



Resilience and Reciprocity: The Future of Partnership Amidst Strategic Simultaneity

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Executive Summary

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine constitutes the most visible affront to the rules-based international order confronted by the Euro-Atlantic community today. Its ramifications, however, extend far beyond the surrounding Black Sea Region and, even, the European continent. To the South, trade disruptions stemming from the conflict have compounded political instability in the Sahel, already weakened by inflation and continued sub-state extremist violence; simultaneously to the East, the People's Republic of China has closely monitored developments in Ukraine, as it escalates efforts to assert itself as a major military, economic, and political force both regionally and internationally. Russian aggression perfectly encapsulates the principle of strategic simultaneity, whereby threats to the rules-based international order are now increasingly multi-faceted and interconnected.

Euro-Atlantic policy must, therefore, work to identify these connections and engage states far beyond its immediate region as equal partners, forging security relations centered on resilience and reciprocity. This report begins by highlighting these issue linkages in four key regions: the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Indo-Pacific, and Africa. Rooted in the insights of security practitioners from these four theaters, the report offers a foundational roadmap for strategic partnerships with the Euro-Atlantic community, leveraging a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to countering known and emerging threats to common values.

Introduction

The Senior Executive Seminar held at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies from May 16-19, 2023, brought together forty-eight senior military and civilian security practitioners for four days of discussion. These practitioners represented over forty governmental entities from thirty-five nation-states, each with a unique perspective on the political, economic, and security challenges faced by their respective countries.



Regardless of their nationality or professional background, all forty-eight individuals departed Garmisch-Partenkirchen with a renewed understanding of these threats, which range from armed conflict in Ukraine to climate-change-induced instability in the Sahel. They also departed with a stronger sense of the strategic imperative to build and strengthen regional as well as transatlantic security partnerships. This report seeks to identify contemporary challenges in four strategic theaters - the Western Balkans, Black Sea, Africa, and Indo-Pacific (Figure 1) - before exploring potential avenues of future engagement between these regions and the Euro-Atlantic community.

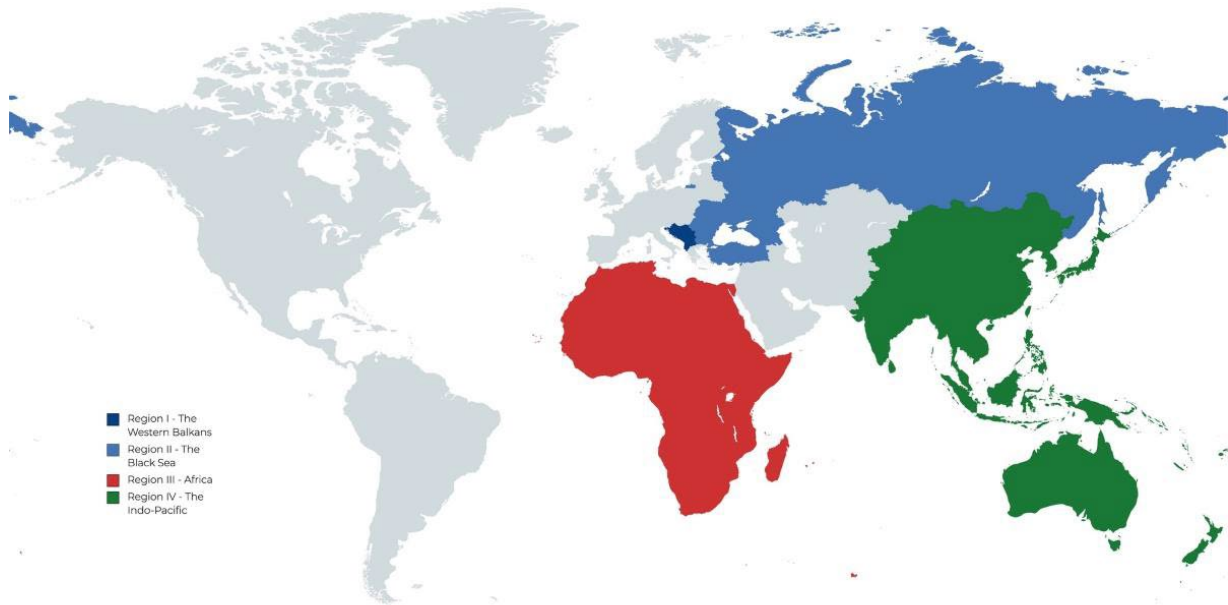


Figure 1: Mathias Katsuya: Created with mapchart.net

An Era of Strategic Simultaneity

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a deliberate attempt by President Vladimir Putin to undermine a defining tenet of the rules-based international order: that no state can reshape borders through the employment of coercive armed force. The conflict, and the ensuing wave of economic, military, and political support to Ukraine from forty-one states, has permanently altered the global security landscape.¹ Unity of effort within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) has been largely restored. Both organizations, still recovering from internal divisions at the highest levels of political leadership, now confront the dual strategic imperative to enable a Ukrainian victory and reinforce Euro-Atlantic deterrence and defense.

The ramifications of Russian aggression in Ukraine, however, extends far beyond the Black Sea Region and the European continent. As NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, asserted

¹ Ariana Antezza et al., *The Ukraine Support Tracker: Which countries help Ukraine and how?* (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2023), 25, [The Ukraine Support Tracker: Which countries help Ukraine and how? | Kiel Institute \(ifw-kiel.de\)](https://www.kiel-institute.org/publications/the-ukraine-support-tracker-which-countries-help-ukraine-and-how/).

during the 2023 Munich Security Conference, “security is not regional, it is global.”² In the East, the People’s Republic of China is carefully following developments in Ukraine, as it escalates its own campaign to assert control over the East China Sea and set favorable conditions for potential military intervention in Taiwan. Chinese tactics have remained in the “grey zone” below the threshold of conventional conflict, fusing traditional instruments of state power such as large-scale military displays or economic sanctions with unconventional means like the employment of paramilitary proxies and information operations.³ Nevertheless, the evolution of Russian action against Ukraine since 2014 demonstrates the potential for escalation inherent in grey zone strategic competition, raising major implications for continued stability in the Indo-Pacific.

To the South, aftershocks of the Russo-Ukraine War have also struck the shores of the African continent. Already weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic, African states now face rising food and fuel prices as well as pervasive trade disruptions, with Russian aggression representing a “Cold War redux” that poses a major threat to regional economic and political stability.⁴ In effect, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine demonstrates the extent to which contemporary strategic challenges are not simply multifaceted but interlinked. Euro-Atlantic states and their external partners in Africa and the Indo-Pacific now inhabit an era of “strategic simultaneity,” defined by the presence of overlapping and interdependent threats to the rules-based international order.⁵ No longer can NATO and the EU focus primarily on tackling threats in their immediate geographic regions. Security practitioners must now work across regional divides to strike the balance between addressing known strategic challenges and coping with new ones as they arise.

Region One: The Western Balkans

The Western Balkans (WB) constitute an emerging front in contemporary geostrategic competition. Russian and Chinese efforts to cement political and economic influence in the region have expanded in scope and sophistication, aided by a pause in U.S. and European engagement following the large-scale interventions of the 1990s. Though six WB states are current or potential candidates for EU membership, the accession process remains stymied by pervasive rule-of-law concerns, with one report recognizing “clear elements of state capture” such as connections with organized crime at the highest levels of political leadership.⁶ Disillusionment with corruption has driven a regional brain-drain, but while popular support for formal EU/NATO membership remains consistent, the question of the political will to implement vital reforms is another matter entirely. In effect, the current strategic reality of the WB is captured in a simple paradox: ongoing

² Jens Stoltenberg, “Opening Remarks at the Munich Security Conference” (speech, Munich, February 13, 2023), North Atlantic Treaty Organization, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_212041.htm.

³ Chungjin Jung, “China’s Gray Zone Operations in the Yellow Sea,” *DKI APCSS Security Nexus* 22 (2021): 4, https://dkiapcss.edu/nexus_articles/chinas-gray-zone-operations-in-the-yellow-sea/.

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, *The impact of the war in Ukraine on sustainable development in Africa* (New York: United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa, 2022), i, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-05/UNDP%20RBA%20-%20Impact%20of%20the%20war%20in%20Ukraine%20on%20Africa%20-%202024%20May%202022_0.pdf.

⁵ Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Tackling Strategic Simultaneity: What NATO Could Do to Adapt to the New Multitude of Threats,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 5, no. 1 (2022): 166, <https://sjms.nu/articles/10.31374/sjms.143>.

⁶ European Court of Auditors, *EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist* (Luxembourg City: European Court of Auditors, 2022): 9, https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR22_01/SR_ROL-Balkans_EN.pdf.

strategic competition has provided new exigence for full regional Euro-Atlantic integration, but the accession of partners who fail to meet the necessary economic, political, and security benchmarks would only introduce new vulnerabilities into existing institutions and relations.

The Way Forward

The near-term strategic vision for the Western Balkans envisions full regional integration into existing Euro-Atlantic structures such as the European Union and NATO. This outcome, however, remains predicated on the resolution of internal and external challenges to accession. Russian disinformation campaigns in the WB have, for instance, grown increasingly aggressive in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, seeking to fuel regional resentment against the Euro-Atlantic community by emphasizing the shared historical memory of EU and NATO interventions.⁷ Interestingly, however, such narratives have largely failed to gain traction within WB societies, and popular support for future EU/NATO integration remains high. It is, instead, individuals and groups within the state that have been most active in the production of disinformation; in the case of Euro-Atlantic accession, these domestic actors have sought to reinforce the narrative of the EU as uncommitted to WB integration.⁸ The result is an increased unwillingness to obey EU conditionalities, further stymying the accession process and reinforcing the status quo. Countering these malign narratives requires the development of robust strategic communications (StratCom) and counter-disinformation campaigns.

Recommendations for Action

- Cooperation through communication: EU and WB leaders must synchronize strategic messaging to the regional public, emphasizing the mutually beneficial nature of EU/NATO membership, in order to effectively dispel disinformation.
- Leveraging institutional knowledge: The EU/NATO possess rich institutional knowledge in the field of countering disinformation, both among individual members and internal organizations. Enhancing cooperation between WB states and these entities is central to the transfer of best practices to inform national disinformation awareness programs and foster cross-generational resilience through education.

In addition to disinformation, the Western Balkans has also confronted high levels of corruption, a critical obstacle to the rule-of-law requirements of Euro-Atlantic integration. WB states can be described as “stabilitocracies,” combining semi-authoritarian political structures and limited rule-of-law with external legitimacy under the guise of a reforming democracy.⁹ Continued support to stabilitocratic regimes only reinforces the resulting effects of this corruption, from stagnant economic growth to limited economic opportunities, that further hinder Euro-Atlantic integration. The entanglement of public and private administration in the WB means that political connections

⁷ Branislav Stanicek, *At a Glance: Russia's influence in the Western Balkans* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022): 1,

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS_ATAG\(2022\)733523_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/EPRS_ATAG(2022)733523_EN.pdf).

⁸ Gregory Asmolov et al., *Study: Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them* (Brussels: European Parliament Policy Department for External Relations, 2021): 35-36, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

⁹ Florian Bieber, “The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies,” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 10 (Winter 2018): 177. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573486>.

are a virtual necessity for employment, leading to the mass emigration of disenchanted skilled workers needed for the implementation of reform. Forty-seven percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens, for instance, live abroad, with only eleven percent believing that today's youth have a positive future in their country.¹⁰ Addressing corruption and its associated consequences on the human capital vital to WB integration into the Euro-Atlantic community necessitates a holistic approach, leveraging cooperation with regional and external partners.

Recommendations for Action

- EU anti-corruption assistance: Local anti-corruption measures must be aggressively pursued and implemented, with EU support to WB institutional capacity building serving to create and strengthen mechanisms for public oversight and accountability.
- EU support to education and vocational training: At the same time, educational and vocational training initiatives sponsored by the EU offer a vital means of generating cross-generational involvement in key sectors for regional economic development such as IT or engineering. In doing so, these programs also create a powerful incentive for remaining within one's home state and combat endemic brain drain.
- Regional Advisory Task Forces (RATFs): Cooperation with neighboring states who have completed, or are further along in the EU/NATO integration process, is of central importance. The creation of RATFs would foster closer ties within the Euro-Atlantic community and ensure that lessons learned by new EU/NATO states are made available to all aspiring members.

Region Two: The Black Sea

If the Western Balkans represent an emerging theater of strategic competition, the Black Sea Region (BSR) constitutes the veritable front-line. Efforts by the Russian Federation to redefine the region's internationally recognized borders through overt military force and covert political, economic, and information efforts did not begin with the 2022 invasion of Ukraine or 2014 annexation of Crimea. These events, instead, marked the culmination of an escalatory cycle of Russian behavior, from its 2008 intervention in the Georgian province of South Ossetia to the maintenance of a symbolic 1,500-troop contingent in Moldova's Transnistria region.¹¹ The effects of strategic competition in the BSR go beyond armed violence: its status as a vital energy corridor and transit point for grains and fertilizers offers both powerful coercive leverage to the Russian Federation as well as potential opportunities for expanded regional cooperation. While the invasion of Ukraine has deepened political, economic, and security ties between the Euro-Atlantic community and its Black Sea partners, formalized integration for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia has yet to be achieved, and large-scale regional cooperation remains limited.

¹⁰ Heather Conley and Donatienne Ruy, *Confronting Stablocracy in the Western Balkans: A New Approach for Western Assistance* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32257>.

¹¹ Vladimir Solovyov, "Ukraine War Risks Repercussions for Transnistria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 23, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87986>.

The Way Forward

Safeguarding the territorial integrity of Black Sea states is the central objective of future security cooperation in the region. Providing continued political, economic, and military support to Ukraine is the most immediate measure available, but it is imperative that any partnership plan also combats Russian attempts to assert control over the region as a whole. The Russian Federation has engaged in the concerted militarization of the Black Sea, since its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Its Black Sea Fleet is based in the critical strategic port of Sevastopol and has employed standoff weapons to attack Ukrainian targets, while the Crimean Peninsula now bristles with anti-access area-denial platforms such as S-400 missiles and the K-300P Bastion-P coastal defense system.¹² Though Ukraine has been highly effective at blunting the Russian Navy through asymmetric means, such as shore-based anti-ship missiles and unmanned submersibles, it is likely that Russia's naval dominance and offensive posture on the Black Sea will remain unchanged, even with a Ukrainian strategic victory. Naval capacity-building, thus, represents a key domain for future cooperation between the Euro-Atlantic community and BSR partners.

Recommendations for Action

- NATO Black Sea Flotilla: While Turkey retains the right to close access to the Black Sea to foreign vessels under the 1936 Montreux Convention, the establishment of a NATO Naval Flotilla, operated by NATO BSR states and supported by the Alliance, would allow for a permanent maritime presence to deter Russian aggression.¹³ As the Black Sea continues to grow in importance as a corridor for European energy and food supplies, this unified effort represents a vital means of challenging Russian attempts to employ both military and non-military coercive tools in the region.

The nature of contemporary strategic challenges in the BSR necessitates an increased degree of interoperability and integration between the Euro-Atlantic community and its regional partners. In addition to possessing EU candidate status, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia form part of NATO's Partnership Interoperability Initiative, with the latter two designated as "Enhanced Opportunity Partners" (EOPs) who possess increased access to NATO programs and exercises.¹⁴ All three states still have some distance to cover prior to Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly with regards to rule-of-law reforms and the resolution of territorial conflicts. Nonetheless, there remains a large degree of potential for enhanced security cooperation between the EU/NATO and Black Sea states.

Recommendations for Action

- Moldova and EOP status: Moldova is constitutionally neutral; however, the re-designation of the state as a NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partner would create an increasingly

¹² Steve Horrell, "Ending Russia's Black Sea Stranglehold," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, March 2, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/ending-russias-black-sea-stranglehold/>.

¹³ Mark Lancaster, *Troubled Waters: How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly Defence and Security Committee, 2023): 13, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2023-black-sea-security-report-lancaster-020-dscfc>.

¹⁴ "Partnership Interoperability Initiative," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified April 25, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132726.htm.

tailored relationship between Moldova and the Alliance, allowing for the provision of the specific training and equipment needed to prepare the country's armed forces for the full spectrum of conflict or national crises.

- Streamlined accession: The security guarantees afforded by Euro-Atlantic integration, such as collective defense provisions under Article V of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, constitute the most effective deterrent against aggression. Though additional reforms are required before the accession of BSR states into the EU and NATO, it is also imperative that Euro-Atlantic institutions work to streamline this process where possible.

Finally, the conflict in Ukraine presents new opportunities for strengthening cooperation within the Black Sea itself, especially with regards to tackling reconstruction and addressing spillover effects of violence. Bilateral and multilateral arrangements have been instituted to address challenges as varied as food security and the flow of Ukrainian refugees into neighboring states, demonstrating a significant potential for continued regional cooperation.

Ukrainian reconstruction and recovery will undoubtedly prove costly and immensely labor-intensive, but leveraging this increasing degree of cooperation could result in an ideal “win-win situation” for the Black Sea as a whole.¹⁵ Such arrangements may prove particularly beneficial in highly specialized technical fields associated with conflict management such as maritime explosive ordnance disposal.

Recommendations for Action

- Multinational explosive ordnance disposal (EOD): Large-scale Russian and Ukrainian sea mining campaigns have resulted in a high risk of collateral damage or direct hits on civilian shipping operating in the Black Sea.¹⁶ The exchange of technical knowledge and capabilities in the field of maritime explosive ordnance disposal, thus, represents an avenue for strengthening regional ties and ensuring long-term physical and economic security in the Black Sea.

Regardless of its specific format, the potential for cooperation amidst post-conflict reconstruction in Ukraine offers a vital opportunity to stimulate economic growth and address spillover affecting domains such as maritime trade or food security. Most of all, a joint Black Sea reconstruction effort could be leveraged to implement reforms that reduce regional reliance on the Russian Federation, while also setting favorable political, economic, and security conditions for continued integration with the wider Euro-Atlantic community.

Region Three: Africa

Africa currently finds itself at the heart of intense geostrategic and diplomatic competition. Moscow and Beijing have escalated attempts to cement their political and military influence on the continent, with Russian and Chinese arms as well as private military contractors supplied to forty

¹⁵ Paul Aligica, “Reconstructing the postwar Black Sea region,” *Geopolitical Intelligence Services*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/black-sea-postwar/>.

¹⁶ “Risk of Collateral Damage in the North Western, Western, and Southwest Black Sea,” NATO Shipping Centre, last modified February 28, 2023, <https://shipping.nato.int/nsc/operations/news/-2022/risk-of-collateral-damage-in-the-north-western-black-sea-2>.

of the continent's fifty-four states.¹⁷ The large-scale withdrawal of European forces from the Sahel in 2022 generated new opportunities for the expansion of Russia and China's security presence, and the region remains locked in bitter conflict against transnational jihadist organizations and other substate armed groups. Strategic challenges in Africa, however, extend beyond the threat of armed conflict. Food and energy prices have drastically increased amidst trade disruptions brought on by the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, a major source of insecurity for a continent in which food and energy needs constitute over fifty percent of household consumption.¹⁸ Amidst this, diplomatic relations with the Euro-Atlantic community remain tenuous, fueled by a sense of disenfranchisement from global economic and political structures and compounded by relentless campaigns of disinformation directed by malicious actors within the continent and beyond.

The Way Forward

Future Euro-Atlantic strategic relations with African states envision the continent as a partner in advancing common political, economic, and security goals, both bilaterally at a national level and multilaterally alongside institutions like the EU or NATO. The success of these partnerships is contingent upon their ability to address the sources of insecurity most relevant to African communities, rather than instrumentalizing the continent in escalating strategic competition against great-power rivals like Russia or China.

One such avenue for mutual cooperation is the field of energy security. Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the EU remained heavily reliant on Moscow for its energy needs, with Russian gas constituting forty-five percent of total gas imports the previous year.¹⁹ Though immediate measures were taken to ensure continued European access to fossil fuels, the Euro-Atlantic community now faces a strategic imperative to reinforce the long-term sustainability of this decoupling by substituting Russian energy imports with renewable energy obtained from alternative producers. The African continent represents one such source. North Africa, for instance, has a large-scale potential for solar and wind energy, with the installable capacity of Algeria alone estimated at more than two-and-a-half times Europe's yearly electricity output.²⁰ Such initiatives offer an opportunity to not only increase EU energy resilience and facilitate its renewable energy transition but also provide avenues for economic and technological development on the African continent.

Recommendations for Action

- EU-Africa energy infrastructure development: Though the systems required for energy trade across the Mediterranean are largely established, the Euro-Atlantic community must

¹⁷ John Parachini et al., *Mapping Chinese and Russian Military and Security Exports to Africa* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2022): 7, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TLA2045-3.html>.

¹⁸ Marijn Bolhuis and Peter Kovacs, "Africa's Inflation Among Region's Most Urgent Challenges," *International Monetary Fund Blog*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/10/20/africas-inflation-among-regions-most-urgent-challenges>.

¹⁹ Szymon Kardás, "Conscious uncoupling: Europeans' Russian gas challenge in 2023," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, February 13, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/conscious-uncoupling-europeans-russian-gas-challenge-in-2023/>.

²⁰ Laura El-Katiri, *Sunny side up: Maximising the European Green Deal's potential for North Africa and Europe* (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023): 9, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Sunny-side-up_Maximising-the-European-Green-Deals-potential-for-North-Africa-and-Europe.pdf.

develop and modernize the renewable energy infrastructure within the African continent itself. By leveraging Africa's immense energy potential, such initiatives both maximize output to the EU and establish mechanisms for the intra-regional trade of affordable energy.

- Technical and vocational training programs: North African states, in particular, possess large youth populations with elevated levels of education; however, access to work remains limited. The provision of technical training, whether through formalized EU programs or smaller exchanges with individual European energy companies, represents a crucial line of effort, providing both long-term sustainability of regional energy infrastructure as well as valuable employment that strengthens national economic prosperity.

A similar partnership dynamic can be envisioned in the domain of food security. Restrictions on grain exports as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have revealed the potential for global food disruptions as a result of localized conflicts. This impact was particularly felt on the African continent, with states such as Kenya and Cameroon almost entirely reliant on Russia or Ukraine for their grain imports.²¹ Addressing the threat of continued food insecurity necessitates a multi-faceted approach, leveraging the political, economic, and technical resources as well as institutional knowledge of Euro-Atlantic and African states.

Recommendations for Action

- EU-backed emergency measures: In the short-term, EU states must work to minimize restrictions on the exportation of essential foodstuffs to Africa. At the same time, the EU must also assist African states in developing appropriate mechanisms for the distribution of African-grown food, in order to address emergency humanitarian needs on the continent.
- Agricultural modernization: Both African states and the Euro-Atlantic community have a strategic imperative to industrialize the continent's agricultural sector and ensure its resilience in the face of climate change. Technical capacity-building must adapt farming mechanization to the peculiarities of local environments through measures such as improving irrigation and developing harvesting, storage, and distribution systems suited for the reality of pervasive environmental degradation.
- Fostering interest in the agricultural sector: At the same time, African states must also leverage strategic communications and civil society engagement to increase the appeal of agricultural careers for youth. Complementary measures such as technical training and employment in state-funded agricultural projects play a vital role in this effort, offering opportunities to simultaneously develop the economy and strengthen national resilience through food security.

Ultimately, the current realities of geostrategic and diplomatic competition have highlighted the underlying shortfalls of existing international security frameworks. Though it is estimated that Africa will encompass one-quarter of the global population by 2050, for instance, the continent

²¹ "Ukraine/Russia: As War Continues, Africa Food Crisis Looms," Human Rights Watch, last modified April 28, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/28/ukraine/russia-war-continues-africa-food-crisis-looms>.

still lacks permanent representation on the UN Security Council (UNSC), whose current arrangement is increasingly regarded as “the anachronistic legacy of the post-World War II order.”²² Proposals to reform the UNSC’s structure to incorporate permanent African membership are far from novel. In 2005, for instance, the AU released its Common Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations, calling for no less than two permanent African seats in the UNSC with full veto power as well as five non-permanent positions.²³ Political support for such reforms has grown, but lasting structural changes to the United Nations remains unaccomplished.

Recommendations for Action

- StratCom support for UNSC reform: Though such reforms cannot be enacted unilaterally by any individual state, the Euro-Atlantic community must leverage its existing diplomatic relations and strategic communications resources to support permanent African membership of the UNSC. Beyond simply ensuring equitable representation of contemporary security interests, such reforms would also push back on Russian and Chinese narratives of a marginalized African presence in global politics and serve as powerful confirmation that all states belong in the rules-based international order.

Region Four: The Indo-Pacific

Despite its geographical isolation from most Euro-Atlantic states, the Indo-Pacific represents the central theater of future strategic competition. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has aggressively expanded its influence in the region, adopting an approach combining diplomatic engagement, the development of infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative, low intensity coercion, and overt military displays to assert its influence as a key Indo-Pacific and international actor. In particular, Chinese tactics have occupied the grey zone between traditional diplomacy and military force, employing means ranging from civilian proxy militias and industrial espionage to economic coercion.²⁴ China’s objective is twofold - ensure strategic control of its immediate surroundings, especially with regards to the East China Sea and neighboring Taiwan, and secure access to the maritime commons. This increasingly provocative foreign policy, in addition to continued PRC support to the Russian Federation, renders the Indo-Pacific a key domain of great-power competition, with implications extending far beyond the region.

The Way Forward

The overarching objective of Euro-Atlantic strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific is the safeguarding of the rules-based international order amidst escalating threats to regional stability. China, in particular, has grown increasingly adept at advancing its political, economic, and security interests through an ever-expanding arsenal of coercive tools. These capabilities are

²² Stanley Ehiane et al., “Re-evaluating the African Union’s Ezulwini Consensus in the Reform of the United Nations’ Security Council,” *Journal of African Union Studies* 10, no. 1 (2021): 55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27159735>.

²³ African Union, *The Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations: “The Ezulwini Consensus”* (Addis Ababa: African Union, 2005): 9, <http://old.centerforunreform.org/sites/default/files/Ezulwini%20Consensus.pdf>.

²⁴ Asya Acka et al., “The Challenge,” in *By Other Means Part I: Campaigning in the Gray Zone*, ed. Alice Friend and Kathleen Hicks (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), 7, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep22609.6>.

tailored to specific targets, with China employing the greatest variety of tactics against Taiwan and smaller states like Vietnam and limiting its activity against larger adversaries such as Japan or India.²⁵ From overt displays of military force and cyberattacks against Taiwan to the destruction of Vietnamese fishing boats by Chinese Coast Guard vessels, the PRC's tactics offer the flexibility of sequentially applying military and non-military pressure, rather than relying on escalation in a single domain.

Most of all, the unconventional nature of the methods employed drastically hinders attribution and generates confusion regarding an adversary's intentions, complicating the ability of targeted states to deploy effective countermeasures.²⁶ Facilitating and enhancing multinational security cooperation in the maritime domain is, thus, a crucial facet of any Euro-Atlantic strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific.

Recommendations for Action

- Joint reporting, investigation, and attribution: Central to establishing a unified regional front against PRC aggression is the creation of common mechanisms for incident investigation and attribution. Rather than relying on ad-hoc communication arrangements, a joint information-sharing platform regarding hostile grey zone action would enhance situational awareness and facilitate the ability of Euro-Atlantic states and regional partners to identify trends in Chinese behavior that may be indicative of future escalation.
- Deterrence and Taiwan: Though formalized recognition of Taiwan remains infeasible in most instances, the Euro-Atlantic community must avoid ceding to PRC political pressure and engage with its Indo-Pacific partners to prevent the eruption of armed hostilities in Taiwan. Measures may include continued capacity-building activities, support to Taiwanese defense and disaster relief organizations, or freedom-of-navigation patrols through the Taiwan Strait.

The PRC has also developed an extensive suite of anti-access area-denial (A2AD) platforms, capable of inflicting massive damage on any intervening military force in its First Island Chain. Such capabilities seek not to prevent an incursion altogether but, rather, to restrict adversary freedom of action within the A2AD weapons engagement zone through overlapping anti-ship and anti-air missiles, multi-domain early warning arrays, and electronic warfare systems.²⁷ Enhanced multilateral and defense diplomacy will be crucial to preventing any escalation within the region; however, if required, Euro-Atlantic states and their Indo-Pacific partners must be prepared to conduct the full spectrum of combat operations in this denied environment.

²⁵ Jonah Blank et al., *A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2022), 5, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA594-1.html.

²⁶ James Derleth, "Great Power Competition, Irregular Warfare, and the Gray Zone," *Irregular Warfare Center Perspectives*, no. 2 (2023): 3, https://irregularwarfarecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/20230111_Perspectives_No_2.pdf.

²⁷ Oriana Mastro, "China's Anti-Access-Area Denial (A2/AD) Capabilities: Is American Rebalancing Enough?" in *American Strategy and Purpose: Reflections on Foreign Policy and National Security in an Era of Change*, ed. Jason Brooks and William Natter III (Lexington: CENSA, 2014), 2, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3008893.

Recommendations for Action

- “Inside-out” interoperability: An “inside-out” approach, leveraging technical capabilities and rapid maneuver to strike key centers of gravity in the A2AD network, represents the most decisive manner of piercing the PRC’s defensive bubble with minimal attrition.²⁸ The interoperability required of a multinational force in this environment cannot be developed in an emergency and must, instead, be fostered over time. Large-scale exercises, such as the annual RIMPAC, are vital and ensure that Euro-Atlantic states and their regional partners possess the necessary tactics, techniques, and procedures to achieve strategic victory.
- Reorienting development and acquisition: At the same time, operating at-depth in an adversary’s weapons engagement zone means that the aerial, technological, and logistical superiority enjoyed over the previous 20 years are far from assured. The Euro-Atlantic community must, therefore, work alongside its Indo-Pacific allies to develop technical capabilities in critical domains, ranging from fire support to personnel recovery, that are resilient enough to function in a contested electronic and cyber environment.
- Holistic regional resilience: Beyond politico-military measures, these preparations must also consider the economic dimensions of a potential escalation and encompass measures to ensure continued access to vital goods, raw materials, and services in the event of a regional crisis.

Conclusion: Facing the Challenges Together

The strategic challenges confronted by the Transatlantic community have broadened in scope and sophistication, as state adversaries leverage a growing arsenal of coercive capabilities to pursue dominance. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 permanently altered the global security environment and ignited the largest interstate conflict on the European continent since the end of the Second World War. Further from Euro-Atlantic shores, the PRC has aggressively sought expansion in the East China Sea, combining traditional displays of economic and military force with unconventional tactics such as proxy harassment and cyber-attacks. At the same time, new strategic threats have emerged, ranging from looming food insecurity due to disruptions of Ukrainian grain exports to climate-change-induced political instability in the Sahel.

This contemporary security reality is defined by coinciding and mutually reinforcing challenges of both natural and man-made origins. Most importantly, it is also one that, in the words of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, “we need to face collectively.”²⁹ Success in this era of strategic simultaneity rests upon robust Euro-Atlantic engagement with its external partners, engagement which is neither imbalanced nor instrumentalizing but, instead, fosters relationships defined by resilience and reciprocity. In this sense, “facing the strategic challenges together” is not simply a catchphrase. It is a commitment central to the preservation of the rules-based international order in the face of today and tomorrow’s threats.

²⁸ Andreas Schmidt, “Counter Anti-Access/Area Denial Future Capability Requirements in NATO,” *Romanian Military Thinking* 1, no. 2 (2018): 254, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=133861957&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²⁹ Jens Stoltenberg, “Speech at Keio University,” (speech, Tokyo, February 1, 2023), North Atlantic Treaty Organization, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_211398.htm.

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