HELSINKI SECURITY FORUM

THE HOUR OF EUROPE

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FORUM

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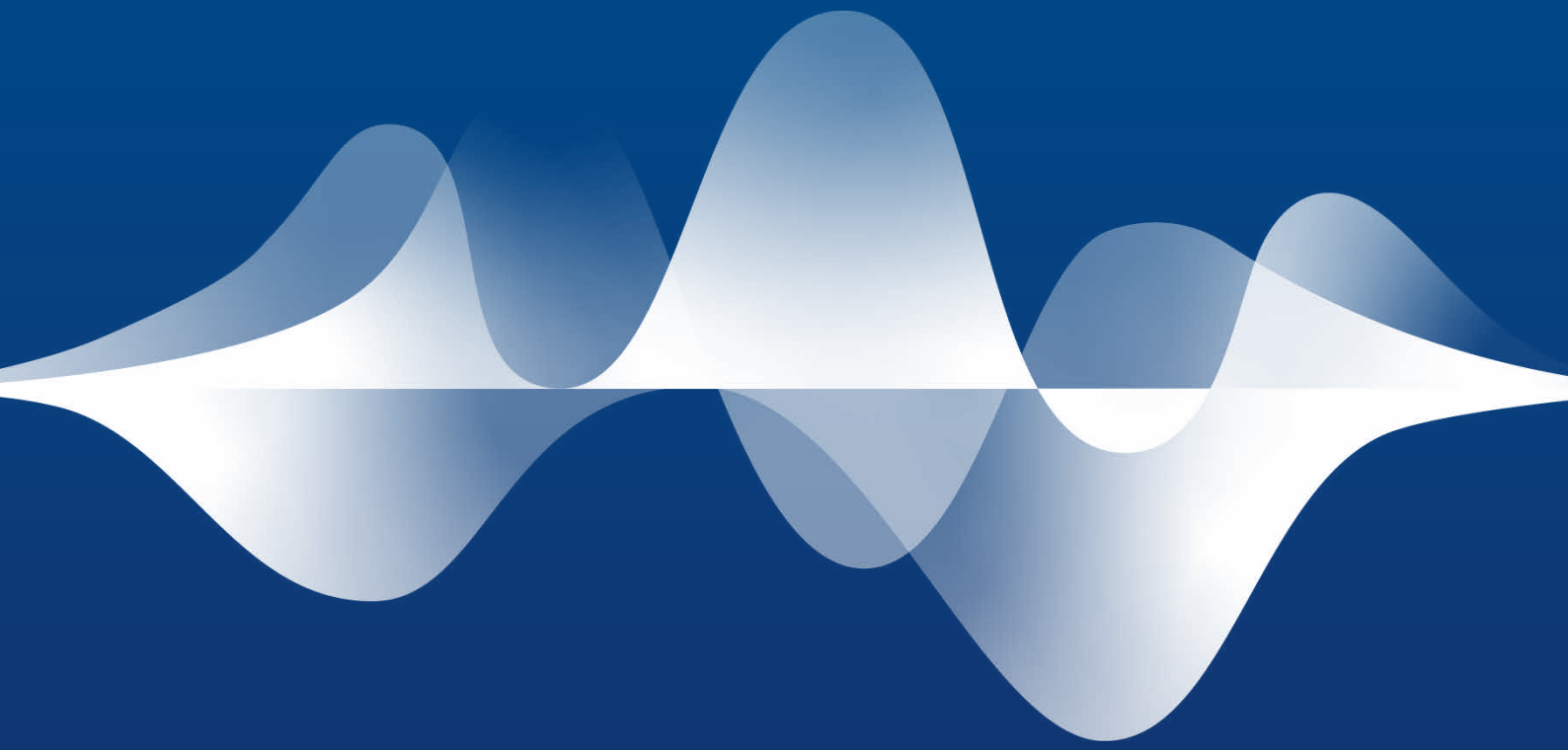

19 – 21 SEPTEMBER 2025

THE HOUR OF EUROPE

WELCOMING WORDS

HISKI HAUKKALA

DIRECTOR, FINNISH INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The Hour of Europe – blink and you might miss it?

The year 2025 marks yet another turning point for Europe and the global security order. As international tensions escalate, democratic values are tested and strategic competition intensifies, the question is no longer whether Europe must act – but how. And more importantly, now: This is the Hour of Europe.

The idea behind the slogan is not new, of course. Since 1991, when Luxembourg's foreign minister Jacques Poos coined the term, we have seen many renditions of the concept. The plot line is the usual cliffhanger, in which an external shock jolts the Europeans to scramble and rise to the occasion through heroic feats of ad hoc political leadership – and, at times, all-night summitry. This is a process where they snatch victory out of the jaws of impending peril by making an improvised leap of faith towards further integration and/or adopting a common position on the issue at stake.

Yet, what has served Europe well in the past does less so in the current situation. A more determined – dare one say strategic and forward-looking? – approach is called for. Europe is faced with a series of challenges that relate to the continent's economic competitiveness, technological innovativeness, and security, both internal and external. An ambitious and concerted long-term approach is now urgently called for.

The agenda of this year's Helsinki Security Forum is shaped by the recognition that Europe's well-being and security cannot be outsourced, and that the best way to prepare for future challenges is to set our gaze into the horizon. The fourth annual HSF convenes at a critical juncture to explore how Europe, together with its partners, can assume a greater role when it comes to its own defence and security – and how best to do that in lockstep with its most important ally, the United States. Over the course of the three-day Forum, conversations will span a wide range of themes from technology competition to the security implications of AI, and from transatlantic security cooperation to nuclear deterrence. We will also discuss the future of warfare in light of Russia's war on Ukraine, the geopolitical role of China, alternative futures for the EU, as well as many other themes.

Helsinki Security Forum continues to serve as a flagship platform in Northern Europe for essential discussions about security. As the host organisation of HSF, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs is proud to provide a venue for an open and forward-looking strategic dialogue among policymakers, military leaders, experts, and industry representatives.

HSF 2025 enjoys the support of more partners than ever before. This reflects not only the growing importance of the Forum and a shared sense of urgency concerning the challenges ahead, but also the readiness of key ministries and government officials, the city of Helsinki, and a wide range of companies and organisations to come together and seek solutions to the most pressing issues of our time. We are deeply grateful for the support of our partners, which not only makes this gathering possible but also strengthens the Forum's substance and its impact.

I hope that the debates at the HSF 2025 serve to identify the right questions while also inspiring the necessary answers and preparing us to act – both now and tomorrow. On behalf of myself and the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, I am happy and honoured to warmly welcome you to the Helsinki Security Forum 2025!

HELSINKI SECURITY FORUM CONTINUES TO SERVE AS A FLAGSHIP PLATFORM IN NORTHERN EUROPE FOR ESSENTIAL DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SECURITY.

WELCOMING WORDS

DANIEL SAZONOV

MAYOR OF HELSINKI

Building security on a local level

'Challenges such as war, global warming, biodiversity loss, segregation and social exclusion do not respect borders, nor do they obey orders. The consequences of each of these phenomena can be seen the world over, but cities have the power to prepare for and respond to them.'

Helsinki's new City Strategy was negotiated in June 2025. I find these opening words of the strategy to be especially relevant. The world remains highly unstable, and such uncertainty calls for institutions that can act as security providers.

Besides ensuring high-level preparedness for any risk scenario, cities and municipalities are responsible for maintaining conditions for residents that allow a safe and smooth everyday life. Cities also play a crucial role in fostering a sense of security among their citizens.

Helsinki's status as a capital city demands adequate crisis preparedness, readiness and continuity of services. Helsinki has a long tradition of taking preparedness, civil defence and security of supply very seriously. We maintain a network of civil defence shelters with a capacity to protect more people than the population of Helsinki. We protect not only our citizens but also all visitors to Helsinki.

In our new City Strategy, called "A Helsinki we can be proud of", the role of preparedness and security has become an ever more important cornerstone of the operations of Helsinki. Questions regarding security and preparedness now have their own chapter, which outlines how Helsinki builds safety.

For Helsinki, preparedness and security must be seen as a question that encompasses a wide variety of issues. For example, Helsinki is strengthening its preparedness for increasing extreme weather phenomena, promoting media literacy skills, and maintaining safe streets and a pleasant urban environment. Helsinki ensures the safety and security of the city in all circumstances.

Helsinki is the right place for security dialogue, and we are pleased to welcome you to Helsinki Security Forum. I hope you will also find time to enjoy our vibrant cultural activities, unique nature, and distinctive maritime atmosphere during your stay in Helsinki.
I wish to warmly welcome you to Helsinki!

CITIES AND MUNICIPALITIES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR MAINTAINING CONDITIONS FOR RESIDENTS THAT ALLOW A SAFE AND SMOOTH EVERYDAY LIFE.

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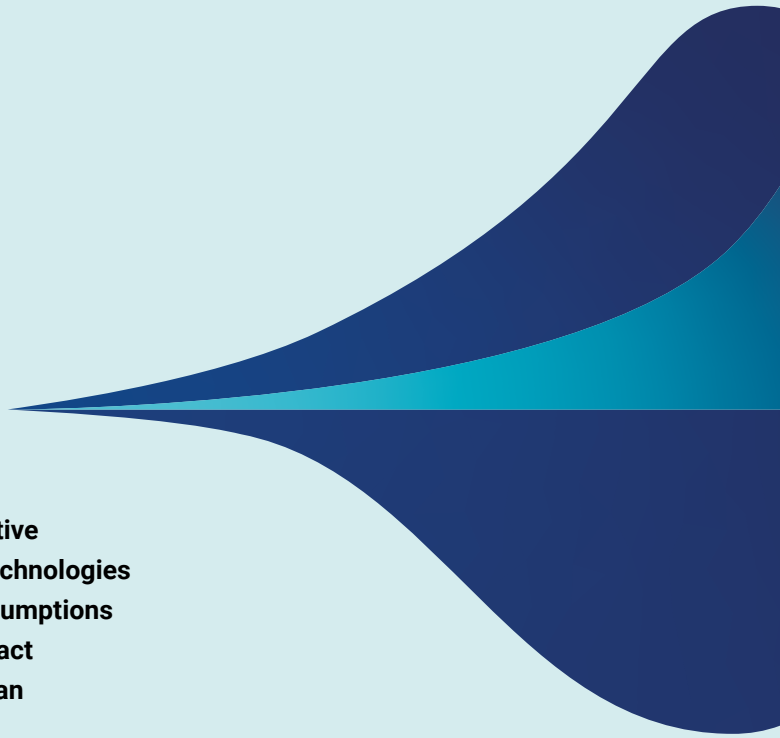
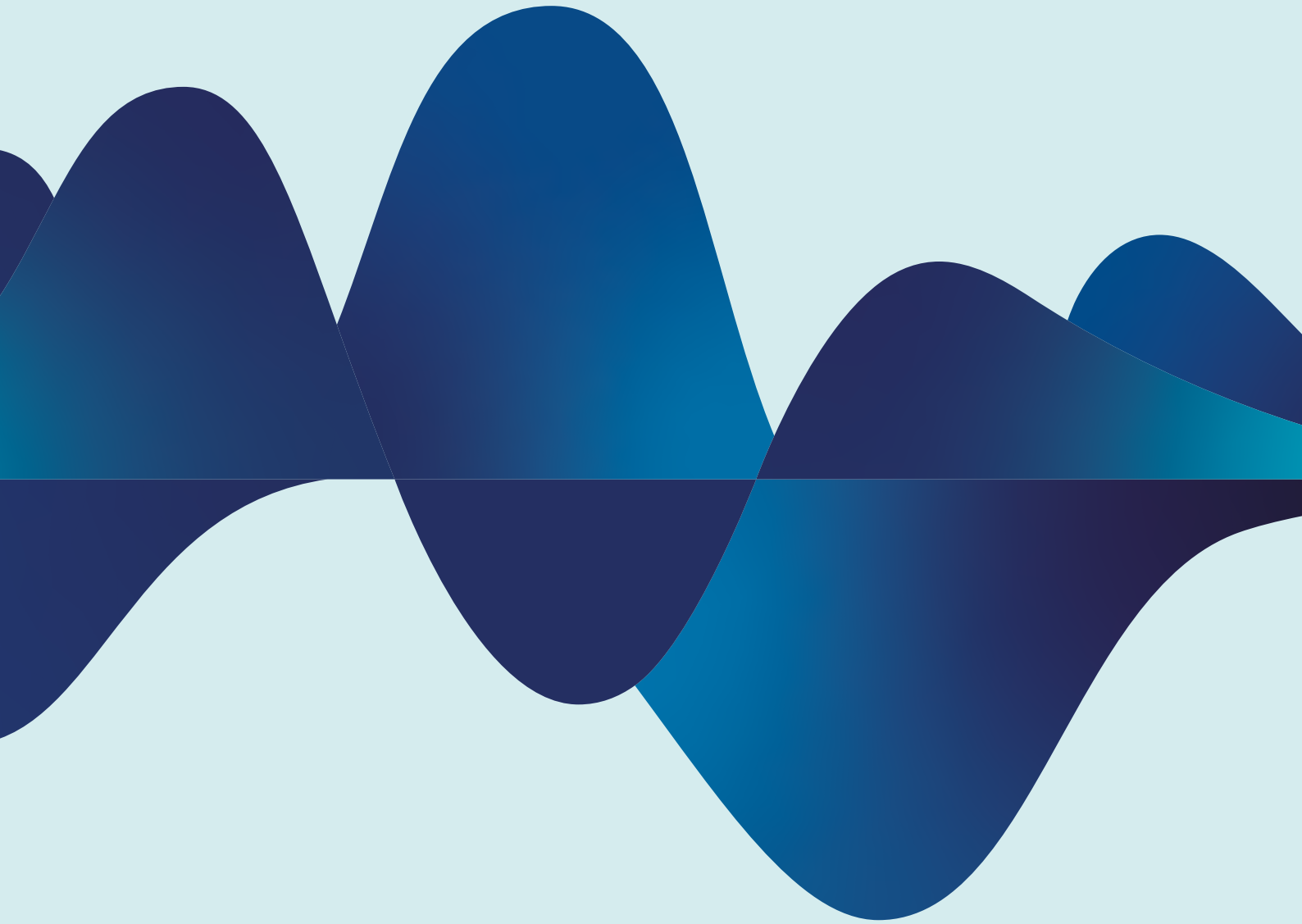


The international order continues to face rapid and disruptive change. Strategic competition is intensifying, emerging technologies are redrawing the boundaries of power, and traditional assumptions about security no longer hold. In this reality, Europe must act decisively on several fronts to shape and defend a European security order that reflects its own interests and values.

Against this backdrop, the Helsinki Security Forum convenes to discuss how Europe – together with its allies – can assume a greater role in its own defence and security. Conversations will span a wide range of issues, from the security implications of artificial intelligence to the geopolitical role of China, and from nuclear deterrence to alternative futures for Europe and the European Union.

In the following pages, researchers from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs share their expert perspectives of the themes of Helsinki Security Forum 2025.



MATTI PESU
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Nordic military cooperation as an enabler and hedge

Finland's and Sweden's NATO memberships have led to increasingly deep military cooperation among the Nordic countries, particularly within the "Fennoscandian trio" of Finland, Sweden, and Norway. NATO's Nordic enlargement has brought strategic clarity to Northern Europe. Together, the Nordic countries form a uniquely coherent group of states that can serve both as a critical enabler of NATO's collective deterrence in Northern Europe and as a hedge against any reduction in the United States' role in European security.

The integration of all five Nordic states into NATO creates unprecedented opportunities for defence cooperation. The Nordic countries share broadly similar threat perceptions, focus on deterring Russia, and are increasingly aligning their defence doctrines. Geography offers both the Nordics and NATO as a whole strategic depth and operational synergies: Norway's Atlantic coastline and control of vital sea lines of communication; Sweden's role as a logistical hub with a strong defence industrial base; and Finland's strong army and extensive land border with Russia. Together, these features create complementary roles within the regional defence architecture. All three are also investing heavily to bolster their military capabilities.

Nordic cooperation, formalised through NORDEFCO and reinforced by bilateral and trilateral agreements, has reached a new level of ambition stated in the New Vision for Nordic Defence Cooperation 2030. The scope of this cooperation is evident in several initiatives: the Nordic Air Command concept aims to integrate over 250 advanced combat aircraft into a single operational framework, enabling rapid and flexible airpower in crises; a Nordic military mobility corridor from Norwegian ports, through Sweden, to Finland enhances NATO's ability to reinforcement its new Finnish frontline; and Defence Cooperation Agreements with the United States open critical infrastructure to allied use. The planned Forward Land Forces battlegroup – "the Arctic FLF" – to be established in Finnish Lapland and led by Sweden, provides a significant symbolic marker of NATO's evolving posture and deepening Nordic cooperation.

For NATO, a cohesive Nordic grouping delivers substantial operational benefits. The High North and the Baltic Sea are increasingly viewed as a single strategic direction, and Nordic integration strengthens the Alliance's capacity to plan, exercise, and, if necessary, fight across the entire theatre. Nordic cooperation also serves as a force multiplier for NATO's new Regional Plan Northwest, which likely depends on local forces holding key terrain until reinforcements arrive.

Nordic cooperation is not only about complementing NATO's deterrence posture – it also has intrinsic value as a hedge in an uncertain transatlantic environment. The United States remains central to European security, but recent political shifts in Washington, including more transactional approaches to NATO, have prompted serious European debates about a future with reduced American involvement.

In such a scenario, a robust Nordic defence cluster could form the core of a "Plan B" for Northern European security. While no combination of European allies could fully replace US military power – particularly its nuclear umbrella – closer Nordic integration could help sustain

credible deterrence and defence in the region. Affluent, technologically advanced, and supported by strong defence institutions, the Nordic states have the capacity to significantly expand capabilities, increase force generation through enhanced conscription, and invest in critical enablers such as intelligence, surveillance, and precision-strike systems.

Nordic cooperation is also embedded in the evolving European security architecture and the drive for stronger burden-sharing. The United Kingdom, with its operational experience and maritime reach, and France, with its nuclear capabilities and expeditionary forces, are natural partners. Increasingly, there is also demand for deeper Nordic–Baltic–Polish coordination in foreign and defence policy, reflecting the countries' shared outlook on European security – particularly on Russia and its threat potential.

Nordic military cooperation is not without challenges. Resource constraints stemming from the relatively small armed forces and economies of Nordic states, along with a curious political reluctance to present the countries as a bloc within NATO, can limit its strategic weight. The level of political urgency related to defence efforts and regional cooperation also varies in the Nordic capitals. Moreover, without US enablers, even the most integrated Nordic force posture would face constraints in high-intensity conflict against Russia. Nevertheless, the Nordics are well placed to enhance European burden-sharing, drive deeper regional integration, and coordinate deterrence signalling in Northern Europe. By doing so, they can strengthen NATO's posture today while preparing for an uncertain tomorrow.

FOR NATO, A COHESIVE NORDIC GROUPING DELIVERS SUBSTANTIAL OPERATIONAL BENEFITS

Action Plan

Deepen integrated planning: Establish a formal Nordic division of labour aligned with NATO's Regional Plan Northwest, clarifying frontline and hub roles in land, air, and maritime domains.

Expand joint capabilities: Accelerate the Nordic Air Command initiative, broaden shared ISR and precision-strike capacities, and synchronise force generation models.

Strengthen connectivity: Prioritise infrastructure and mobility investments along the Nordic military corridor, ensuring rapid reinforcement from Atlantic ports to Finland's eastern border.

Link Nordic and European efforts: Systematically connect Nordic defence initiatives with UK, French, and other European frameworks.

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A more equal relationship? The new emerging transatlantic security deal

Since the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, Europe and NATO have slowly returned to building conventional deterrence in Europe. The balance in the transatlantic relationship, however, has largely remained intact. While the US has been doing most of the heavy lifting at its own expense, European countries have wasted precious time reminiscing of a world order that no longer exists. Russia's war in Ukraine, together with President Trump's rise to power in the United States, have awakened Europe to a new harsh reality. As the US pivots towards the Indo-Pacific region, there are increasing expectations towards European NATO countries to carry a larger burden in developing a credible defence and deterrence posture in Europe.

The overall tone of the transatlantic relationship during Trump's second term has improved markedly over the past six months. The US and Ukraine concluded a partnership on the use of Ukrainian minerals and the EU and US were able to finalise a trade deal. Finally, the 2025 NATO Hague Summit resulted in European pledges to take up greater commitment for their own defence and security.

This all has enabled Trump to claim to his political base the dawn of a more equal transatlantic partnership. Rich Europeans will finally pay out of pocket for their own defence. Post-Hague Trump has largely stuck to flattering European leaders publicly, promised to uphold Article 5, agreed to a new trade deal with the European Union and stepped-up dialogue with European leaders and especially Ukraine's President Zelenskyy.

At the same time, the transatlantic alliance is facing enormous challenges. Europe's political cohesion and capacity to secure a just peace in Ukraine are questionable. Meanwhile, President Trump's deep-seated grievances towards traditional American allies, trade partners and China remain a fundamental undercurrent in America's new foreign policy priorities.

The Hague Summit defence investment pledge, allocating 3,5% of GDP to core defence requirements and 1,5% to critical infrastructure, civil preparedness, resilience as well as strengthening Europe's defence industrial base, must be now translated from political rhetoric into action. For European NATO allies, it will mean a commitment to positioning more prepositioned forces at higher readiness, acquiring strategic enabling capabilities, and developing resilient national forces through long-term investment plans. Building a credible European pillar in NATO, a prerequisite for European strategic autonomy, will take years, or more likely, decades.

Although the Trump administration seems momentarily to be pleased with its European allies, there is no guarantee that this era of positive sentiment will continue in perpetuity. For Europe, a conflict in the Indo-Pacific region could prove a nightmarish scenario, simultaneously drawing limited US attention and resources away from Europe, while increasing pressure on a reluctant but dependent Europe to align with American policies in Asia.

From European point of view, with roughly three and a half years to go, the Trump administration should consider three points when recalibrating US global strategy.

First, the transatlantic relationship provides structural advantages for the United States. Although the Allies and NATO as an alliance entail costs and possibly even entrapment risks, they also act as a force multiplier and provide a strong logistical base for US power projection in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Second, while Russia is not a global rival to the United States, it is a regional adversary in two key regions: Europe and the Arctic. Further, Russia can pose strategic headaches for US and its allies near the Korean peninsula through its partnerships with North Korea and China. Third, the US should practice strategic patience by withholding from hasty unilateral actions which might inadvertently weaken NATO's deterrence toward Russia and thus risk drawing America into a European conflict.

Finally, US–Russia bilateral talks and Trump's maneuvering over the war in Ukraine are a source of continuous political tensions between the United States and its European allies. Despite Europe's internal problems with political cohesion, its position on the war in Ukraine is clear. Sustainable peace in Europe can only be achieved by including Ukraine in the peace talks. Strong support to Ukraine before and after the end of the war are crucial for European security.

BUILDING A CREDIBLE EUROPEAN PILLAR IN NATO WILL TAKE YEARS, OR MORE LIKELY, DECADES.

Action Plan

Forge a new transatlantic security deal based on a rebalancing of costs and responsibilities. Enable the United States to focus on its competition with China, while negotiating a realistic timeline for Europeans to take greater responsibility for their own security and defence.

Agree to heavy European long-term investments in strategic enablers and key capabilities, combined with a new unified political vision for a greater European role in global politics.

Agree that US commitment to NATO's Article 5 and extended deterrence will continue to be the cornerstones of transatlantic security.

Coordinate closely prior to any major shift of US resources or capabilities away from Europe to the Indo-Pacific. This is essential to ensure that NATO's core tasks, deterrence and collective defence in Europe, are not endangered.

Agree that by waging a war at the heart of Europe, Russia poses a security threat both to Europe and the United States. Ramp up substantial contributions to Ukraine to ensure a sustainable peace and a durable post-war European security architecture.

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Sitting on a cliff: How Europe should enhance Ukraine's security

Over the last year Ukraine's political and military position has been worsening. Moscow insists on its maximalist objectives and is determined to continue to pursue them through military means. Amid the shifts in the US policy, Europe has to find ways to enhance Ukraine's support while offsetting the risks of the US further distancing from the Russia-Ukraine war.

Although Ukraine's defence industry is expanding, its capacity to sustain the defence effort – both in terms of materiel and morale – continues to rely heavily on international military support. European support, including innovative assistance instruments, does not meet the challenge that Ukraine is facing. At the same time, the current level of US commitment to Ukraine falls short of the Biden-era policy, which already was criticised in Ukraine as insufficient. Europe also faces a range of its own challenges from military unpreparedness to a lack of political will, as well as divisions within European institutions and society regarding the war and support to Ukraine.

EUROPE SHOULD BRACE ITSELF FOR A PROLONGED CONFLICT WITH RUSSIA OVER UKRAINE'S FUTURE AND EUROPEAN SECURITY.

The current focus of the US and consequently European efforts – the ceasefire and the peace deal – has diverted attention from Ukraine's priority needs. The Alaska summit once again indicated that Russia refuses to compromise on any of its core demands. The impasse, in which Moscow does not have enough incentive to stop the war and Kyiv cannot accept to give up its territories without credible Western guarantees, is currently unbreakable. At the same time, a discussion of Russia's terms only serves Moscow's realisation of its goals in Ukraine through political means.

All this puts Europe in a difficult position. It cannot afford to lose US support and thus it is right to make every effort to keep Trump happy and supportive of Ukraine, even if only in a limited form. Yet, the war and shifts in the US policy require greater European leadership. Although the task of supporting Ukraine's fight for its existence does not fall exclusively on European shoulders, Ukraine's survival is increasingly a European responsibility. Failing to adequately acknowledge that may be fatal for Ukraine and will damage Europe's security in the longer term.

The good news is that Europe is aware of the task at hand and has capacity to strengthen its role. There are three

ways for Europe to gather its act. First, European states in general, and the coalition of the willing in particular, could double their efforts to build up Ukraine's military capabilities. Volodymyr Zelenskyy is right to stress that a strong Ukrainian army is the only reliable security guarantee to the country. Enhancing support for Ukraine's armed forces is the easiest and most effective policy tool at Europe's disposal. If Europe wants Ukraine to survive this war and safeguard its own security, it must provide more financial and military support.

Second, in the long term, Ukraine needs a more comprehensive security and military assistance through an institutionalised framework rather than ad hoc arrangements. At least, Europe can offer a long-term financial commitment to meet Ukraine's needs, ensuring that funds are not scrambled for each year to fill gaps in the Ukrainian budget. This sends a wrong signal to Moscow and Kyiv alike. The EU shall make a stronger effort to integrate Ukraine into its institutions in spite of a Hungarian veto. The EU accession process is a key instrument at Europe's disposal. The prospect of membership has been pivotal for Ukraine and boosted morale and resilience. Yet the reform process is sluggish, and Brussels is not doing Ukraine any favours by turning a blind eye to the genuine, long-standing challenges. Stronger governance is an untapped domestic resource that could improve Ukraine's resistance to the Russian aggression, and it is Europe that can provide the necessary resources and conviction to make sure that reforms continue in Kyiv despite the war.

Lastly, although there are hopes and talks for peace, Europe should brace itself for a prolonged conflict with Russia over Ukraine's future and European security. Despite the diplomatic process, there are no signs of Russia stopping its aggression and lowering its demands from Ukraine and Europe. The good news is that while Ukraine faces shortages in manpower and supplies, it is able and willing to continue to defend itself. Europe should match Ukraine's commitment and show readiness to share the burden with Ukraine until Russia's military machinery runs out of steam. A strong, well-armed Ukrainian army is the best security guarantee that Europe can both offer and have.

Action Plan

Europe should provide more financial and military resources for Ukraine in an institutionalised form to prepare for a prolonged war.

It should also accelerate Ukraine's integration into European institutions, in particular the EU membership.

Focus on improving governance in Ukraine: the more efficient the Ukrainian state becomes, the more resources it can invest in its own defence. At the moment, Europe is the only force that can impact the incumbent government's reform trajectory in absence of elections.

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Russia's neighbourhood policy: Why it remains Eurocentric

The difference between Russia's policy towards the 'near' and 'far' abroad, namely between countries that once belonged to the USSR and those that did not, is well recognised. Moscow has continued to view the former, with the partial exception of the Baltic states, as its exclusive sphere of influence.

However, this does not mean that Russia applies a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to its new neighbours. From the outset, Moscow prioritised post-Soviet states situated within geographical Europe, which are arguably part of Eastern Europe, while countries in Central Asia received much less attention. Russia's invasion of Ukraine only served to emphasise and deepen this differentiation. The explanation for this is simple. The Kremlin sensed, well before the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO, that post-Soviet Eastern Europe would become a zone of geopolitical rivalry. Without retaining dominance in this 'in-between' area, Vladimir Putin's overarching goal – to revise the outcome of the Cold War, restore Russia's veto power over key issues of European security, and compel the West, at least implicitly, to recognise that Russia is back as a first-rank power – would be unattainable.

Moscow's incessant rhetoric about Russia's 'pivot to Asia' does not change anything in this regard. Ukraine, in turn, due to its size and determination to defend itself, was bound to become a key element of resistance to Moscow's strategies.

Today, Russia's leadership may well believe that success is on the horizon. Donald Trump's accommodationist stance towards the Kremlin has emboldened those in the West who would prefer Ukraine to concede, so they could eventually return to 'business as usual' in relations with Russia. In the meantime, Europe's lack of consensus on support for Ukraine, combined with almost zero progress in putting the country – along with Moldova, Georgia, and potentially Armenia – firmly on the path to EU integration, signals to Russia that its policy is working.

Moscow's confidence is bolstered even further when it sees that: 1) the current Georgian leadership has decided to halt the country's European integration, despite significant public support for it; 2) the West remains entirely passive while Belarus is essentially being incorporated into Russia; and 3) Azerbaijan has been able to persuade Europe to accept Baku's vision of a bilateral relationship based on economic pragmatism rather than shared liberal values.

In comparison, the Central Asian states are undeniably located outside Europe's imagined borders and cannot aspire to institutional integration with the EU. As for the deepening of Sino-Central Asian ties, Russia does not appear to oppose the trend. Russia recognises that it cannot prevent China's gradual penetration into the region, nor can it afford a conflict with Beijing, particularly given China's support for Moscow's war effort in Ukraine. Moscow likely expects Beijing to tread carefully and does not foresee any problems for itself and its international status stemming from China-Central Asia cooperation.

However, geopolitics is not the only factor behind the differences in Russia's policy towards its neighbours in the West and the South. Another key driver is the Kremlin's attitude towards attempts to bring about

change. Russia seeks to prevent any such reforms in its East European neighbourhood that could pave the way for integration with the West. This course was evident even before 2022, but Russia's own growing authoritarianism in the context of the war in Ukraine has qualitatively increased Moscow's hostility towards political liberalisation in the region. In contrast, the Kremlin is not concerned about reformist efforts in Central Asia, both because all current regional leaders are inclined to strengthen the authoritarian setting, and because any transformations in Central Asian states would have little bearing on prospects for their integration with the West.

Another baseline motivation for Moscow is that Central Asia is a region rife with challenges, ranging from lengthy, hard-to-control borders and drug trafficking to territorial disputes and Islamist extremism. Any claim – or worse, a genuine attempt – to resolve all these problems without foreign partners (above all China, but in this case also the West) would quickly overstretch Russia's resources. The recognition that Russia cannot and should not try to be the region's sole external security provider also plays a role in decision-making.

Last but not least, more than 30 years after the collapse of the USSR, Moscow must be aware that its expertise in regional affairs, including proficiency in local languages, has eroded. Russian society at large has traditionally taken a condescending view of Central Asia, assuming that Russia would by definition remain the region's preferred partner and that Central Asia's true representatives are labour migrants who desperately want to obtain Russian citizenship. This attitude has reinforced the belief that Central Asian countries "have nowhere else to go" and has prevented a sense of urgency from emerging in Russia's policy.

As long as the war in Ukraine continues, Eurocentrism will remain entrenched in Russia's neighbourhood policy. This will constitute a major challenge for the EU and the West at large, requiring a much more proactive regional policy. At the same time, this could create a window of opportunity in Central Asia, which should not be missed.

AS LONG AS THE WAR IN UKRAINE CONTINUES, EUROCENTRISM WILL REMAIN ENTRENCHED IN RUSSIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY.

Action Plan

The West must clearly reject Russia's claims to an exclusive sphere of influence and to having veto power over the territory of the former Soviet Union.

The West needs to articulate a credible policy for states located in Europe's East. EU membership for those willing and ready – if and when this materializes – should be presented as a realistic prospect. At the same time, countries that reject liberal reforms and integration with the West should not assume that the West will acquiesce to any policies they may pursue domestically.

Europe should regard Central Asia as an opportunity and seek to deepen cooperation with the region in appropriate policy areas. When regional leaders signal interest in forging closer ties with the West to balance their relations with China and Russia, their initiatives should be encouraged and supported.

JYRI LAVIKAINEN
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The NATO nuclear mission in the future security environment

NATO is amidst its greatest transformation since the end of the Cold War. The Alliance is taking its military strategy back to its original premises and plans to deter Russian aggression by creating capability to wage large-scale war. As NATO's decisions on its new Force Model and regional defence plans are being implemented, NATO's nuclear capability is also undergoing adaptation. The Vilnius communique in 2023 and the Washington declaration in 2024 note that the modernisation of nuclear weapons and their carrier vehicles will be accompanied by a stronger nuclear planning capability. Effectively, this means that the military branch of NATO has likely been given a mandate to plan how the weapons could be used in conflict, given that this is what military planning is about, but this process appears to be in its early stages. At the 2025 summit, the United Kingdom also announced that it will join NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements and procure 12 F-35A fighters for the nuclear mission, marking the first expansion of the SACEUR's nuclear posture since the end of the Cold War.

These steps are the natural consequence of NATO having to deter and plan to defend itself against Russia, an expansionist state with the largest and most diverse nuclear arsenal on the planet. At the same time, NATO's recent decisions represent a gradual restoration of the military capability of the arsenal that was calibrated to meet the requirements of the 1990s security environment. While they are necessary, they may not be sufficient. As with its conventional military capability, NATO's nuclear posture must meet the requirements of the security environment of the 2030s. A comprehensive analysis is needed to determine what this would entail, but it is already possible to identify some key factors affecting the role of NATO's nuclear mission in the future. These factors involve at least the global geopolitical transformation, the development of balance of power in Europe and advances in military technology.

The first factor is China's emergence as the primary challenger of the US, which affects the requirements of the NATO nuclear mission in two ways. First, China's military build-up will necessitate increased allocation of US military potential to the Indo-Pacific region. Unless Europeans compensate this with their conventional military power, the relative weight of nuclear weapons increases, particularly during a potential US–China war. The current policy of the Alliance is to rely mainly on the

NATO'S NUCLEAR POSTURE MUST MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT OF THE 2030S.

strategic nuclear forces of the US to provide for nuclear deterrence. However, as China continues its military build-up, it will also occupy a more prominent place in US nuclear targeting. Moreover, if the assumed war escalated to the use of nuclear weapons, it could drastically change the nuclear balance also between the US and Russia . This situation would be particularly troubling because nuclear taboo would have also been broken. Theatre nuclear capabilities in Europe would not be affected in this situation, however, making them particularly important for deterring Russia's opportunistic aggression during or after the potential war.

The second factor is related to Russia's effort to strengthen its nuclear and non-nuclear military capabilities. As NATO's conventional power increases, Russia is likely to focus even more on its nuclear weapons to attain the military advantage it seeks against NATO. Russia's three-stage exercises for non-strategic nuclear weapons in 2024 and its development and deployment of intermediate range nuclear weapons both indicate that the role Russia assigns to nuclear weapons in theatre warfare is not diminishing but rather increasing. Regardless of how well NATO implements its new Force Model, it will likely need a robust nuclear capability to be able to counter Russia's advantages in this field, particularly in scenarios involving a global conflagration that would result in a massive strain on US resources.

Action Plan

NATO must thoroughly analyse the role of strategic and theatre nuclear weapons in its military posture and strategy, considering pressures that a global conflict could put on the US ability employ military power in Europe.

NATO should start this process by integrating conventional and nuclear planning.

As SHAPE develops its regional defence plans, it also creates a foundation to analyse the role of nuclear weapons in these plans, significantly strengthening their deterrent value. In fact, the lowest-hanging fruit for NATO to strengthen deterrence would involve integrating nuclear weapons into military plans, while continuing to maintain political control over employment decisions. The only barrier against this appears to be a political one, as there is no military logic in not planning for worst-case scenarios and strengthening deterrence by having made those plans. This will also make it possible to identify with greater detail whether NATO needs to expand or diversify its theatre nuclear capability and, if so, to what extent and in what way.

The third factor is related to advances in military technology. Even if restoring the military role to theatre nuclear weapons is appropriate in the current and future security environment, a major expansion of the NATO nuclear posture is unlikely to be needed. Technological developments have resulted in major improvements in conventional weaponry and, in some cases, conventional deep precision strike capability can take on missions that would have been assigned to nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Advances in missile defenses have also made it easier to defeat even ballistic missile threats, blunting some of the advantage Russia could gain from its superior arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Neither capability is a substitute for nuclear weapons, but they indicate that the place of nuclear weapons in military plans will not be as prominent as it was during the Cold War.

Ultimately, deterrence is most robust when NATO will be able to close all potential pathways to victory from Russia – even in scenarios the Alliance would prefer not to find itself in. Building the force to achieve that requires a sober analysis of the nature of the conflict NATO must deter but might have to fight. This work will start with asking the right questions – the first one pertaining to nuclear weapons being, what is the role of nuclear deterrence in a modern large-scale war against a nuclear-armed adversary? There must be one, because such a war would be fought under a nuclear shadow. Secondly, what is the appropriate mix of strategic and theatre capabilities for deterring such a war? In the current geopolitical environment, where the US strategic targeting must now increasingly take China into account, this mix is becoming more important.

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National security implications of AI agents

AI agents are computer programs that autonomously perform functions to reach a set goal, taking inputs from their environment and developing their operational parameters in the process. The adaptability and potential for autonomous performance improvements are key to their appeal, and the importance of AI agents is expected to balloon in the coming years. Alongside increased autonomy, development in efficiency and speed is anticipated.

The development of AI agents as a field separate from expert systems began in the 1980s but only recently gained momentum again due to a set of breakthroughs in machine learning. Reflecting this boom, the market size estimations for the business year 2025 vary between $4 to $8 billion. The expected annual growth rates could be as high as 50% over the next decade. These promises serve as partially self-fulfilling prophecies accelerating sector growth.

THE RACE DYNAMICS MAY ALSO LEAD TO TRUSTING SYSTEMS TO AI AGENTS FASTER THAN WOULD OTHERWISE BE TERMED SAFE.

The growth is further buoyed by the fact that the usual barriers to early adoption[1] turn into advantages due to the nature of the technology itself. This is because rather than risking investing into a system that may become obsolete after the next breakthrough, early adopters help developing agents to answer their needs, and the time spent verifying outputs diminishes gradually.

There are race dynamics at play. The adoption boom in China, sparked by the breakthrough of DeepSeek's Large Language Model and the CCP's nationwide AI-adoption campaign, is encouraging other actors to follow suit. As a result, there is growing interest in adopting and investing in a wide range of AI-enabled products, which provides a boost to domestic suppliers.

China's activity in the field encourages the United States to speed up its adaption campaign to avoid risking falling behind. All the largest AI agent developers are now based either in the US or China, and the escalating rivalry is likely to cause significant compatibility challenges. The world might be traversing into the existence of two increasingly competitive and potentially incompatible AI ecosystems. This raises the question of how the EU and Europeans position themselves in this emerging technological constellation. For Europe, too, the stakes are high.

The race dynamics may also lead to trusting systems to AI agents faster than would otherwise be termed safe. This causes risks but is practically unavoidable, as the benefits of functioning agents outweigh potential

costs and are simply going to be too significant to ignore. Whether the agent is organising a data archive or calendar, targeting sales quotas or missile defence systems, monitoring signal or airport traffic, or controlling food or payload deliveries, over time agents are likely to be more reliable and even more efficient in responding than humans. They will tirelessly perform repetitive tasks without an error, whereas people tend to make mistakes, burden shift, or avoid responsibility.

Even at tasks where agents make fewer mistakes than humans, their impact is still significant, and at times potentially catastrophic. In fact, AI risks pose an emerging resilience paradigm. One of its key problems lies in the fact that the potential errors might be incomprehensible to human way of thinking. This increases the severity of the errors and makes contingency planning exceedingly difficult. In other words, the more systems or devices an agent controls, the wider the impact of a single error is, and the more developed the agent is, the more perplexing the error is likely to be. Over time users, whether they are states, institutions, or individuals, will likely learn to better account and react to wide and odd errors. Unfortunately, the skills to develop, operate, and use agents will likely diverge, which can slow down error correction and enable new user-created vulnerabilities also by malign actors, as has happened with traditional computer programs.

AI models have already been used to discover cyber vulnerabilities, and they have also created new vulnerabilities in systems in which they have been implemented. While illegal marketplaces for AI vulnerabilities, like obfuscation data, do not yet exist in the same way as those for traditional cyber vulnerabilities, they are bound to emerge. How long this will take will mostly depend on the adoption rate of agents and other AI-enabled products, and the criticality of agent-controlled systems.

A subsequent problem is that nations and other actors will, in time, learn to better create and exploit such errors. The age of AI agent-driven malign influence, even disruption, beckons. As agents and other programs that run systems involved in international communication, security, and economy become more common and control larger tasks, the designing, updating and protecting of these algorithms gain prominence in international relations. Thus, ever greater convergence between the skillsets of toolmakers and tool users is needed. Ensuring that decision-makers have access to the information on how those systems function and share the consequent understanding on what the new tools can and cannot be trusted with. This is a challenge for farsighted international diplomacy, too: Guidelines about what is permissible and what is not should be established. This should not be left to a process of trial and error alone.

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1) Most of the adopted solutions are single-agent systems specialised for individual group of tasks, but this is also expected to change as the technology matures.

Action Plan

Ensure that states know who makes decisions on their behalf and for what motives – for example, when designing the operational parameters of agents.

Mandate transparency in the design of AI agents that are (to be) used in critical systems. Monitor closely how their reward systems develop.

Implement agents gradually and with care. Have resiliency plans for unexplainable widescale errors unlike those made by humans.

Ensure users of agents in international relations understand what their new tools can and cannot be trusted to do.

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Cold war in the age of silicon

While in no way inevitable, the trade and tech rivalry between the United States and China is leading towards another cold war. This would imply the emergence of ideologically and economically diverging blocks, as well as a set of middle powers seeking to benefit from superpower rivalry. There are several reasons why such development is worth assessing.

For decades, China has aimed at technological autarchy and independence in critical supply. Targeted subsidies and funding for research and development, uneven market access for foreign companies and investors, restrictions for foreigners working at critical initiatives, and concentrated efforts to set the key technological standards have defined China's approach. These policies are viewed antagonistically in the US, which is also worried about its technological lead slipping away. As a response, the US is trying to cut high-end technological information flows to China by banning export, blocking Chinese employees' and researchers' access to critical projects, and by scraping Chinese telecom technologies of critical systems, while pressuring their allies to do the same.

This causes the Chinese- and US-driven supply networks, information spaces, and technological architectures to gradually disconnect as a colloquial silicon curtain slowly descends between the two superpowers. If the development continues, two separate technological spheres with their own platform systems, path-dependencies, and lock-in effects will likely emerge. To understand this development, it is important to avoid comparing China to the USSR. Not only are the countries and their economic models immensely different, but the global connectivity and economy are too. The second cold war would not emerge from wartime and recovering economies, but from the period of efficiency-driven globalisation, that has tied the US and Chinese economies tightly together. Thus, keeping the economies separate will not be sufficient in the current world order. Instead, a major economic and design-architectural decoupling process would be required for a new cold war to truly emerge. Currently neither side is able to produce everything they need without the other.

Even from the perspective of the countries involved, complete economic decoupling should not, and could not, be achieved. However, economic decoupling would still likely be easier to reverse than its technological equivalent. The rise of internet and especially the World Wide Web has enabled unforeseen control of international flows and production reliant on those flows. Today, offices, factories, and other facilities that do not run on microchips are exceedingly rare. A century-long dependency on computers and decades of internet have created countless layers of hardware and software dependencies.

As China is struggling with its dependencies regarding software, US has largely lost its state-of-the-art hardware manufacturing capabilities. Access to quality data is an issue for both countries. As a response, they are heavily investing on replacing imported systems with domestic ones, thus consequently reducing interoperability of their technological supply. If such dynamic continues, the technological layering of both sides will create systems that either cannot 'talk' with each other by processing each other's system data or require extensive gateway coding and compatibility construction. Crucially, such

technological fragmentation could hamper the resolution of a new cold war, in contrast to the shared political will on both sides during the 1970s.

Digitisation-enabled connectivity relies on data. As more data-producing systems and devices connect to the internet, the amount and quality of the gathered data increases. This is fuel for big data analytics and artificial intelligence, which are quickly developing into the main battlefield of the Sino-US great power rivalry. Data required for developing new systems is highly specific and as both superpowers restrict each other's access to their data and devices, the systems developed using this data will incrementally diverge. This will speed up technological inoperability, creating added difficulties for reversing the course.

One, perhaps the strongest reason to fear for a longer-lasting and more total cold war relates to what the AI systems are used for. As AI systems are set to be given an increasing role in information management in terms of information retrieval, packaging, distribution, and even outright manipulation, it is feasible to assume that the ideological divide will eventually develop significantly larger than during the 20th century cold war. Both sides seem willing to use AI to legitimise their actions, which is likely to create incremental tensions between the two nations and with the rest of the world.

THE SECOND COLD WAR WOULD NOT EMERGE FROM WARTIME AND RECOVERING ECONOMIES, BUT FROM THE PERIOD OF EFFICIENCY-DRIVEN GLOBALISATION.

Action Plan

Monitor development so that silicon curtain does not descend unnoticed.

Conduct research on issues like interoperability divergence, politicisation of technical standards, fragmentation of global supply networks, and impacts of geoeconomic escalation.

China and US should build strategies for resolving the cold war path even if not currently desirable.

Europe needs to follow up on the Sino-US rivalry and decide whether to position itself as an intermediary trader and coder, or to align firmly with the US.

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Turning the tide? How recalibration of the European risk calculus may benefit China

When Donald Trump was re-elected for the President of the United States in November 2024, many Europeans expected turbulence. Yet the rapid pace of the turmoil took many observers aback. Very soon, the US became rather a geopolitical risk than a stabilising force in the eyes of many Europeans.

As one matter rises in urgency, it often changes the way other risks are evaluated. If there is one country that has benefited from the recalibration of the European risk calculus, it is China. Indeed, without doing anything to change its domestic policies or contested economic foreign policy, the optics suddenly make China appear as the adult in the room: stable, predictable, and yet ready to push back if provoked.

Trump's second term disorder and the evolving European threat perceptions are clearly welcome developments for the Chinese leadership. Although it is too early to say whether the Sino–European relations will truly improve, it is highly beneficial for China that the talk on de-risking is toned down – or at least that the debates are not gaining too much speed. In essence, the new risk calculus may allow China to overcome some hurdles in the face of two long-term policy goals with high relevance to Northern Europe in particular.

First, China seeks to become the leading global high technology power by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC. In essence, it wants to be self-reliant and produce the most advanced technologies domestically. Over the past decades, European knowledge and technology transfers through foreign direct investments, trade, and business collaboration have greatly contributed to this aim. Since the early 2020s, however, European countries have followed the US lead in restricting such forms of Chinese engagement by tightening investment screening, expanding the scope of export controls and broadening the definition of dual-use products.

European countries are likely to continue shielding the most critical industries from Chinese engagement, but the new risk calculus may allow China to secure knowledge and technology transfer in other high-tech domains. Although subject to screening, Chinese acquisitions of, for example, European medical technology companies may well resume for pragmatic reasons. Given the lack

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of European capital, many companies have either had to attract investments from the US or China for expansion. If the US poses greater geopolitical risks, a European company is likely to rethink selling its business to a buyer that opens the door to a market of 1.4 billion potential customers. Such deals may allow China to catch up in technologies in which it still lags behind, including life-supporting devices.

Technology transfer to China can also take place through outbound investments, when European companies invest in the Chinese market. Following up on the US example, the EU has recommended that its member states develop national mechanisms for screening outbound investments. While the 'China risk' will clearly factor in these processes, tightening regulation on Asia-bound technology flows is less appealing when businesses find more stability in the East than in the West. In other words, there may be relatively less political will to hinder investments to China in the new risk environment.

Second, China wants to become a 'polar great power', as stated by President Xi Jinping in the mid-2010s. In practice, it wants to be able to exert influence globally, including in both poles. The goal is also tightly connected to China's broader aim to become a leading science and maritime power by 2049. While the favourable stance of Northern European countries towards China's polar outreach enabled the country to learn how to develop polar technologies, set up science stations and join the Arctic governance in the 2010s, many forms of collaboration have since then dried up. This shift is largely due to China's damaged reputation and national security concerns.

In the new risk environment, China will not be any more successful in obtaining critical infrastructure from Nordic Arctic countries than in the past. Northern European companies are also likely to be very cautious in transferring any cold technologies with even remote dual-use potential to China.

Yet there may be room for activating polar science collaboration, especially with regard to climate change. China's continued emphasis on understanding climate change as its number one Arctic and Antarctic policy goal appears as a calculated move in the new risk environment. It stands as a stark contrast to the Trump administration's encouragement of Arctic fossil fuel extraction and limiting of climate change research funding and international collaboration.

In practice, China may benefit from the recent difficulties to continue US–European polar science collaboration. There are now less opportunities to enter the US as a climate change researcher or an engineer with related expertise. It is more difficult to invite US professionals to European events and schemes. Especially the unpredictability surrounding the outcomes of US visa applications frustrates high-level experts and may guide some to look elsewhere for mobility options. In a bigger picture, such weighing for options may favour China in a global competition for top talent.

Perhaps most importantly, however, China's continued emphasis on understanding climate change legitimises its polar role in the eyes of those Arctic stakeholders that view global heating as the number one existential threat. That helps China to remain in dialogue with the Arctic countries – despite its close relationship with Russia.

In conclusion, the new European take on China as a stable risk is likely to present the country as a more favourable partner in less sensitive industries. However, in security-critical fields much more needs to be done to turn the tide in China's favour. In the middle of these changes, it is crucial for Europe to keep calm and recognise its active role and genuine options.

Action Plan

Europe must nurture and develop its independent China debate, especially in the domains of technology and science.

Europe must consider feasible ways to continue China collaboration; it is also a prerequisite for knowing what happens in China in the future. Climate change research and mitigation are viable options for cooperation.

PARTNERS

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs, together with approximately one hundred diplomatic and consular missions abroad, promotes the security and welfare of Finland and the Finns, and works for a secure and fair world.

Puolustusministeriö
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Ministry of Defence

As one of the Ministries of the Finnish Government and leading authority in the area of national defence, **the Ministry of Defence** is in charge of national defence policy, provides guidance to the development of defence capability, directs international defence cooperation and coordinates total defence.

Helsinki

Helsinki is a clean, stable and safe capital with a high standard of living and wellbeing. It is a compact city known for its unique mix of urban culture and calming nature. It is Helsinki's goal to be a city with no significant socio-economic differences between our different residential areas, meaning that it is possible to live safely and comfortably everywhere. As the capital of Finland, Helsinki promotes general security in close cooperation with the associated regional and national authorities. Helsinki is an international city of equality and non-discrimination, where everyone can enjoy a good life.

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Fortum is a Nordic energy company. We generate and deliver reliable energy to our customers and the Nordic energy system while at the same time helping industries decarbonise their processes and grow. Our core operations comprise efficient and best-in-class low-carbon power generation, customer services, and heating and cooling. Fortum's power generation is already 99% from renewable or nuclear sources with one of the lowest specific CO2-emissions in Europe. We are guided by our ambitious SBTi-validated emission reduction targets on our way towards net-zero by 2040.

STARK is a technology-driven defense company, born out of urgent operational demands, that serves Europe and NATO member states. The company's unmanned systems operate across domains and are designed to meet the realities of modern conflict by being AI-enabled, software-defined, and ready for affordable production at scale. STARK believes that technological superiority and mass deployability are crucial for deterring future aggression. This is why it works closely with NATO allied and partner militaries, testing its systems under real operational conditions and using user feedback to drive rapid innovation.

Sitra is a future-oriented fund that supports Finland's renewal. It engages in foresight activities and develops solutions to address tomorrow's challenges in collaboration with various partners. Sitra promotes national well-being and drives sustainable economic growth. Building a better future requires action today.

Stora Enso is the leading provider of renewable products in packaging, biomaterials, and wooden construction, and one of the largest private forest owners in the world. The forest is at the heart of Stora Enso and we believe that everything made from fossil-based materials today can be made from a tree tomorrow. Stora Enso has approximately 19,000 employees and our sales in 2024 were EUR 9 billion. Stora Enso shares are listed on Nasdaq Helsinki Oy and Nasdaq Stockholm AB. In addition, the shares are traded in the USA on OTC Markets as ADRs and ordinary shares.

Lockheed Martin is a global defence technology company driving innovation and advancing scientific discovery. Its all-domain mission solutions and 21st Century Security vision accelerate the delivery of transformative technologies to ensure that those it serves always stay ahead of ready.

Outokumpu is accelerating the green transition as the global leader in sustainable stainless steel. With our new growth-focused strategy for 2026–2030, we aim to revolutionize value creation with innovative materials and technologies. Our business is based on the circular economy: our products are made from 95% recycled materials, and are utilized in various applications across society. We are committed to 1.5°C target to mitigate climate change, and with up to 75% lower carbon footprint than the industry average, we support our customers to reduce their emissions. Outokumpu Corporation employs approximately 8,700 professionals in close to 30 countries, with headquarters in Helsinki, Finland.

ABOUT HSF

HELSINKI SECURITY FORUM

Helsinki Security Forum (HSF) is a flagship venue for high-level, in-depth discussions on international security and defence, viewed through a Northern European lens. Organised by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), it convenes policymakers, military leaders, experts, and industry representatives to address the most pressing security challenges of our time.

Now in its fourth year, HSF has firmly established itself as a key gathering in the network of security conferences. Since its launch in 2022, it has provided a space for open, forward-looking discussions on issues that matter both to Finland and to the international community.

In 2025, HSF will focus on themes such as the security implications of emerging technologies and artificial intelligence, the future of transatlantic security cooperation, energy security, nuclear deterrence, Russia's war on Ukraine, the geopolitical role of China, and alternative futures for the European Union.

HSF is an invitational event, bringing together over 300 high-level participants relevant to international security each year. By combining a global outlook with regional insight, the Forum strengthens Finland's role as a convener of strategic debate. The President of the Republic of Finland, Alexander Stubb, serves as patron of HSF 2025, underlining the significance of the Forum at this critical moment for Europe and the wider world.

HSF 2025 is organised with support from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Ministry of Defence of Finland, the City of Helsinki, Patria, Nokia, VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, Fortum, STARK, The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, Stora Enso, Lockheed Martin, and Outokumpu.

ABOUT FIIA

FIIA
FINNISH INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) is an independent research institute that works in connection with the Finnish Parliament. The Institute produces high-quality academic research on a broad range of topics related to international relations, security, the global economy and the European Union.

FIIA'S PRINCIPAL TASKS ARE TO

- **conduct academic research**
- **support political decision-making**
- **participate in public debate**

FIIA supports political decision-making by producing research of a high academic standard and producing analysis for public use. The institute's staff take an active role in public debate on international affairs, sharing their expertise and providing commentary on the rapidly changing global order. These times of radical uncertainty have underscored the importance of FIIA's role as a source of reliable, evidence-based analysis.

From 1961 to 2006, FIIA functioned as an independent research institute run by a private foundation. In 2006, the Institute was established by the Parliament of Finland in its centennial plenum. The Parliament provides funding for the primary operations of the Institute. FIIA is autonomous in its research activities and is governed by a nine-member board, assisted by an advisory council and a scientific advisory council.

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