliance indications and warning capabilities. Should conflict break out, thin ISR would limit the coverage needed to acquire targeting data or potentially overtask satellite-based navigation systems like the Global Positioning System (GPS). A shortage of personnel needed to interpret/analyze

The shortage of ISR platforms and personnel would result in degraded situational awareness of Russian activity and less timely early warning.

intelligence, targeteers, and specialists in space, cyber, and electronic warfare would have a critical impact. The shortage of ISR platforms and personnel would result in degraded situational awareness of Russian activity and less timely early warning. Targeting would not be as comprehensive given fewer targeteers to analyze the data. The alliance would be especially vulnerable to missing Russian hybrid attacks, like cable cutting, should alliance antisubmarine warfare (ASW) be degraded by shifting P-8s to the Pacific, creating a more permissive environment for Russia to significantly ramp up its hybrid operations against Europe.

Strategic enablers. U.S. assets for strategic lift—such as C-17s—and refueling tankers would be extremely stretched in the event of competing requirements in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Despite allies' progress on fulfilling their regional plans, strategic enablers remain an area where progress has been more limited.²⁹ European militaries currently do not have the ability to entirely replace U.S. tankers: During the NATO operation in Libya in 2011, for example, the United States provided most of the air-to-air refueling tankers.³⁰ Reduced capacity in both strategic lift and tanker support would make it harder to get

U.S. forces, including forces to draw on Army prepositioned stocks (APS), to Europe on a priority basis. Limited American strategic lift means that Europe may not be able to rely on timely troop reinforcement from the contiguous United States to bolster the European theater. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some NATO allies had to rely on the United States to get their troops to eastern Europe to reinforce the eastern flank.³¹ Reinforcement delays could give Russia an opportunity to occupy territory in the event of an ongoing conflict and use coercion to compel NATO to accept the result, complicating NATO's response.

Maritime support. Conflict in the Indo-Pacific would have a significant maritime component—particularly submarine forces and destroyers—and according to expert discussions, it would be likely that U.S. nuclear attack submarines operating in the Atlantic and European theaters would be transferred to the Indo-Pacific. This reduced submarine force in the Atlantic and European theaters would degrade U.S. ASW capability, potentially impacting the security of U.S. convoys traveling across the Atlantic, and would also impact the Arctic and Nordic regions where Russian submarines would be harder to track and respond to should they engage in aggressive activity. The five Aegis-class destroyers currently deployed at Rota, Spain, with a primary missile defense mission in the eastern Mediterranean (including air defense of Israel) could also be reduced to provide support to the Indo-Pacific. Because their missile defense mission remains important, especially given a potential Iranian intermediate-range ballistic missile threat made in support of a Russian operation, not all ships would be redeployed, but the reduced number would likely impact U.S. Navy missile defense support to NATO maritime operations. Especially impactful would be if specialist personnel from U.S. ballistic missile defense staff in Europe were sent to the Pacific. Finally, the effort to provide a periodic carrier strike group (CSG) presence in the European theater would be impacted not just by the requirements in the Indo-Pacific, but also by other real-world requirements that may be occurring concurrently—such as a need to respond to a conflict in the Gulf or Middle East. Without a CSG presence in the European theater, NATO maritime power would be reduced, especially strike aircraft and

ASW, thereby weakening deterrence. An additional maritime impact would be on the Ready Reserve Force (RRF) cargo ships (or other merchant vessels from the National Defense Reserve Fleet).³² Many of these ships—which the U.S. Army depends on for transporting heavy equipment to Europe—are not at optimum readiness and those that are, are in short supply.³³ A conflict in the Indo-Pacific would place a heavy demand on these merchant vessels to carry cargo across the Pacific, thereby making the timely resupply of Europe by ship challenging.

Ground-based air and missile defense. Ground-based air and missile defense, such as Patriot systems deployed in Germany and rotated to other sites in central and eastern Europe, is already in short supply in Europe and could be further diminished if needed in the Indo-Pacific. Aegis ashore missile defense facilities in Poland and Romania (and their supporting radar in Türkiye) are part of the NATO missile defense program oriented to defend Europe against an Iranian ballistic missile threat and will likely remain in Europe. However, even the relatively few American personnel required to man these systems and the SM-3 Block II-A missile defense munitions (which are in short supply) may be drawn down to support a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Air and missile defense is one of the most crucial gaps that must be filled to credibly deter Russia, and its degradation will leave allied forces and nations within striking distance of Russia particularly vulnerable.

Long-range precision fires. The Indo-Pacific commander, Admiral Samuel Paparo, has said that the Army has developed a Multi-Domain Task Force concept that can deliver the precision fires he needs in a Pacific conflict. He especially pointed to the Army's Precision Strike Missile as a "game changer."³⁴ If the conflict in the Indo-Pacific calls for additional land-based precision fires as suggested by Admiral Paparo, European-based systems may be redeployed along with their munitions to the Pacific. This would significantly erode European deterrence and increase European vulnerability in the event of a Russian attack, as one of the key deterrents against Russia is NATO's credibility in holding high-value targets inside Russia at risk.

Drones. The demand for drones of all types, from reconnaissance to electronic warfare to strike, is increasing every year in both the Pacific and European theaters. Drone operators will be in especially high demand. Currently, China is outpacing the United States in manufacturing drones and likely has a larger stockpile which it could use in a conflict over Taiwan.³⁵ For a potentially large and protracted conflict, the United States will need an affordable mix of drones, as well as drones with a long range and endurance, given the distance the United States will be operating from.³⁶ Meanwhile, in the European theater, the use of drones to deter Russia is also critical, given Russian proficiency in the use of drones in combat, as well as their

Russian drone capability has advanced significantly during the war in Ukraine, and Russia now has more battlefield experience in the deployment of drones—leaving Europe at a double disadvantage of both stocks and experience.

likely large stocks of drones in five years. Given the probable high demand for drones in an Indo-Pacific conflict, U.S. drone stock and the associated personnel could be drawn down in the earliest stage of a conflict, leaving the Europeans to provide most of these capabilities. Russian drone capability has advanced significantly during the war in Ukraine, and Russia now has more battlefield experience in the deployment of drones—leaving Europe at a double disadvantage of both stocks and experience.³⁷ The new Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) will facilitate the sharing of best practices from Ukraine to NATO and should remain a focus for allies. The longer the conflict goes on in the Indo-Pacific, the more acute the shortage of drones and their operators in Europe will become, with a resulting increase in European NATO vulnerability.

F-35s. The two squadrons of American F-35s that make up the 48th Fighter Wing stationed at Royal Air Force Lakenheath (UK) could be drawn down

Force readiness is critical for deterrence, and Europe would likely have to increase the readiness of their own forces in certain categories to compensate for the redeployment of corresponding U.S. ready forces to the Pacific.

over time to reinforce the Indo-Pacific. This would reduce Europe's conventional deterrence and defense capability in the skies and would also contribute to the loss of ISR given the role F-35s have in data collection. The Lakenheath-based U.S. F-35s also constitute the U.S. contribution to NATO's dual-capable aircraft nuclear deterrent, so withdrawing them would impact deterrence of Russia's limited use of nuclear weapons against NATO forces. In addition to the F-35s, U.S. strategic bombing assets such as B-1s, B-2s (to be replaced by the B-21), and B-52s (most of which originate from the contiguous United States) may not be as readily available for a European theater as they will likely be earmarked for the Indo-Pacific (as well as deployed to the U.S. base on Diego Garcia). A reduction in U.S. F-35s (noting that many European countries have their own) may make it harder for Europe to establish air superiority and will impact its ability to defend and defeat a Russian attack.

Other Considerations

Pool of ready forces. While the authors' analysis primarily focused on specific gaps in military capabilities, like air defense, a U.S. withdrawal from the European theater would impact not just the availability of certain specific capabilities but would also reduce the pool of ready forces who could quickly reinforce the European theater. Force readiness—or the ability of military forces to quickly and effectively fight and meet the demands of assigned missions—is critical for deterrence, and Europe would likely have to increase the readiness of their own forces in certain categories to compensate for the redeployment of corresponding U.S. ready forces to the Pacific.

Sustainment units. Logistics support of all types is a critical part of supporting combat forces and is therefore also essential for the credibility of NATO deterrence. Currently, the United States provides many of the sustainment units in the European theater. The demand that an Indo-Pacific conflict could place on sustainment will likely be high, particularly for medical, quartermaster, and ordnance support.³⁸ Critical personnel from these services will be in high demand and will likely be taken from U.S. National Guard units and from U.S. troops stationed in Europe. Because the United States provides many sustainment services for deployed allied forces, these services will need to rapidly accelerate readiness efforts to replace their U.S. counterparts in support of European forces.

What Is the Role of Europe in an Indo-Pacific Conflict?

A U.S. intervention in the Indo-Pacific cannot be conducted alone, and the United States will be, to some extent, reliant on regional allies for access, basing, and overflight, as well as logistics and munitions resupply. There are a range of views regarding the role European allies might play in an Indo-Pacific conflict. Some analysts believe that the United States should limit its demands on European allies to send their capabilities to the Indo-Pacific, as allies will have to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining conventional deterrence in Europe.³⁹ Even where allies have capabilities that would be in high demand in the Indo-Pacific (for example, UK surface combatants or F-35s), these assets would be best reserved in the European theater to fill the gaps left by U.S. reallocation.

However, there is also a strong argument for a level of European involvement in the response to a blockade of Taiwan in order to present a united transatlantic front and strengthen the deterrent message to China. Maintaining a (small) European defense presence in the region would show alignment with the United States and potentially signal that China would suffer higher costs for any acts of aggression. Outside of the military sphere, Europe has a greater role to play in the economic space—coordinating sanctions across the U.S./EU/UK space to ensure they have maximum effect in imposing economic costs on China and deterring military aggression.

Munitions stockpiles. In an Indo-Pacific conflict, the usage rate of munitions, especially air defense, antiship, and cruise missile munitions, is projected

to be extremely high.⁴⁰ It is likely that the United States would run out of some types of munitions (particularly air defense) within weeks in a conflict over Taiwan.⁴¹ Should the conflict worsen in the Indo-Pacific, the INDOPACOM commander would likely want to ensure adequate munition stockpiles, which will likely result in an extreme shortage in missile stocks in both the United States and in Europe. European forces dependent on U.S. stockpiles for munition replacement (again, like air defense) will need to hedge against such a scenario by increasing their own holdings of key munitions. (For the European theater, having substantial holdings of long-range strike munitions will be key.) Although Europe has made progress in increasing its own production in light of the Ukraine war, much more will need to be done.

Specialist personnel. Experience from past NATO operations has shown that there are almost always shortfalls in specialist personnel when operations begin. Such specialists include targeteers, intel analysts, logisticians, drone operators, cyber and space experts, and electronic warfare specialists. In

an Indo-Pacific conflict, such specialists will be in high demand and will be taken from the United States and Europe to fill Combined Air Operations Centers (CAOCs) and other fusion centers in the region. European specialists will need to be interoperable with their U.S. counterparts and be ready to fill gaps in European CAOCs and other headquarters and field locations. Because intel sharing is a two-way street, sharing intelligence between the United States and European allies could decrease if Washington focused its intel assets on the Indo-Pacific at the expense of Europe.

Special operations forces (SOF). Current thinking about the role of ground forces in the Indo-Pacific has focused on small units of Marines or Army SOF that would deploy to harass and threaten Chinese maritime and air assets and ground facilities along the first island chain.⁴² If this becomes the accepted role of ground forces in the Indo-Pacific, absent a ground war in China or a North Korean attack on South Korea, SOF will be in great demand. SOF earmarked for Europe or already in Europe will likely be redeployed to the Indo-Pacific.

THE PROSPECTS FOR RUSSIAN OPPORTUNISTIC AGGRESSION

The View from Moscow

THERE ARE NUMEROUS FACTORS working to dissuade Russia from challenging NATO. However, Moscow would probably view a scenario in which the United States is engaged in the Indo-Pacific, and therefore a time when NATO's conventional posture is degraded, as a golden opportunity to accomplish its aims: to divide the United States and Europe, expand its sphere of influence, and relitigate the post-Cold War security order in Europe. Just before sending Russian tanks across the border into Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow issued a set of demands that included a significant rollback of NATO borders.⁴³ The Kremlin has clearly and repeatedly signaled that it aims to restore Russia as a global power and that doing so starts in Europe. Putin's level of ambition in Europe is likely to be shaped by the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Not only would Putin be emboldened by a favorable outcome to the war, but if he is successful in limiting the size and capabilities of Ukraine's military, Russia would have a significant percentage of its forces and defense budget freed to pursue aggressive actions elsewhere, including in Europe.

Putin has long sought to fragment the transatlantic alliance, both to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe and undermine cohesion within Europe itself. Moscow would almost certainly see a scenario in which the United States is focused on the Indo-Pacific as an opportune time to further fuel fears that the United States is abandoning Europe. Likewise, Moscow probably would ramp up its influence operations in the United States to stoke

American concerns about overstretch and dissuade U.S. involvement in Europe, while portraying European allies as free riders unable to contribute to Washington's Indo-Pacific operations. Within Europe, Moscow would double down on hybrid warfare, especially reinforcing divisions. Different views across Europe about how best to respond to rising Russian aggression at a moment of U.S. distraction would provide fertile ground for Russian disinformation and influence operations.

With Europe feeling vulnerable about an ongoing crisis in the Indo-Pacific, Russia would perceive an opportunity to ratchet up its coercive tactics to intimidate European publics and seek to convince them that the costs of resisting Russia are too great, and they instead should pressure their govern-

The Kremlin has clearly and repeatedly signaled that it aims to restore Russia as a global power and that doing so starts in Europe.

ments to pursue a more accommodating approach to Moscow. From Moscow's perspective, this threat would ideally be significant enough that the Kremlin could come to dictate many of the policies and actions of European governments and institutions, such as the EU, ultimately limiting the sovereignty of its neighbors. Belarus serves as a model in this

regard. Russia has expanded its influence there to such an extent that Minsk allowed Moscow to stage its invasion of Ukraine from Belarusian territory and is now hosting Russian tactical nuclear weapons—all without Moscow expending any military force.⁴⁴

If Russia perceives greater gaps and vulnerabilities in NATO's conventional forces, the Kremlin is likely to accept more risk in pressing its ambitions. Moscow will assume that with hostilities in Asia, the imperative for the United States and Europe would be to de-escalate in Europe, creating a context that the Kremlin would view as exceptionally permissive and therefore paving the way for increasingly brazen acts. The risk that Russia might assume in this

Moscow is already waging an unconventional war against Europe, but a perception that ISR is more limited could lead Moscow to significantly ratchet up its efforts.

scenario could be further amplified by the Kremlin's predisposition for miscalculation. Political science research shows that personalist autocrats like Putin are more inclined to make mistakes partly because they are surrounded by advisors and loyalists who tell the leader what they want to hear.⁴⁵ Moreover, Russia has long been dismissive of Europeans, viewing them as supplicants of Washington, unable to function effectively absent U.S. direction and capabilities.⁴⁶ In Ukraine, for example, Putin clings to the prospect that Ukraine will collapse without U.S. support. If the United States is engaged in Asia, Moscow could judge that European unity and political will would collapse absent of U.S. support. Russian officials also only engage with a very narrow circle of European interlocutors, often with a very anti-European perspective, further contributing to its often inaccurate views of European strength and resolve. Finally, Moscow is highly attuned to the fact that Europe is racing to ramp up its military capabilities. Russia, therefore, could see this as a closing window of opportunity to significantly change European and geopolitical dynamics in Moscow's favor.

What Might Russia Do?

Most immediately, a reduction in NATO ISR would create a more permissive environment for Russia to further ramp up its gray zone activities against Europe, like cable cutting and other forms of sabotage (such as hacking critical infrastructure), that would be harder to detect with fewer U.S. eyes and ears in Europe.⁴⁷ Moscow is already waging an unconventional war against Europe, but a perception that ISR is more limited could lead Moscow to significantly ratchet up its efforts. Further convinced that NATO would only seek to de-escalate, Russia may be especially brazen, increasing the prospect that some act of sabotage could result in the deaths of European citizens. In this case, the affected NATO member state could go to NATO under Article 4, which commits NATO parties to "consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of any of the Parties is threatened."⁴⁸ In this case, a weak or watered down (or no) response to Russia could expose the alliance's divisions or lack of resolve and ultimately show NATO to be a paper tiger, discrediting the alliance.

Beyond hybrid actions, U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific would heighten the risk of a kinetic Russian action against a NATO member state. Moscow could come to judge that the absence of key U.S. capabilities would slow a NATO response, giving Russia time enough to attack a NATO member and use coercion to create new facts on the ground and compel NATO to accept the new reality. Already, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led the United States to accept that Ukraine will not be a part of NATO. NATO's lack of air and missile defense, already in short supply and further depleted by Washington's efforts in Asia, could also lead Russia to judge that it could target civilian centers—compelling Europe to end a conflict on Russia's terms. To this end, Russia could act in these European regions:

The Arctic. Russia has been heavily investing in Arctic civilian and military infrastructure since the end of the Cold War. In the last decade, Moscow has re-opened and modernized over 50 bases along its Arctic coastline, with a heavy concentration on

Low-Hanging Fruit: Russian Opportunistic Aggression Against Non-NATO Countries

Russia could use the opportunity created by U.S. involvement in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific to target countries along its periphery, such as Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, or Kazakhstan. All four fall into what Russia views as its so-called sphere of influence, and Russian aggression in these countries has the advantage of dividing the alliance over how to respond, given that these nations are not members of the alliance. Moldova stands out as among the most vulnerable to further Russian aggression, as Moscow is already carrying out hybrid attacks in Moldova with the express goal of trying to install a pro-Russian government—in part to frustrate Moldova's desire to join the European Union.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Russia has a small military presence in Moldova with Russian “peacekeepers” stationed in the pro-Moscow autonomous region of Transnistria.⁵⁰ While countries on NATO's periphery would remain attractive targets, aggression against them would not have the benefit, from Moscow's perspective, of shattering NATO.

the Kola Peninsula.⁵¹ The peninsula houses Russia's Northern Fleet, as well as multiple air bases, nuclear weapon facilities, and nuclear and diesel-powered submarines. U.S. submarines are vital to maintaining deterrence against Russia in the Arctic. Given that many of them would likely go to the Indo-Pacific, Russia could exploit a perceived vulnerability in the region. If some U.S. maritime resources and ISR were redeployed to the Indo-Pacific, the Kremlin could perceive that NATO's ability to detect its actions and/or respond to its provocations would be slowed, leading to more brazen actions, including in Greenland.

Norway's Svalbard archipelago, located just under 700 miles northwest of the Kola Peninsula, makes the islands one of the most critical locations for NATO in the Arctic. The Svalbard Treaty prevents the archipelago from being used for military purposes, but doesn't preclude Russian fishing and research vessels from entering the waters surrounding Svalbard.⁵² Emboldened by events in the Indo-Pacific, Russia could fabricate an incident, such as an environmental threat, and rapidly deploy “rescue personnel” via civilian vessels, damage underwater fiber cables to limit Svalbard communication—as was suspected in 2022—deploy electronic warfare to jam Norwegian signals and GPS, and establish “humanitarian” control over

the island, challenging NATO to respond.⁵³ Or, more audaciously, as a result of fewer NATO eyes and ears, the Kremlin could expect that its pre-positioning of submarines and aircraft in the Barents and Norwegian Seas and use of civilian transport cover to smuggle special forces onto the island would go undetected. Aware that a NATO response could be delayed because of limited U.S. help, Moscow could take control of an airstrip, port facilities, and communication nodes within hours—sending shockwaves through NATO, and once again daring the alliance to respond.

Southwest of Svalbard, the well-known maritime choke point between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom—the GIUK gap—also presents the allies with strategic challenges. If the U.S. naval presence is thin and the allies do not have the ASW capability to keep the GIUK gap clear, the Russian navy would find it easier to enter the North Atlantic through the gap and so threaten the UK and interdict U.S. convoys to Europe.⁵⁴

Baltic States. Russia views the independent Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) as a threat to Russia's security due to their active role in NATO and the EU.⁵⁵ Russia has been engaged in disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks across all three Baltic states and has been removing demarcation buoys and jamming GPS signals around Narva—the Estonian town which shares a border with Russia.⁵⁶ The majority of Narva's population is Russian speaking (although they are a minority within the overall Estonian population) and many people hold dual citizenship with Russia. Tallinn has been concerned for some time that Moscow could use the excuse of “protecting” Estonia's Russian speakers as a pretext for an incursion into the country at Narva.⁵⁷

These states are also particularly vulnerable to Russian opportunistic aggression given their small landmass and proximity to both the Russian mainland and the heavily fortified Kaliningrad enclave. The recent addition of Sweden and Finland to NATO means the Baltic states are now less isolated, and NATO has also increased its infrastructure and troop rotations (including American participation in these rotations) in the Baltics to deter Russian aggression.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, if Moscow judges that a lack of U.S. enablers like strategic lift will complicate and slow a

reaction, and potentially erode NATO's counterforce offensive capabilities, the Kremlin could view creating a fait accompli in one of these countries as an ideal opportunity to undermine NATO.

Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea is now surrounded by members of NATO, except for the sliver of Russian territory at Kaliningrad and the coast near St. Petersburg. Maintaining access to the Baltic Sea is essential for Moscow—Kaliningrad is home to the Russian Baltic Fleet and is the only Russian port that is ice-free all year. The Baltic Sea is also vital for European allies. Communications cables and energy pipelines are submerged under the shallow waters and provide vital links between the Nordic and Baltic regions, and the rest of Europe.⁵⁹ These cables have been tempting targets for Russia, and Moscow has likely been behind multiple acts of sabotage over the last two years—with ships that belong to the Kremlin's "shadow fleet" damaging cables by using their anchors to drag them along the seabed.⁶⁰

If Moscow judges that a lack of U.S. enablers like strategic lift will complicate and slow a reaction, and potentially erode NATO's counterforce offensive capabilities, the Kremlin could view creating a fait accompli in one of these countries as an ideal opportunity to undermine NATO.

With less ISR available, Russia could use bases in Kaliningrad and Murmansk to launch increased sabotage targeting Baltic seabed cables, offshore energy platforms, military sensors, and/or maritime domain awareness systems. These actions could lead to communications blackouts and energy disruptions in the region, or they could degrade NATO surveillance networks in key zones. Emboldened by U.S. distraction in Asia, Russia could simultaneously take increasingly assertive actions, like using Russian corvettes to harass NATO ships or Russian aircraft to simulate missile runs on NATO ships. European allies could increase patrols, but given a lack of U.S. capabilities, these actions would be less likely to successfully deter Russian aggression.

Amid the rising Russian aggression, Sweden and/or Finland could call for NATO Article 4 consultations, which, as discussed above, could erode NATO's credibility if the allies lack the political cohesion to effectively respond.

Black Sea. Although much attention is given to the prospect of Russian aggression in the Baltic and Arctic regions, Russia—especially if its military were to take additional territory in the south of Ukraine—could view the Black Sea countries as opportune targets for opportunistic aggression intended to discredit NATO's Article 5. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 has given it a strategic foothold in the Black Sea. The peninsula hosts the Russian Black Sea fleet and is now directly connected to the Russian mainland via the Kerch Bridge. Almost a million Russians have moved to Crimea since 2014, displacing many Ukrainian residents, and Moscow has invested over \$10 billion to create a heavily fortified presence in the Black Sea.⁶¹ While this presence gives Russia greater access to the Black Sea littoral states and an ability to exert control over the maritime area, Ukraine has used seaborne drones to sink a number of Russian warships, and caused the Russian Black Sea fleet to redeploy further to the east out of range of the Ukrainian drone fleet.

Russia could view U.S. involvement in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific as an opportunity to increase its attacks on energy supplies that transit the Black Sea to Europe; increase the number and intensity of cyberattacks against power grids, government systems, and/or ports; increase sabotage of pipelines, cables, and logistics hubs in the area; harass NATO member state fishing vessels and commercial ships; and even declare an exclusion zone in the west Black Sea.⁶² Russia could view Romania as a particularly opportune target for these hybrid attacks and coercion, given recent political turmoil in the country, recent public disillusionment with their government, and challenges facing the country's institutions. The goal for Russia would be to create chaos and uncertainty, potentially erode NATO's freedom of navigation, and erode public trust in the alliance. With conflict ongoing in the Indo-Pacific, NATO member states may be divided over how to respond, undermining NATO cohesion, and allowing Russia to demonstrate its dominance in the Black Sea.

Nuclear Deterrence

Since its inception, NATO has relied on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence as the foundation of its collective security strategy and defense posture. In their 2024 Washington Summit Declaration, NATO allies stated, "Nuclear deterrence is the cornerstone of Alliance security."⁶³ Similarly, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept declared that, "The strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance," and that, "NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies on the United States' nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and the contributions of Allies concerned."⁶⁴ Both these NATO documents state that, "NATO's deterrence and defense posture is based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional, and missile defense capabilities, complemented by space and cyber capabilities."⁶⁵

But how is the role of nuclear deterrence in NATO's defense strategy and posture affected by the threat of Russian opportunistic aggression in the context of the United States being engaged in a conflict with China?

After the end of the Cold War, NATO's nuclear deterrence strategy shifted to focus on deterring Russian limited nuclear use against NATO. This approach also aimed to enhance deterrence of other (non-nuclear) forms of Russian aggression against a conventionally superior NATO. However, once Russia reconstitutes its conventional forces following the end of the war in Ukraine, U.S. engagement in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific could undermine NATO conventional superiority over Russia. Noting this potential threat, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States recommended:

"The objectives of U.S. strategy must include effective deterrence and defeat of simultaneous Russian and Chinese aggression in Europe and Asia using conventional forces. If the United States and its allies and partners do not field sufficient conventional forces to achieve this objective, U.S. strategy would need to be altered to increase reliance on nuclear weapons to deter or counter opportunistic or collaborative aggression in the other theater."⁶⁶

If NATO were to find itself conventionally inferior to Russia while the United States was engaged in a conflict with China, it would need to compensate with nuclear weapons. Using nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional inferiority is a far more demanding mission, and current NATO nuclear forces are neither sized nor structured for this purpose. A NATO nuclear force sufficient to enable such a strategy would require significantly more nuclear weapons in theater and additional delivery options to hold at risk the full range of Russian conventional forces needed to confidently ensure the defeat of these forces, and to make credible U.S. first use of nuclear weapons for this purpose.⁶⁷

Deterring or defeating Russian opportunistic aggression in the context of a major war in Asia will have a critically important nuclear dimension, one the United States and its NATO allies must not fail to address and prepare for.

CONCLUSION

THE RISK THAT RUSSIA POSES TO NATO is not theoretical. Moscow is already waging an unconventional war in Europe. These sub-conventional attacks on NATO countries will likely continue so long as Russia views NATO as a superior force with the political cohesion and will to respond to Russian aggression. Once the Russian military is reconstituted—and especially if the Kremlin perceives itself as advancing its aims in Ukraine, including its demand to limit the size and capabilities of the Ukrainian military—Moscow is likely to look for opportunities to test NATO, with the aim of undermining the alliance. Russia would be most likely to test NATO's resolve if the United States is engaged in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. In this case, Moscow may calculate that Washington would have neither the political interest nor the resources to rapidly come to Europe's defense, and the European members of NATO are vulnerable without the U.S. capabilities that would be redeployed to the Indo-Pacific.

NATO must now ensure it can retain a credible conventional deterrent to prevent Russia from attempting to exploit this scenario for its own advantage. It will take time for Europe to fill the gaps Washington would leave. Washington and its allies therefore must think beyond the current war in Ukraine and start making investments now in the capabilities identified in this report to prevent Russian opportunistic aggression later. The United

States and its allies should also discuss other approaches to offset the vulnerabilities that would emerge in the event of a crisis in Asia. The United States and Europe, for example, should determine what additional assets it should pre-position in Europe to avoid the challenges that would emerge from a shortage of strategic enablers and maritime support that would impact Washington's ability to get quickly and securely across the Atlantic to reinforce Europe.

Europe's ability to fill the capability gaps that the United States would leave is only one element of maintaining an effective deterrent against Russia—demonstrating political will is the other critical component of deterrence. If a crisis erupts in the Indo-Pacific, it will be critical for the allies to project unity and resolve, not just through rhetoric and statements, but actions. Allied actions such as cyber operations against Russia, for example, could help signal to Russia the costs that the allies can impose if Russia chooses to test the alliance. But here too, the allies must act now to build up the resilience of their own cyber systems to provide them with greater confidence and latitude for action that would be required to send such a signal of resolve. Deterring Russian aggression in the future requires concrete investments and actions today.

SACEUR must also be prepared to make a case for the capabilities that should remain in Europe to most effectively deter Russia in the event of

a crisis in the Indo-Pacific. First and foremost, NATO must demonstrate that its nuclear mission is secure and well-maintained. Certifying the F-35 for nuclear missions—with the aircraft's enhanced stealth capabilities and ability to penetrate Russian air defenses—would contribute to the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. If NATO does not have a credible capability to man the dual-capable aircraft

Washington and its allies therefore must think beyond the current war in Ukraine and start making investments now in the capabilities identified in this report to prevent Russian opportunistic aggression later.

mission, Putin may judge that his attempt to attack a NATO member and use nuclear threats to hold the alliance hostage has a greater chance of being effective. More broadly, the United States and NATO must retain some offensive capability in Europe—such as sufficient qualities of Army Tactical Missile

Systems—that demonstrate to the Kremlin that NATO can go on the offensive and hold targets of value inside Russia at risk. This includes signaling to Russia that the restrictions placed on Ukraine limiting its ability to strike targets inside Russia would not apply in a war with NATO. In sum, NATO should work to ensure that even if the United States is engaged in the Indo-Pacific, Moscow can see NATO's capability and understand the credibility of its threat to use it.

Russian opportunistic aggression is what the U.S. intelligence community would refer to as a “known unknown”—or as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it, “We know there are some things we do not know.”⁶⁸ There is no guarantee that Putin would directly challenge NATO, but there is a risk that he could try—and one that would grow significantly if the United States were engaged in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. It is critical now that the United States and Europe take practical actions to mitigate that risk. Simply put, when it comes to its policies and approach to Russia, the United States and Europe can invest in confronting Russia now or pay a far greater cost later.

APPENDIX

Possible INDOPACOM Requests to Reinforce U.S. Pacific Forces in a Crisis

This inventory of potential U.S. requirements in the Indo-Pacific was based on a literature review and the expert elicitation workshop with former senior U.S. military officials, former Pentagon officials, and U.S. defense experts.

Maritime

- Attack submarines (Virginia class)
- Aegis destroyers (Arleigh Burke class) and/or cruisers (Ticonderoga)
- One or more carrier battle groups
- Unmanned surface and subsurface vessels
- Maritime patrol aircraft (P-8s)

Ground Forces

- Ground-based air defense (Patriot, THAAD)
- Ground-based early warning sensors
- Mobile ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles

Air and Space

- Additional squadrons of U.S. Air Force combat aircraft (F-22, F-35, F-15, F-16)
- Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) (manned and unmanned: U-2, RC-135 Rivet Joint)
- KC-46 air-to-air refueling tankers
- Repositioning and reprioritization of satellite assets (ISR and targeting)

- Long-range bombers (B-52, B-1, B-2 [until replaced by the B-21])
- Airborne early warning and control aircraft (E-3s, and, when available, E-7 wedgetail)
- Strategic and tactical lift assets (C-5, C-17, C-130J)

Ammunition Resupply

U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy Aircraft Ordnance	
AGM-86/129	Advanced air-launched cruise missile
AGM-88	HARM antiradiation
AGM-158	JASSM (long-range air-to-surface stealth missile)
AGM-154	JSOW joint standoff weapon (glide bomb)
AIM-120	AMRAAM (air-to-air missile)
AIM-9	Sidewinder (air-to-air missile)
AGM-84H/K	SLAM-ER standoff land attack missile
Naval Ordnance	
AGM-84	Harpoon (antiship missile)
Naval Strike Missile	(antiship/land attack)
AGM-158	LRASM (antiship cruise missile)
BGM-109	Tomahawk (land attack cruise missile)
RIM-66/67	Standard SM-1MR/ER SM-2MR/ER (surface-to-air/antiship)
RIM-116	Rolling airframe missile (surface-to-air/antiship missile)
RIM-161	Standard SM-3 (Aegis surface-to-air missile)
RIM-174	Standard SM-6 (anti-air and antisurface)
RIM-162	Sea Sparrow (ship self-defense missile)

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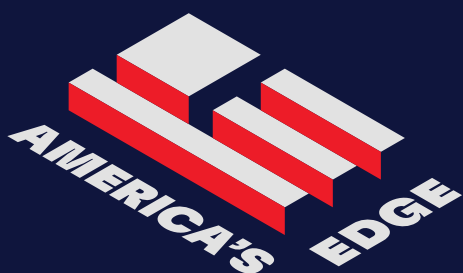
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