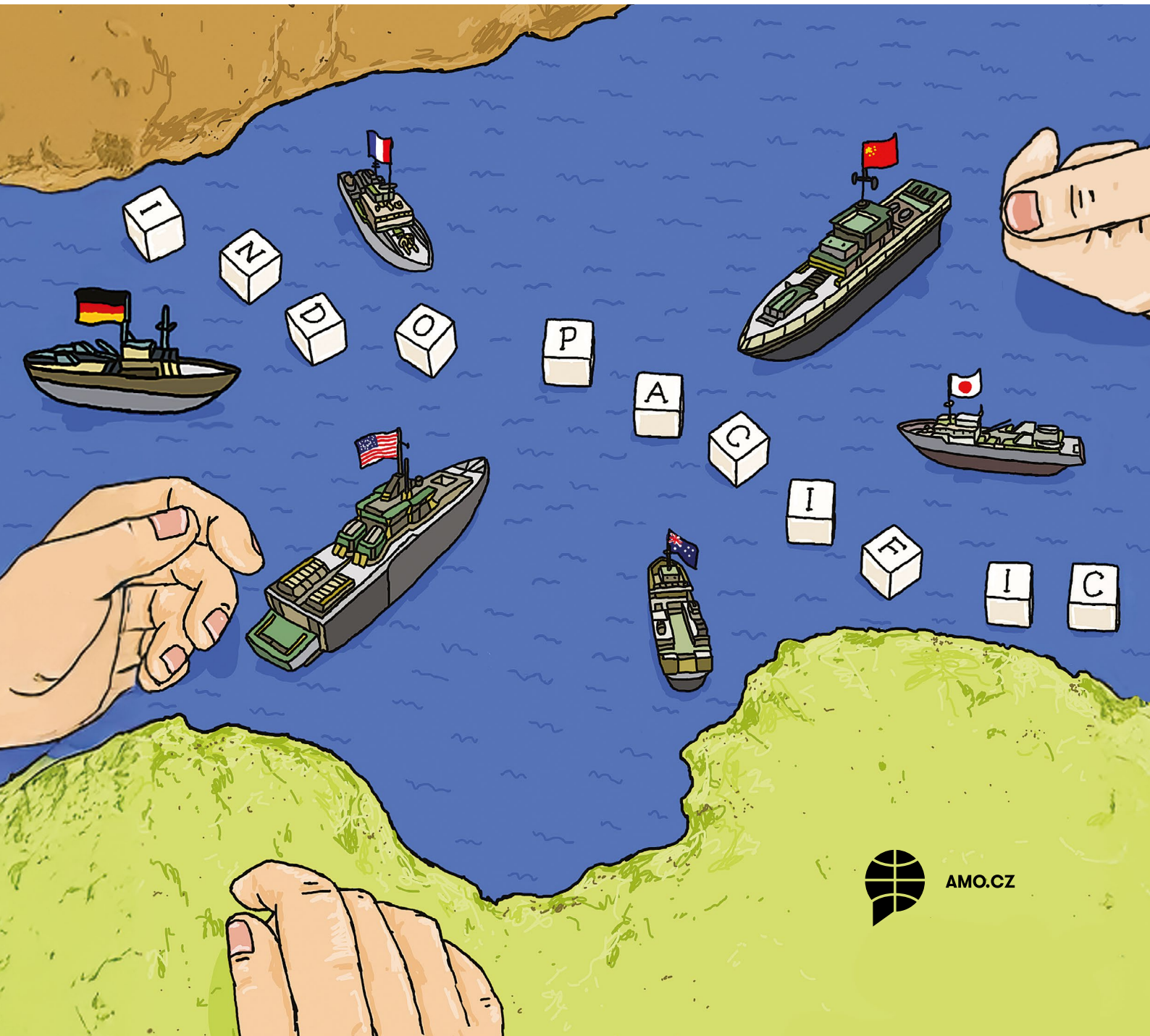


Interlinked Instability: Central and Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape

Pavel Havlíček, Ivana Karásková, Danila Naumov



BRIEFING PAPER

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Bridging Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific: economic, political and security considerations	9
Lessons from the War in Ukraine for the Indo-Pacific	13
Parallels and Divergences Between Ukraine and Taiwan	16
Conclusion: Lessons from Ukraine and Taiwan	19
About Authors	23
About AMO	25
Footnotes	26

Introduction

The world in 2025 has entered an era of escalating global instability and multifaceted crises, characterised by the weakening of global institutions and a multilateral world order grounded in norms, rules, and principles. This decline has given way to a resurgence of realpolitik and geopolitical revisionism, championed by some of the world's leading powers. These dynamics are evident in the ongoing efforts of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC, hereafter China) to rewrite the rules of the international system, and, more recently, in the disruptive reemergence of Donald Trump in global affairs.

The concept of the West, forged during the Cold War as a unified framework of shared values and strategic cooperation, is now being significantly undermined. The singular actions of the newly inaugurated US president have introduced unprecedented challenges to this cohesion. His controversial rhetoric, including threats pronounced in the first days of the presidency to militarily assert control over the Panama Canal, and provocative overtures towards Denmark regarding the independence of Greenland, risks sowing disunity among NATO allies and undermining the transatlantic alliance. What is at stake is not merely a pragmatic partnership but the principled commitment to shared values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – values that have long underpinned the strength and unity of the global West. This shift appears rooted in a philosophy that prioritises interests over enduring partnerships, signalling a departure from norms of alliance-based diplomacy. The implications of this approach are profound, with the potential not only to strain the transatlantic partnership but also to precipitate a dangerous return to a world order characterized by great power rivalries, reminiscent of Thucydides' grim observation where the strong do as they will, and the weak suffer as they must.

For Europe, the most acute manifestation of this crisis remains the nearly three-year-long Russian full-scale war against Ukraine and its broader aggression against neighbouring states. The West has endeavoured to deter, contain, and isolate Russia's imperialist ambitions, but parallel dynamics are unfolding in the Indo-Pacific. In this region, China has exhibited similar behaviour – albeit with somewhat lesser intensity – through its increasingly assertive actions, particularly in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas. This convergence highlights how crises in one part of the world are increasingly shaping developments in others, extending even to the so-called Global South, where the confrontation between the West, Russia and China is having widespread repercussions.

Despite their geographic distance, Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific are becoming ever more interlinked through shared security challenges and economic interdependencies. A stark example of this is North Korea's actions, which involved military support for the Kremlin's efforts in Ukraine while simultaneously escalating its confrontational stance toward South Korea in the Indo-Pacific. This marks a troubling trend of increased cooperation between the "axis of adversaries" formed

by the world's most belligerent authoritarian states, with far-reaching implications for global security.

In this context, the responses of the Czech Republic and the European Union (EU) to these developments will significantly influence their own roles in global politics. The global community is closely watching their actions, and any signs of weakness are likely to be exploited by rivals, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

This paper seeks to explore the current dynamics between these two key regions, highlighting both good and bad practices in responding to the overt aggression of Russia and the growing assertiveness of China. Furthermore, it aims to analyse the multi-faceted nature of the crisis and its consequences for the West and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, ultimately issuing a call for stronger, united action to mitigate these negative trends and work toward a more stable and cooperative future.

Bridging Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific: economic, political and security considerations

For the EU, the Indo-Pacific region represents a diverse array of trade partners, each with varying levels of economic significance. Among them, China stands out as the largest and most influential. Over the years, extensive trade flows and investment channels between the EU and China have created a deep economic interdependence that inevitably shapes political agendas. This dynamic is particularly visible in cases such as Germany or Spain, where Chinese economic influence has prompted a delicate balancing act. For instance, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez recently voiced opposition to EU-imposed tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, citing concerns over unfair competition.¹

The Spanish Ministry of Economy reports that around 600 Spanish companies currently operate in China, while Chinese investments in Spain have reached an impressive €11 billion as of 2024, dwarfing Spain's €4.76 billion investments in China.² This disparity underscores the extent of China's leverage in bilateral relations, as it strategically uses its economic presence to influence the political stances of individual EU member states. This creates a complex dynamic for states: balancing national economic priorities linked to Chinese investment with their broader commitments to EU policies and principles. The interplay between economic reliance and political autonomy is not unique to Spain, but emblematic of the broader challenge facing the EU in its approach to China – one of its most important yet strategically challenging trade partners in the Indo-Pacific.

The economic ties between the EU and countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan present a marked contrast to the dynamics with China. With a more balanced investment relationship, funds from these nations do not exert the same degree of influence as Chinese investments do within Europe. Japan, the EU's second-largest trade partner in the region, recorded total trade exceeding €140 billion in 2022.³ This trade relationship is dominated by Japanese exports of heavy machinery and EU exports of pharmaceutical products, according to Trading Economics.⁴ The EU's commitment to deepening ties with key Asian economies is exemplified by the 2018 Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Japan, which the EU considers one of its most significant trade agreements to date.⁵

While trade with Japan remains relatively balanced, South Korea presents a different dynamic. The EU is South Korea's third-largest export destination, with a focus on technologically advanced products where the EU lags behind in development.⁶ Conversely, South Korea ranks as the EU's eighth-largest export partner, with total trade volumes slightly behind those of EU-Japan trade.⁷ The EU's strategy of strengthening economic partnerships also led to doubled bilateral trade since the provisional

implementation of the EU-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2011, even though it was formally ratified years later, in 2015.

Taiwan, despite being only the EU's 13th largest trade partner by total trade volume, holds comparable strategic importance to Japan and South Korea in the context of the EU's long-term development strategy.⁸ Taiwan's trade and investments are heavily centred on high-tech equipment and devices that the EU is not yet competitively manufacturing. As such, Taiwan remains a vital partner, with mutual dependence expected to continue as the EU seeks to enhance its global competitiveness against economic powerhouses such as China and the US, while advancing its own technological capabilities. A notable development in 2023 was the agreement between the Czech Republic and Taiwan to lead efforts in establishing new Taiwanese production plants in Europe. While Germany will host these plants, the Czech Republic will play a crucial role in the supply chain for semiconductors produced there, reflecting the growing importance of EU-Taiwan cooperation in high-tech industries.⁹

Zooming in on Central and Eastern Europe, China's influence was once touted as a hallmark of its expanding global ambitions, exemplified by the creation of a platform for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe¹⁰ in 2012. This framework, being designed to foster economic and cultural ties between China and 16 CEE countries, was originally seen as an opportunity for the region to attract much-needed Chinese investments and infrastructure development.¹¹ Beijing emphasized its commitment to "win-win" cooperation, promising to bridge gaps in CEE's underdeveloped transport and infrastructure sectors. Initially, this approach was met with enthusiasm by many CEE governments, as they sought alternatives to Western markets and investments and hoped to leverage China's rise for their own economic benefit. The symbolism of China engaging directly with smaller states, bypassing traditional "old Europe", further heightened interest from the region.

However, over time, the promises of the platform for cooperation with China failed to materialize into tangible results, leading to a significant decline in interest in China in CEE. Many of the grand infrastructure projects either stalled or failed to meet expectations, exposing the asymmetry in economic benefits. For instance, the much-publicized Belgrade-Budapest railway project remains mired in delays and controversies over its financing and transparency. Furthermore, growing concerns about China's political influence, lack of reciprocity in trade relations, and its reluctance to address EU norms and standards have led to increasing scepticism across the region. Countries like Lithuania and the Czech Republic¹² have taken bold steps to upgrade relations with Taiwan, while the Baltic trio left the 16+1 initiative entirely,¹³ and others are re-evaluating their engagement in light of the geopolitical shifts prompted by the war in Ukraine and China's increasingly close ties with Russia.

Indeed, the decline of China's role in CEE has been further exacerbated by its perceived role as a decisive enabler of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, deepening disillusionment among many countries in the region. The Czech Republic, Poland, and the Baltic states have been particularly critical of China's reluctance to condemn Russia's actions, seeing this as support for Russian expansionism, which they view as an existential threat. For these nations, Beijing's ambiguous stance has only reinforced concerns about its reliability as a partner and underscored the risks of allowing deeper Chinese involvement in strategic sectors. Moreover, the increas-

ing number of influence operations¹⁴ run by China in the region has also drawn the attention of some of CEE countries' counterintelligence agencies. In contrast, other countries in the region, such as Hungary and Slovakia, maintain a different stance, seeing China as a potential mediator in the conflict rather than an active enabler of Russian aggression.

It is not surprising that the traditional 'Russia hawks,' comprising Poland, the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, and Romania, have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of China's positions and proposals for cooperation, including from within the framework of cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries. This shift is perhaps most evident in Poland, which, prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, had sought to maintain constructive relations with China. Poland even pursued a strategy of engaging with China as a means of counterbalancing Russia's assertive posture, as exemplified by President Andrzej Duda's visit to China in January 2022. In hindsight, however, this effort fell short of its intended goals, as subsequent developments reshaped Poland's foreign policy priorities.

In the Czech Republic, China's ambivalent position on the Russian invasion prompted the development of a national Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁵ This strategy aims to reduce dependence on the Chinese market, diversify economic ties with other regional partners, and minimize vulnerabilities in critical sectors and sensitive industries. A key component of this reorientation has been the Czech Republic's growing engagement with Taiwan, whilst understanding that Taiwan cannot fully replace the economic opportunities tied to China's vast market.

Even with this recalibration, the Czech approach has also been shaped by pragmatic voices from within its leadership. Prime Minister Petr Fiala's administration, alongside National Security Advisor Tomáš Pojar, has sought to strike a balance between diversification and maintaining constructive ties with China. Pojar's visit to Beijing in November 2023 reflected this pragmatic stance, as he emphasized the importance of engaging with China – not only as a counterbalance to Russia's aggressive military posture but also as an economic opportunity for the Czech Republic and the broader West.

The platform for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe now exists more as a "zombie format" than a functional platform. China's overtures to the region have largely shifted back to bilateral relations, recognizing that it can no longer count on collective engagement to advance its interests. While some countries, such as Hungary, remain open to deeper ties with Beijing, others are doubling down on their alignment with the EU and NATO as they seek to insulate themselves from both Russian and Chinese influence.

In contrast to the increasingly cautious and fragmented approach to China, CEE countries have embraced a more favourable and constructive stance toward long-term investors such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. These countries are viewed as reliable partners with shared democratic values and a commitment to the rule of law, which aligns closely with the priorities of many CEE governments. Japan has established a regional cooperation platform with the Visegrád Four states.¹⁶ South Korea has also made significant inroads, with companies like Hyundai, Samsung, and LG investing in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland. In 2024, the Czech

government picked South Korean company KHNP over France's EDF to build at least two new nuclear reactors at the Dukovany power plant.¹⁷

Taiwan, though diplomatically limited, has found vocal allies in the region.¹⁸ The Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil made headlines in 2020 with a high-profile visit to Taiwan, emphasising shared values of freedom and democracy. This was followed by deepened cooperation, including agreements to strengthen semiconductor supply chains, such as Taiwan's 2023 commitment to establish production facilities in Europe, with the Czech Republic playing a vital role in the supply chain. Lithuania has also forged a closer relationship with Taiwan, opening a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius in 2021, a move that drew sharp retaliation from Beijing.¹⁹

For the EU, ensuring regional stability in the Indo-Pacific has been a critical goal. South Korea and Japan, in this context, are not only valuable trade partners with advanced technological expertise but also indispensable security allies. Both are among NATO IP4 partners. Japan, in particular, has been steadfast in fostering mutually beneficial relations globally. However, the rising volatility in the region, particularly in 2023, has prompted Japan to undertake significant militarization efforts. These efforts aim to address critical gaps in its defensive capabilities amid growing threats from China, North Korea, and, increasingly, Russia.

The worsening security environment has even pushed both Japan and South Korea to reconsider their nuclear deterrence guarantees – an extraordinary development, particularly for Japan, where the population has historically maintained a strong anti-nuclear stance.²⁰ Recognizing Japan's value as a strategic partner, the EU has ratified the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (EU-Japan SPA), which officially came into force on 1 January 2025.²¹ This agreement explicitly emphasises maritime security cooperation, reflecting the intensifying collaboration between the EU, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence not only in their respective neighbourhoods, but also on their domestic spheres.²²

While Taiwan is similarly a key ally for the EU – and especially for member states like Lithuania and the Czech Republic – it does not yet carry the same strategic weight as Japan (an understandable position given, also, the EU's One China policy). This is evident in official EU documents: Taiwan is described as a “valued and like-minded partner,”²³ whereas the EU-Japan relationship is explicitly labelled as “strategic.”²⁴ Nevertheless, Taiwan's importance as a technological powerhouse is undeniable, particularly in the current era of rapid digital transformation. The EU, while committed to supporting democracy in Taiwan and peace in the Taiwan Strait, is also striving for greater technological independence by stimulating investments in domestic production and co-production through the European Chips Act.²⁵ This ambition poses a potential, albeit indirect, challenge to Taiwan's security, as a reduced dependency on Taiwanese microchips by major economies could erode its strategic leverage.

To mitigate this risk of technological decoupling, Taiwan has been actively seeking to invest in the EU's chip production and supply chains, ensuring it remains the primary supplier of advanced microchips for the union. This dynamic reflects a delicate balancing act for the EU, which must navigate the dual objectives of maintaining robust trade partnerships and achieving technological self-reliance.²⁶ How the EU manages these competing priorities will shape not only its future as a global tech leader but also the nature of its alliances in the Pacific and beyond.

Lessons from the War in Ukraine for the Indo-Pacific

The war in Ukraine has become a watershed moment not just for Europe, but for the entire global security architecture, with significant implications for the Indo-Pacific. It has underscored the interconnectedness of regional and global conflicts, revealing how actions in one part of the world can reverberate across continents. For countries in the Indo-Pacific, the war has provided valuable lessons on the dangers of territorial revisionism, the fragility of international norms, and the importance of securing alliances in the face of growing authoritarian challenges. As China watches the conflict closely, its responses and the implications of its “no limits” partnership with Russia provide crucial insights into its potential future actions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been significant speculation about the extent to which this action occurred with the support and blessing of China’s leadership. The meeting between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in Beijing at the beginning of February 2022, during which both leaders signed the “no limits” partnership, underscored their close relationship and mutual support on the international stage, particularly in opposition to the United States and its global influence, with NATO recently added to their list of shared rivals.

However, since then, China’s behaviour and stance on Russia’s war against Ukraine have been subject to at least two contrasting interpretations. Officially, China’s leadership has positioned itself as a non-aligned and neutral actor in the international arena, promoting a peace agenda that aligns with its long-standing diplomatic positioning. This stance has been consistently articulated in China’s official rhetoric, government communications, and propaganda aimed at global audiences, particularly the Global South.

In practice, however, China’s actions and policies have often contradicted its rhetoric. Numerous examples point to China’s involvement in supporting Russia, including collaboration in banking and finance, technology transfer, the provision of sensitive goods, and facilitating the circumvention of international sanctions imposed on Russia. The most sensitive aspect of this support has been the transfer of dual-use technology and lethal weapons, further fuelling concerns over the true nature of Beijing’s stance on the war.²⁷

It was the collaboration in the military, defence, and security domain that caused uproar in the West, to the extent that some countries initiated targeted sanctions against China-based entities, both state-managed and those operating outside official state ownership.²⁸ Additionally, the West has been left rather perplexed by China’s so-called “peace proposals,” which, despite being presented from an ostensibly neutral standpoint, largely mirrored earlier Russian propositions. These proposals were not

consulted on with Ukraine and seemed more focused on criticising the Western community than offering viable solutions.

Since 2022, China has become increasingly involved in discussions surrounding the resolution of Russia's war against Ukraine. However, much to the EU's dissatisfaction, China has gradually aligned many of its positions with the Kremlin, opposing European and global initiatives such as the peace conference format, the latest iteration of which was held in Switzerland in June 2024. Neither China nor Russia participated, and instead, China presented an alternative vision for resolving the conflict alongside Brazil – a vision that was promptly rejected by the West. Nevertheless, this is unlikely to mark the end of China's ambiguous stance on the war in Ukraine.

Japan, by contrast, surprised many, including its closest partners, by announcing its unconditional support for Ukraine's security, peace, and post-war restoration following Russia's invasion in February 2022. After seventy years of pragmatism and neutrality akin to that of Switzerland, the Kremlin's blatant violation of fundamental international laws pushed Japan to take a firm stance. This shift came at great cost to Japan's other national interests, most notably the stability of joint energy ventures with Russia and hopes for the return of the Kuril Islands. Japan's immediate and unequivocal support for Ukraine underscores the Japanese people's commitment to fair and just international relations rooted in mutual respect, support, and democratic values. Beyond symbolic alignment with the Western world, Japan has sent life-saving defensive and humanitarian aid and facilitated the evacuation of approximately 2,500 Ukrainians to Japan – an unprecedented effort in the country's history.

The invasion of Ukraine has also driven Japanese political elites toward a more pragmatic realism, reinforcing the arguments of those advocating for a heavily armed Japan with an independent and self-sufficient military. While Japan's right to defend itself and to build its defence capabilities is unquestioned, its efforts to acquire new weapons systems have raised both legal and economic challenges. The record-high increases in military spending have sparked debates on how to fund these initiatives, while constitutional questions over Japan's right to acquire preventive-strike capabilities remain unresolved. These issues are still high on the agenda of the current Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's administration, as the country seeks to reconcile its security needs with its legal and financial constraints.

South Korea, unlike Japan, was not in a position to offer unconditional material support to Ukraine in 2022.²⁹ While it can be argued that international law provides a legal basis for delivering war materials for defensive purposes to an attacked country, the highly volatile environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula likely prompted Seoul to exercise caution. However, South Korea did publicly denounce Russia's invasion and expressed its support for peace and the defence of Ukraine's sovereignty. As a committed NATO partner (albeit not a member), South Korea contributed indirectly by resupplying its closest ally, the United States. Seoul mobilized and prioritized certain resources for the US military to balance out expenditure. However, South Korea has faced its own challenges; as *The Diplomat* reports, the country has already experienced shortages of key ammunition, such as 155 mm artillery shells.³⁰

A notable shift occurred in November 2024 when reports emerged of North Korean troops being deployed to support Russia's war efforts. With North Korea now directly involved in the conflict, beyond its prior role as a supplier to Russia, South

Korea began re-evaluating its position on aid to Ukraine. On 27 November 2024, Seoul hosted a delegation from Ukraine's Defence Ministry, though no major changes in policy were announced.³¹ South Korea's decision-making, however, is currently overshadowed by domestic uncertainty, as the country grapples with a constitutional crisis. Additionally, the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president has raised doubts about South Korea's willingness to provide direct support to Ukraine, given the unpredictability of the US foreign policy.³²

Nonetheless, with Russia and North Korea forming an increasingly entrenched alliance of authoritarian states, South Korea has grown alarmed at the possibility of Russia sharing nuclear technology with Pyongyang in exchange for military supplies or troop support.³³ This concern has pushed South Korea to seek closer ties with Western allies as a means of counterbalancing these developments. Regardless of how Seoul's internal crisis resolves, as long as Russia continues enabling the North Korean regime, South Korea will prioritise forging stronger alliances with the West to impede such dangerous collaborations and protect its own security interests.

Parallels and Divergences Between Ukraine and Taiwan

Examining the tensions surrounding Ukraine and Taiwan, both Russia and China have historically contested the sovereignty of these entities based on revisionist interpretations of history. While Taiwan's status is complex under international law, Vladimir Putin's assertion that Ukraine is not a legitimate state blatantly distorts both international legal principles and historical facts. Putin has advanced a narrative rooted in the "ahistorical nature of Ukrainian statehood,"³⁴ infamously attributing its alleged creation to Vladimir Lenin in a pre-invasion speech. This historical revisionism and the strategy of questioning the very existence of states mark a parallel approach in the cases of Ukraine and Taiwan.

From a Western perspective, a further commonality lies in the perceived irrationality of open aggression and military confrontation with Ukraine and Taiwan, particularly when assessed through the lens of trade and economic interests. However, this perception highlights a critical failure of Western policies toward authoritarian powers, which operate under fundamentally different strategic and ideological frameworks. The assumption that economic interdependence, or rational cost-benefit analysis, would deter such aggression has proven deeply flawed.

By January 2022, before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow was in a position of relative strength. It exerted considerable leverage over both Ukraine and the West, issuing a range of demands while conducting assertive diplomacy. Western states, to avoid war, demonstrated a degree of willingness to make concessions. Yet, despite these efforts, Russia faced minimal consequences for its provocative actions, rather, there was a withdrawal of Western diplomats from Ukraine and the end of flights to the country. These developments cost Russia very little while Ukraine faced mounting pressure.

When Russia ultimately crossed the Ukrainian border on 24 February 2022, the Kremlin appeared to forfeit much of what it had previously gained. Its international reputation suffered irreparable damage, its economy was severely affected by Western sanctions, and its military strength was undermined by the failure of its anticipated blitzkrieg. This miscalculation also eroded domestic support for the war,³⁵ as the protracted conflict dragged the country deeper into economic and social hardship. Over time, even Russia's closest allies in Central Asia and the South Caucasus began seeking alternative partners, sponsors, and military backers.

The belief that China will refrain from invading Taiwan due to the potential economic fallout, follows the same misguided logic, as Beijing's understanding of its regime's security and ideological objectives outweigh economic considerations. For the world, however, a potential invasion of Taiwan represents one of the most significant risks, as it would likely trigger an economic crisis of unprecedented scale. The imposition of sanctions on China in response to violations of international law

would have detrimental effects on the global economy, particularly if compounded by reciprocal measures from Beijing. Furthermore, Taiwan's high-tech exports, including semiconductors, would almost certainly cease – either as a result of the conflict itself or as a strategic measure to pressure global actors into providing support.

In 2022, internal Chinese government estimates reported by Nikkei Asia suggested that disruptions to the semiconductor supply chain alone could cause global economic losses of \$2.6 trillion.³⁶ This figure would likely be even higher today, given the increasing dependence on advanced technologies worldwide. A global sanctions regime against China would inevitably lead to a profound restructuring of the global economy, halting technological ventures.

While such a scenario would deeply affect all economies, the EU has proactively sought to mitigate potential damage by bolstering its technological and semiconductor manufacturing capabilities. The European Chips Act, in effect since 2023, is central to these efforts. With the EU currently accounting for only about 10% of global semiconductor production, the ECA allocates €43 billion to diversify supply chains and reduce reliance on Asian imports amidst the global chip shortage and the broader technological race among major economies.³⁷ This initiative reflects the EU's dual objective: to enhance its capacity to produce high-tech products, including semiconductors, and to minimise the economic fallout of potential supply chain disruptions stemming from geopolitical instability in Asia.³⁸

Japan, too, is approaching these risks with equal seriousness. A survey conducted among 114 major Japanese companies revealed that 53% are already preparing contingency plans for the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.³⁹ This proactive approach highlights the global recognition of the need to safeguard supply chains and maintain economic stability in the face of potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific region.

Apart from the potential for a full-scale invasion, it is equally plausible that China may opt for a blockade rather than a direct military assault on Taiwan. While Taiwan's physical separation from mainland China via the Taiwan Strait offers some protection against an immediate military confrontation, this geographic advantage also makes the island particularly vulnerable to economic isolation. A blockade would allow Beijing to exert substantial pressure on Taiwan without the risks, logistical challenges, and international backlash associated with a costly amphibious invasion.

A blockade could be implemented at relatively low cost to Beijing while still crippling Taiwan's economy and disrupting access to critical resources such as energy, food, and raw materials. Such a strategy would likely aim to weaken Taiwan internally, eroding its economic stability and morale over time, potentially forcing concessions or political instability without firing a single shot. For China, this approach may also mitigate the risk of direct military confrontation with the United States and its allies, making it a more palatable option for achieving its objectives while avoiding escalation into a broader regional conflict.

Moreover, a blockade would test the resolve of the international community, as its enforcement would not require the same immediate and visible aggression as an invasion. It remains uncertain whether Donald Trump will maintain his predecessor's explicit commitment to militarily defend Taiwan.⁴⁰ Equally unclear is whether he will continue the policy of strategic ambiguity, which has been a cornerstone of US policy toward Taiwan for decades. His remarks⁴¹ regarding the Taiwan Semicon-

ductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) in January suggested a possible shift in focus toward ensuring semiconductor production supremacy in the United States, potentially deprioritising Taiwan's strategic importance. This raises questions about whether his administration will view Taiwan primarily as an economic or geopolitical asset, and his willingness to risk triggering a conflict with China remains ambiguous.

Finally, a key differentiating factor between Taiwanese and Ukrainian societies lies in their respective levels of readiness to take up arms in defence of their security. In Ukraine, this willingness has been a consistently positive factor, bolstering the leadership in Kyiv and reinforcing national resilience. By contrast, surveys suggest that approximately one-third of Taiwan's population would be willing to surrender rather than engage in armed resistance, reflecting a less unified consensus on national defence.⁴²

Ukraine's robust civil-military cooperation, including the engagement of civil society and territorial defence units, serves as an inspiring model for the democratic world, including Taiwan. Taiwan has also made strides in this area, with initiatives such as the Kuma Academy offering valuable lessons in civilian preparedness and resilience.⁴³ However, these efforts have yet to achieve the scale and impact observed in Ukraine, which raises concerns about Taiwan's readiness to respond effectively to potential aggression. Strengthening civil-military cooperation and fostering a culture of national resilience will be crucial for Taiwan in order to bolster its defensive capabilities and societal cohesion in the face of mounting challenges.

Conclusion: Lessons from Ukraine and Taiwan

Ukraine and Taiwan represent dual challenges on the global stage. Both hot spots are sources of significant tension and potential triggers for far-reaching disruptions in world politics and security. At the same time, Ukraine offers valuable lessons that the Czech Republic and its Western allies can use to better support Taiwan and address the evolving threats posed by authoritarian regimes.⁴⁴

First, the importance of deterrence and defence posture cannot be overstated. The greater the investment in conflict prevention, the less likely it is that aggression will occur. Taiwan has so far benefitted from the US military presence in the Indo-Pacific and (more or less) explicit military guarantees. Ukraine, by contrast, lacked comparable assurances before 2022, leaving it exposed to Russian aggression. The lesson is simple and clear: robust and visible defence preparations can act as a critical deterrent to authoritarian expansionism.

Second, time is a vital resource in conflict preparation. In Taiwan, political leaders frequently emphasise the need to buy time to strengthen defence capabilities, bolster resilience, and improve its international standing. Ukraine's experience highlights the dangers of delayed action. Western reluctance to provide advanced military equipment early on, out of fear of escalating tensions, only emboldened Russia and increased the costs of intervention later. Timely and decisive support for Taiwan is essential to prevent a similar scenario.

Third, while sanctions and international pressure can raise the costs of aggression, they do not in themselves deter authoritarian leaders from pursuing their objectives. The Kremlin underestimated the comprehensive and coordinated sanctions imposed after its invasion of Ukraine, including measures targeting its central bank. For China, the robust Western response to Russia's actions – though initially surprising – has forced it to tread carefully. However, China has closely observed both Western military strategies and the societal fatigue that accompanies prolonged crises. If the time comes, it will be better prepared.

Fourth, democratic legitimacy and leadership are critical factors in mobilising public support and enhancing state resilience. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's now-famous appeal for “ammunition, not a ride” galvanised domestic and international confidence in Ukraine's ability to resist aggression. Taiwan's leadership can draw inspiration from Kyiv's effective communication strategy, which played a vital role in sustaining morale and securing international support.

Finally, Western policymakers should abandon the tendency to underestimate authoritarian leaders, particularly those driven by seemingly ‘irrational’ agendas or grandiose narratives. Leaders like Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping operate according to strategic logics that differ fundamentally from those of the West, making it imperative to treat their ambitions with caution and pragmatism. To do so effectively, there is

a pressing need to build greater competency in understanding the evolving strategic cultures of both Russia and China. This includes recognising the historical, ideological, and cultural drivers that shape their decision-making processes and influence their behaviour on the international stage. Without this nuanced understanding, Western strategies risk being reactive and misaligned, leaving policymakers unprepared for the complexities of dealing with authoritarian powers that are increasingly willing to challenge the global order.

To address these challenges, the Czech Republic should continue in implementing comprehensive strategies to enhance security, resilience, and policy alignment.

Strengthening Cybersecurity and Resilience:

The Czech Republic can play a leading role in advancing cybersecurity collaboration with Japan, offering expertise in countering Russian and Chinese cyber operations. Japan faces significant challenges in building its cybersecurity capabilities due to a shortage of domestic experts, while the Czech Republic possesses a deep understanding of hybrid threats and cyber activities. Cooperation in espionage prevention and combating North Korean cybercrime, which siphons funds from Japan, is critical.⁴⁵

With Japan convincingly taking the side of NATO allies and becoming one of the key targets for Russian hybrid activities, it would be prudent to begin building resilience and countermeasures together already. Losing any more time to set the frameworks of cooperation up could lead to a decrease in political will from both sides as governments change, as well as increase the risk of being left behind the constantly evolving cybercrime patterns. Japan, South Korea and the US are already preparing mutual initiatives to counter cybercrime in the Indo-Pacific,⁴⁶ and the EU should not lag in joining them.

Diversifying Trade to Reduce Reliance on China:

The Czech Republic should continue to advocate for the EU's trade diversification, near-shoring, and friend-shoring strategies to decrease economic dependence on China, thereby ensuring greater resilience in the face of potential disruptions to global supply chains. A balanced and diversified trade policy would enhance the EU's economic security while reducing vulnerabilities to coercion from authoritarian regimes.

However, the immediate challenge posed by the threat of US sanctions and tariffs on the EU must be addressed with care. While this creates pressure on European policymakers, it should not lead to the automatic abandonment of the EU's de-risking strategy regarding China. As Ursula von der Leyen emphasised during her address at Davos World Economic Forum, the EU must pursue its own interests while adhering to its core values. This means continuing to build economic resilience and reducing over-reliance on China without compromising the EU's long-term strategic goals, even in the face of external pressures.

Bolster NATO's Role in the Indo-Pacific:

NATO must be actively engaged in addressing security risks in the Indo-Pacific, providing a framework for transatlantic cooperation on hybrid threats and military challenges posed by authoritarian actors. Greater involvement in the region will

bolster collective security and signal a unified Western commitment to maintaining international stability.

The increasing presence of NATO's Indo-Pacific partners (IP4) – Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand – at various NATO meetings underscores the Alliance's growing focus on the region. This shift indicates that China is becoming an integral part of NATO's agenda. However, for some NATO member states, engagement in the Indo-Pacific remains largely symbolic, serving as a signal to the United States that they take the challenge of China seriously. Despite this, many have yet to internalise the broader implications of China's rise for global security.

Additionally, the recognition that the United States will prioritise the Pacific region due to its own security needs places greater pressure on European NATO members to manage the defence of Europe, particularly the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, more independently. This dynamic reinforces the necessity for NATO members to increase their defence spending, which will inevitably spark tough domestic and Alliance-level discussions.

Domestically, governments will face the challenge of identifying funding sources for higher defence budgets, which may require difficult trade-offs, such as taking out a loan for defense spending or scaling back investments in social welfare or healthcare systems. At the NATO level, diverging threat perceptions among member states could create further tensions. For instance, nations on the eastern flank, such as Poland and the Baltic states, are likely to prioritise military spending to counter the threat from Russia. Meanwhile, countries on the southern flank, including Italy and Spain, may prioritise border policing and addressing migration-related security issues over conventional military investments.

Moreover, the division of labour between NATO and the European Union is another critical issue. Some argue that the EU is better equipped to handle economic, infrastructure and bloc-based challenges, such as countering propaganda and disinformation, screening foreign investments, and implementing sanctions against authoritarian regimes. Others contend that certain competencies, particularly those related to national security – such as addressing foreign malign interference, electoral interference, and cyber threats – should remain under the control of individual nation-states. Resolving this division of labour will require enhanced coordination between NATO, the EU, and member states to ensure a cohesive and efficient response to both traditional and hybrid threats.

Contribute to Fostering Cohesion:

The EU and its member states, including the Czech Republic, should prioritise internal cohesion and policy alignment to present a unified and credible response to Russia and China's geopolitical ambitions. Strengthening alignment among member states will enhance the EU's ability to project strength and maintain its credibility on the global stage. However, this is becoming increasingly challenging in the context of domestic and international pressures.

Maintaining unity within NATO will require significant effort, especially given the policies of the United States and its focus on the Indo-Pacific, which places additional responsibility on Europe to address regional security concerns, particularly in Ukraine. Furthermore, the upcoming parliamentary elections in Germany and the

Czech Republic, as well as presidential elections in Poland, Romania and France, add another layer of complexity. These electoral processes are likely to lead to shifts in national priorities, potentially disrupting a fragile unity across Europe. Divergences in threat perceptions and political agendas could further complicate efforts to create a cohesive strategy to counter Russia and China's ambitions and other global challenges.

To mitigate these risks, the Czech Republic should team up with Poland, the Nordic countries and the Baltic trio to play a leading role in promoting collaboration and unity within both NATO and the EU. Applying the lessons learned from Ukraine to Taiwan provides a roadmap for enhancing collective security and resilience. Aligning defence priorities, countering hybrid threats, and fostering a shared understanding of the strategic importance of democratic values are essential steps. The Czech Republic, Poland, Nordic countries and the Baltic trio, with their expertise in addressing influence operations and hybrid threats and their commitment to transatlantic security, can serve as a bridge between NATO and the EU, helping to navigate the challenges of maintaining unity.

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Footnotes

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