

NAVIGATING A TWO-THEATER CONTINGENCY: LESSONS FROM A TABLE-TOP EXERCISE

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ORGANIZATIONS



European Values Center for Security Policy

European Values Center for Security Policy is a non-governmental, non-partisan institute defending liberal democracies against dictatorships since 2005.

Through its malign activities, the People's Republic of China is threatening liberal democracies across Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Our mission is to analyze these threats, provide actionable policy recommendations, and advocate them among our political, security, and business leaders.

The work of the European Values Center for Security Policy upholds the principles that have been evolving in Europe for centuries and gave birth to the political institutions of liberal democracies. To us, "European values" mean three fundamental values that embody the pillars of the liberal democratic way of government: personal freedom, human dignity, and equality. We believe that democracies, in all their diversity, should not be strategically dependent on dictatorships and authoritarian regimes; therefore, democratic alliances should be built and strengthened. With our headquarters in Prague, our objective is to build trusted alliances between European and Indo-Pacific like-minded partners against common threats. As the first European think tank to have established a permanent office in Taiwan, we are uniquely positioned to foster closer cooperation between democratic actors in the two regions.



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0. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report synthesizes findings from a closed-door crisis simulation convened by the European Values Center for Security Policy (EVC) in Berlin in December 2025. The simulation tested how EU and NATO actors, together with key Indo-Pacific democracies, might respond to a dual-theater contingency in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) escalated pressure against Taiwan while the Russian Federation simultaneously increased military coercion in the Euro-Atlantic theater. In a two-theater crisis, adversaries would not need to “win” militarily in either region to achieve strategic effects. They could instead weaponize ambiguity, economic dependence, and political fragmentation to force democracies into premature trade-offs and incremental concessions.

In Move 1, pressure accumulated below the threshold of declared conflict. China combined diplomatic warnings with cyber operations against Taiwan and disruptive actions affecting European telecommunications and energy-related infrastructure. Influence operations exploited social media ecosystems to shape narratives and normalize political compliance. Russia complemented this pressure through Baltic signaling and proxy-linked sabotage, including actions that pushed Taiwan's energy resilience toward a breaking point. China's suspension of critical raw material exports to European defense industry supply chains illustrated the central logic of modern coercion: the battlefield is not only the Taiwan Strait or the Baltic Sea, but also logistics, energy, and industrial capacity.

Move 2 escalated the coercion into an explicit strategic bargaining framework. China formalized a “quarantine” around Taiwan through an inspection regime backed by large-scale maritime deployments, while simultaneously offering selective evacuation corridors and market-access incentives to European states willing to endorse political neutrality and the “One China Principle.” Russia amplified the pressure through large-scale mobilization near NATO territory and energy inducements conditioned on sanctions rollback and political decoupling from NATO. Across both moves, the simulation revealed a recurring vulnerability: European actors repeatedly emphasized unity and values but hesitated to deploy coercive economic tools against China, including the EU's Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI), largely due to industrial dependence and fear of domestic economic backlash.

Several actor-specific patterns were consistent. The United States acted as the primary crisis integrator, managing escalation across both theaters while attempting to preserve alliance cohesion. Japan behaved as the most forward-leaning frontline actor in the Indo-Pacific, prioritizing operational readiness and coalition integration. South Korea adopted a cautious hedging posture, contributing selectively while seeking to minimize direct exposure. Among European actors, the United Kingdom demonstrated the strongest willingness to project operational capability into the Indo-Pacific, while Germany and the Netherlands emphasized diplomacy, legal framing, and crisis management over force contribution. Poland focused overwhelmingly on the Russian threat but introduced one of the most con-

sequential geo-economic moves by disrupting China–EU rail connectivity through Belarus, highlighting Europe’s latent leverage over logistics corridors.

The report’s policy recommendations are designed to be implementable rather than aspirational. First, EU and NATO governments should institutionalize dual-theater planning as a baseline assumption and develop pre-agreed playbooks for cyber attribution, crisis communications, sanctions sequencing, export controls, and evacuation procedures. Second, Europe must treat critical raw materials and energy resilience as deterrence instruments, not merely industrial policy issues; stockpiling, diversification, and continuity planning should be accelerated and linked to concrete response thresholds. Third, the EU should clarify in advance when and how the ACI and other coercive tools would be triggered in response to Chinese economic warfare, to reduce improvisation and internal bargaining under pressure. Finally, European governments should prepare for “selective corridor” diplomacy by adopting a coordinated position against transactional inducements tied to political compliance, ensuring that humanitarian measures do not become instruments of strategic fragmentation.

1. INTRODUCTION

A potential East Asian contingency, which would most plausibly emerge as a crisis centered on Taiwan and unfolding in parallel with renewed Russian escalation in the Euro-Atlantic theater, would constitute a systemic shock to the international order. Rather than a single-theater crisis, such a scenario would be embedded in a broader dual-theater escalation dynamic shaped by the deepening strategic alignment between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation. The simultaneous escalation of authoritarian pressure across two theaters would yield far-reaching consequences, affecting the security calculus and relations among the European Union (EU), the United States (US), and democratic partners in East Asia. In this configuration, Chinese coercive actions in the Indo-Pacific and Russian pressure in Europe would interact not only militarily but also across economic, technological, and informational domains, generating compounding effects on alliance cohesion, global supply chains, and the stability of the rules-based international system.

Despite the scale and complexity of these risks, there remains a notable gap in preparedness and scenario-based thinking among policymakers and experts in the EU and NATO, as well as among their like-minded partners in East and Southeast Asia. At both national and institutional levels, planning often remains siloed along regional or sectoral lines, limiting the ability to anticipate cross-domain dynamics linking security, economic resilience, technological dependence, and humanitarian contingencies (Jones 2025; Sweijjs and van Hooft 2024). This lack of integrated strategic foresight undermines the development of coherent policy responses across key domains, including foreign and security policy, economic statecraft, supply-chain resilience, and civilian protection. There is therefore an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of European and Indo-Pacific actors to engage with the concrete operational logic of East Asian contingency scenarios, including the likely escalatory pathways pursued by China, Russia, and North Korea.

This report is based on a closed-door crisis simulation conducted by the European Values Center for Security Policy (EVC) in Berlin in December 2025, during which the organizers examined a dual-theater escalation scenario through the lens of economic security and humanitarian risk. In particular, the exercise explored how the PRC might deploy its economic statecraft toolkit in a crisis context, and how European and allied actors might respond to large-scale civilian evacuation and supply disruptions. The report documents the actions taken by active participants and synthesizes feedback provided by both players and observers. None of the views expressed should be understood as reflecting the official positions of any state or institution.

The purpose of the simulation, and of this report, is to inform real-world policy debates by highlighting how a two-theater escalation could unfold in practice, and by identifying structural gaps in planning, coordination, and decision-making under conditions of strategic uncertainty. While the analysis draws on the perspectives of governmental and nongovern-

mental experts, responsibility for the interpretation and conclusions rests solely with the authors. For reasons of sensitivity, the identities of participants are not disclosed, and the report should not be read as attributing specific positions to any individual or organization.

2. SETUP OF THE SIMULATION

In December 2025, the European Values Center for Security Policy hosted the “East Asia Regional Crisis Simulation” in Berlin, following the setup described below:

- **Event format:** Chatham House Rule, no media present, no video or audio recording.
- **Information security:** During the simulation, all active players and observers were requested to place their electronic devices in a secure space outside of the main game-play area.
- **Simulation duration:** half-day (four hours)
- **Number of moves (rounds) played:** Two
- **Total number of participants:** 42 (15 active players, 27 observers)
- **Roles assumed by active players:** EU member states and NATO allies, selected Indo-Pacific countries including Taiwan, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Philippines
- **Profile of participants:** Think-tankers from EU/NATO member states and Indo-Pacific democracies, senior diplomats representing EU/NATO member states and Indo-Pacific democracies, officials from their relevant ministries, as well as representatives from academia, business, and political communities.
- **Simulation design:** The exercise simulated gray-zone scenarios involving Chinese and Russian operations against Taiwan and EU/NATO countries. These scenarios included the potential for escalation within the context of a two-theater conflict and growing alignment between China, Russia, and North Korea. The exercise combined tabletop simulations, role-playing, and strategic decision-making processes. Set in the fourth quarter of 2025, the scenario unfolded against the backdrop of the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine and related ceasefire negotiations. It focused on projected Chinese operations involving a selective quarantine of Taiwan, combined with the strategic blackmail of EU/NATO countries, and a possible Russian escalation in Eastern Europe.

2.1. SUMMARY OF MOVE 1:

Move 1 situated the crisis in a grey-zone escalation environment characterized by coordinated hybrid pressure from China and Russia across multiple domains. Rather than a discrete military incident, the initial phase unfolds through a layered coercion campaign targeting infrastructure, public opinion, and economic interdependence. China initiated the pressure cycle by issuing diplomatic warnings in NATO capitals, framing any engagement on Taiwan as interference in its internal affairs and threatening retaliation across key economic sectors, including pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, transport infrastructure, and green energy. These signals were reinforced through cyberattacks on Taiwan’s financial

and communications systems, widespread telecom disruptions in parts of Europe, and the malfunctioning of Chinese-made renewable energy components, all of which generated attribution uncertainty and complicated collective response.

Simultaneously, China launches a large-scale influence operation across Europe, leveraging TikTok and personal data to shape public narratives in favor of the One China Principle, while Russia- and Iran-linked proxies escalate attacks in the Red Sea, raising global shipping costs and exposing vulnerabilities in maritime trade routes. In the Indo-Pacific, an undeclared Chinese naval militia harassed commercial shipping, contributing to market instability and legitimizing further PLAN deployments under the pretext of restoring order. The most acute shock occurred through the sabotage of Taiwan-bound LNG tankers, attributed to Russian intelligence proxies, pushing Taiwan's energy reserves toward critical exhaustion within weeks. In parallel, Beijing suspended critical raw material exports to European defense industries, directly weaponizing supply chains to enforce political compliance. Russia complemented these actions by maneuvering naval assets in the Baltic Sea, signaling the possibility of maritime coercion against NATO. Collectively, Move 1 establishes a systemic coercion environment in which military thresholds remained formally unmet, yet strategic pressure was already operating across economic, technological, informational, and energy domains.

2.2. SUMMARY OF MOVE 2:

Move 2 marked the transition from hybrid pressure to overt strategic coercion, as China and Russia synchronized their actions across both theaters. Russia initiated the escalation by publicly mobilizing its Western Military District, deploying approximately 200,000 troops near the Baltic states and signaling credible preparations for large-scale military action. Simultaneously, intelligence indicated deepening Sino-Russian military integration, including the subordination of the Russian Pacific Fleet under PLAN operational command and the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear systems into North Korean territory. These moves introduced an explicit nuclear dimension into the crisis and blurred the boundaries between regional contingencies.

In the Indo-Pacific, China escalated decisively by announcing a formal "quarantine" around Taiwan, invoking the Cuban Missile Crisis precedent and asserting the right to inspect or divert all non-PRC vessels bound for the island. This marked an escalation from prior gray-zone activity into a quasi-legal blockade regime, backed by large-scale PLAN and China Coast Guard deployments around Taiwan. Taiwan responded by appealing for emergency food and energy support from the United States and Europe, while Beijing simultaneously launched a coordinated diplomatic and economic pressure campaign in European capitals. China offered humanitarian evacuation corridors, preferential market access, and protected shipping in exchange for political neutrality and adherence to the "One China Principle," while threatening inspection and disruption for noncompliant states.

Russia reinforced the coercive logic by offering highly favorable long-term energy contracts to selected EU states, conditional on lifting sanctions and withdrawing from NATO structures. Together, these moves embedded the crisis in a broader strategic bargaining framework in which economic incentives, security guarantees, and nuclear deterrence were deliberately fused. Move 2 thus represented the consolidation of a dual-theater pressure campaign designed not merely to isolate Taiwan, but to test the cohesion, resolve, and strategic autonomy of the Euro-Atlantic alliance system as a whole.

3. ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN BY PLAYERS

3.1. MOVE 1

3.1.1. European Council

The European Council's actions in Move 1 reflected a classic crisis-management response to a PRC hybrid pressure campaign rather than a conventional military escalation. Faced with Chinese cyberattacks on infrastructure, influence operations via TikTok, disruptions to telecom networks, and sabotage of Taiwan-bound LNG supplies, the Council focused primarily on political coordination, strategic communication, and internal unity. Its first move was to convene emergency consultations among member states and with the United States, seeking to establish a common assessment of attribution and intent before committing to coercive measures. The Council also prioritized energy and supply-chain resilience, responding to China's suspension of raw-material exports to European defense industries and to Red Sea disruptions linked to Houthi attacks. However, rather than escalating economically, the Council emphasized de-escalation and diplomatic signaling, especially toward Beijing, aiming to prevent further coercion against European companies. The Council framed the crisis as a test of EU coherence under systemic pressure, but treated China's actions primarily as a political and economic challenge, not yet a security adversary warranting sanctions or military response.

3.1.2. NATO

NATO's actions centered on alliance cohesion and narrative framing. The alliance framed the crisis as a global threat to humanity, emphasizing the danger of simultaneous nuclear escalation in two theaters. Its actions were shaped by this dual hybrid threat environment: Chinese grey-zone operations and early Russian naval posturing in the Baltic. NATO focused on alliance signaling, intelligence-sharing, and cognitive deterrence. It also proposed enhanced situational awareness and information operations to counter China's influence campaigns and disinformation across Europe. Moreover, the alliance also initiated internal planning around the Russian naval movements near Gotland and Bornholm, interpreting them as potential precursors to maritime coercion or mining operations. However, NATO deliberately avoided military escalation, reflecting the ambiguous and deniable nature of the threats. Its primary strategic role in Move 1 was therefore narrative control and alliance coherence, positioning itself as the guarantor of stability in a grey-zone environment rather than as a warfighting actor.

3.1.3. Taiwan

Taiwan's response focused heavily on strategic communication, alliance-building, and resilience. Its first actions involved mobilizing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to organize international press events, shaping global narratives, and reinforcing Taiwan's image as a responsible, democratic actor. Taiwan also activated domestic emergency plans, particularly in information security and infrastructure resilience, emphasizing protection against cyber and hybrid threats. Another major move was deepening coordination with regional partners, especially Japan and the Philippines, to strengthen regional security linkages and present a united front in the Western Pacific. Taiwan explicitly framed its actions around "naming and shaming" China in international forums, aiming to internationalize the crisis and raise reputational costs for Beijing. The strategic logic was not military escalation but diplomatic and normative escalation: embedding Taiwan's security within broader international norms and alliances. Taiwan's considerations reveal concern about isolation and the need to ensure that any confrontation is framed as an international security issue rather than a bilateral dispute with China.

Domestically, Taiwan activated emergency response planning in the energy sector, including safeguarding hospitals and critical infrastructure and increasing renewable energy deployment (such as solar). Taiwan also sought to diversify energy supplies and explore new shipments from the United States, highlighting vulnerability to supply shocks during crises. Another strand of action was diplomatic outreach to the G7 and the EU to secure political backing and alignment. The strategic logic was that Taiwan's energy system is a key vulnerability in any crisis scenario, and resilience in this sector is directly tied to national security. Rather than military responses, Taipei emphasized economic and infrastructural preparedness, seeing energy stability as foundational for sustaining political and social resilience during prolonged confrontation.

3.1.4. Japan

Japan adopted a cautious but proactive security posture. Its actions focused on fully preparing the Self-Defense Forces, particularly in the maritime and air domains, to deter Chinese escalation around Taiwan. Japan emphasized intelligence sharing with the US and the Philippines, joint exercises, and heightened alert levels in key regions, such as Okinawa and the East China Sea. At the same time, Japan sought to maintain "status quo" rhetoric, signaling defensive intent rather than offensive escalation. Cybersecurity and economic resilience were also highlighted, with preparation for potential cyberattacks and supply chain disruptions. Strategically, Japan framed itself as a frontline state whose credibility and deterrence posture were essential to regional stability. However, political caution was evident: the emphasis remained on alliance coordination and defensive readiness, rather than independent military

initiatives. Japan's underlying concern was avoiding being drawn into open conflict while still signaling enough resolve to deter Chinese coercion.

3.1.5. The Philippines

The Philippines focused on maritime security and alliance activation. It sought immediate reassurance from the US and invoked defense cooperation mechanisms to protect the South China Sea. Actions included mobilizing the coast guard and navy, monitoring Chinese activities, and preparing for information campaigns highlighting Chinese aggression. The Philippines also explored legal and diplomatic avenues, emphasizing UNCLOS and international law to frame China's actions as illegitimate. Another key step was opening ports and facilities to allied forces, including potential access for US and even European naval assets. The strategic logic was to leverage international partnerships to compensate for domestic military limitations. The Philippines viewed the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen its role as a regional security stakeholder, embedding its disputes with China within a broader international coalition.

3.1.6. The Republic of Korea

South Korea adopted a restrained, risk-averse posture. Its primary action was to avoid direct naval involvement, focusing instead on humanitarian and diplomatic measures. The ROK emphasized preventing accidental escalation and maintaining communication channels with China. It coordinated with partners on evacuation planning and intelligence-sharing, while also monitoring economic impacts and shipping disruptions. Seoul placed particular importance on stability, fearing that escalation in Taiwan or the Baltics could undermine regional trade and economic security. The strategic logic was balancing alliance commitments with economic interdependence with China. South Korea positioned itself as a cautious middle power: supportive of international norms but unwilling to provoke confrontation unless directly threatened.

3.1.7. United Kingdom

The UK adopted an activist alliance-support role. Its actions included offering military support to G7 partners, reinforcing NATO operations, and contributing naval and intelligence assets to the Indo-Pacific. The UK emphasized diplomatic coordination across G7, Quad, and NATO frameworks, portraying itself as a bridge between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. London also highlighted information operations and strategic communication, framing the crisis as a defense of liberal international order. The strategic logic reflected the UK's post-Brexit global posture: projecting influence through coalition leadership, maritime presence, and diplomatic activism.

The UK sought to punch above its weight by being visible, vocal, and operationally engaged across both regions.

3.1.8. United States

The US played a central coordinating and escalation-managing role. It activated G7 consultations, reinforced military deployments in both theatres, and emphasized intelligence-sharing with allies. The US also prioritized cyber defense, economic sanctions planning, and strategic communications. Another significant move was preparing evacuation plans for US citizens and diplomats, reflecting expectations of prolonged instability. The strategic logic was twofold: deter adversaries through credible military readiness, and maintain alliance cohesion by constant consultation. The US saw itself as the indispensable actor linking European and Indo-Pacific security, while also managing escalation risks. Importantly, US actions balanced signaling strength with avoiding direct provocation, emphasizing deterrence, economic pressure, and coalition-building over immediate military confrontation.

3.1.9. Germany

The German Chancellor focused on political consensus-building and domestic legitimacy. Actions included calling for parliamentary consultations, engaging allies, and supporting NATO statements. Germany emphasized labor, social stability, and economic resilience, reflecting concern about domestic political backlash and economic costs. The Chancellor sought to persuade partners to avoid unilateral escalation and instead act through NATO and EU mechanisms. Strategically, Germany positioned itself as a cautious leader, prioritizing unity and legitimacy over assertiveness. The underlying rationale was that German public opinion and economic exposure required careful management, and that Germany's main contribution should be political leadership and coordination rather than military initiative.

Concurrently, the German Foreign Minister emphasized the need for diplomatic activism. Actions included contacting counterparts in Taiwan and China, gathering intelligence from embassies, and preparing statements for G7 and EU forums. The FM also highlighted the need to manage US–China dynamics carefully and avoid being sidelined by Washington. The strategic logic was that Germany must remain a central diplomatic actor, shaping narratives and facilitating dialogue. The FM also stressed economic interdependence with China, advocating cautious rhetoric and conflict de-escalation. Germany thus framed itself as a mediator and norm entrepreneur, attempting to preserve dialogue even amid systemic confrontation.

3.1.10. The Netherlands

The Netherlands adopted a maritime and legalistic approach. It emphasized freedom of navigation operations, support for international law, and diplomatic coordination

within the EU and NATO. Dutch actions included preparing naval deployments, strengthening ties with regional partners, and advocating for a rules-based maritime order in the South China Sea. The strategic logic was rooted in the Netherlands' identity as a trading and maritime power: ensuring open sea lanes and legal stability. The Netherlands saw itself as a principled actor, supporting collective security while avoiding unilateral military escalation.

3.1.11. Poland

Poland focused almost exclusively on the European theatre. Its actions emphasized strengthening NATO's eastern flank, mobilizing domestic defense resources, and pressing for stronger deterrence against Russia. Poland advocated increased troop presence, intelligence-sharing, and rapid response mechanisms in the Baltic region. It also supported G7 and EU coordination but viewed the Taiwan crisis primarily through the lens of its implications for Russia's behavior. Strategically, Poland framed the crisis as confirmation of Russian revisionism and the need for hard security measures. Poland's logic was straightforward: deterrence through strength, alliance solidarity, and military preparedness, with less emphasis on diplomacy compared to other actors.

3.2. MOVE 2

3.2.1. European Council

The European Council escalated politically but remained economically cautious. Faced with China's explicit ultimatum—safe evacuation and market access in exchange for adherence to the One China Principle—the Council focused on coordinating national positions and resisting fragmentation under Chinese economic pressure. While discussing sanctions and energy diversification, the Council avoided direct coercive measures against China, reflecting deep concern about industrial dependency and domestic business lobbying. The Council also prioritized the evacuation of EU citizens from Taiwan and crisis communication with European companies affected by the quarantine regime. Strategically, the EU approached the quarantine primarily as a political-economic dilemma, not as a military crisis, seeking to preserve unity while avoiding choices that could collapse European industry or split member states.

3.2.2. NATO

NATO shifted decisively into operational mode. The alliance declared the situation a "game changer" following Russian nuclear signaling and moved toward rapid troop redeployment. European forces were repositioned to replace US units deployed to Korea and Japan, illustrating NATO's attempt to globalize its force posture. NATO also proposed building a joint "cognitive command" structure to integrate deterrence,

information warfare, and cyber operations across both theatres. This move represented NATO's conceptual expansion beyond traditional territorial defense into global strategic competition. The alliance framed its role as providing both deterrence and offensive capability if required. Strategically, NATO's considerations focused on maintaining credibility, managing escalation risks, and ensuring that its response was visible enough to deter adversaries without triggering direct nuclear confrontation.

3.2.3. Taiwan

Taiwan's Move 2 actions reflected a shift from narrative diplomacy to survival and resistance. Taiwan organized international press conferences, appealed directly to G7 partners, and framed the crisis in humanitarian terms, including refugee and civilian protection. Taiwan also implemented maritime checks and attempted to challenge the blockade diplomatically and practically. Military actions included improving air defense, securing critical infrastructure, and preparing missile-related countermeasures. Taiwan's strategic logic centered on internationalization: making the crisis morally and politically costly for China while sustaining domestic resilience. Taiwan explicitly sought external military and economic support, emphasizing democratic values and international law. The underlying concern was that prolonged isolation under blockade would undermine both military capacity and civilian morale.

3.2.4. Japan

Japan moved toward operational engagement in response to the quarantine. It coordinated with the US and ROK on escorting shipping, deployed missile defense systems, and prepared for potential PLAN inspection challenges. Japan interpreted the quarantine as a de facto blockade and therefore as a direct security threat. At the same time, Tokyo emphasized civilian evacuation and legal framing, seeking to justify any future actions as protection of commercial shipping rather than military intervention. Japan thus became the most forward-leaning regional actor, treating the quarantine as an unacceptable transformation of the status quo.

3.2.5. The Republic of Korea

South Korea escalated cautiously but more visibly than in Move 1. It activated missile defense systems, shared ISR intelligence with Japan and Taiwan, and prepared to support US-led operations to break the Chinese blockade. Seoul also made civilian aircraft available for evacuation of Korean nationals from Taiwan. Strategically, South Korea sought to demonstrate alliance solidarity while minimizing direct provocation of China. The Korean role was primarily supportive and logistical rather than offensive. The underlying concern remained economic retaliation and the danger of being drawn into a conflict not directly related to the Korean Peninsula.

3.2.6. United Kingdom

The UK became one of the most operationally assertive European actors. London coordinated with EU partners on sanctions and mobilized naval assets for deployment to the Indo-Pacific. It supported freedom of navigation operations and explicitly backed efforts to break the blockade around Taiwan. The UK also intensified intelligence sharing and prepared for evacuation operations. Strategically, the UK positioned itself as a global security provider, aligning tightly with the US and reinforcing its post-Brexit “Global Britain” identity. Unlike Germany or South Korea, the UK showed few signs of restraint, emphasizing deterrence through presence and action.

3.2.7. United States

The US escalated across all domains. In Move 2, the United States shifted decisively into system-level crisis leadership following intelligence of Russian troop mobilization, nuclear deployments in DPRK, and China’s formal quarantine announcement. The US coordinated alliance responses across both theatres, repositioned naval and missile defense assets, and prepared for potential operations to challenge the Chinese inspection regime. At the same time, the US managed diplomatic escalation by coordinating G7 and NATO messaging, evacuation planning, and sanctions discussions. The US treated the quarantine not as a symbolic act but as a strategic coercion campaign aimed at reshaping global trade and alliance behavior. However, even at this stage, US actions emphasized deterrence and alliance management over immediate military confrontation, reflecting the nuclear risks explicitly signaled by Beijing. The US thus acted primarily as a crisis integrator, balancing military readiness with escalation control.

3.2.8. The Netherlands

The Netherlands focused on maritime law, trade security, and civilian protection. Dutch forces were prepared to escort shipping, coordinate with NATO navies, and ensure freedom of navigation. The Netherlands also emphasized protecting Dutch citizens in Asia and strengthening port security at home. Strategically, the Dutch framed their actions in terms of legal legitimacy and economic stability, reflecting their identity as a trading state. Their role remained supportive but operationally engaged, particularly in maritime coalitions.

3.2.9. Germany

The German Chancellor shifted from political caution to reluctant coercion. Germany supported sanctions, evacuation plans, and business summits aimed at managing economic fallout. Berlin focused on protecting German citizens, stabilizing markets, and reinforcing sanctions against Russia. Strategically, the Chancellor remained deeply concerned about domestic economic costs and social stability. Germany’s response

emphasized crisis management, economic governance, and alliance coordination rather than military leadership.

The German FM pursued an activist diplomatic agenda, denouncing Russian proposals, engaging with Baltic states, and promoting European business coordination. The FM framed the crisis as requiring European unity and economic resilience, particularly in critical industries. Germany supported evacuation and sanctions but remained hesitant about direct military escalation. The strategic logic emphasized preserving European autonomy, avoiding dependency on US decisions, and ensuring that Germany remained a central diplomatic actor rather than a subordinate partner.

3.2.10. Poland

Poland reacted almost exclusively to the Russian escalation. Following intelligence about 200,000 Russian troops and nuclear deployments, Poland mobilized territorial defense, raised readiness across all provinces, and prepared border fortifications, including mining and infrastructure denial along the Belarus frontier. Poland also cut rail links to China via Belarus, effectively disrupting China–EU land trade. Strategically, Poland interpreted the dual crisis as confirmation that Russia remained the primary existential threat and acted accordingly. While Taiwan and China remained secondary in operational terms, Poland still emerged as one of the most militarized and escalation-ready European actors.

3.2.11. The Philippines

The Philippines shifted from monitoring to direct participation. Manila joined US-led efforts to enforce quarantine lines and evacuate Filipino migrant workers from Taiwan. It advocated ASEAN coordination and was prepared to host allied forces. The Philippines emphasized protecting regional shipping lanes and preventing Chinese military activity in Philippine waters. Strategically, Manila framed itself as a frontline Indo-Pacific stakeholder whose security was inseparable from Taiwan's fate. The Philippines balanced alliance loyalty with a strong concern for civilian protection and migrant workers.

4. LESSONS LEARNED AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. LESSON 1:

THE ABSENCE OF US CRM EXPORT CONTROLS REVEALS A SYSTEMATIC BLIND SPOT IN ECONOMIC WARFARE

Although the idea of the United States halting exports of critical raw materials (CRMs) is strategically central to any long-war scenario, this logic was only weakly reflected in the simulation. The US player in Move 2 adopted a clear war-preparatory posture, including emergency declarations, force redeployment, sanctions coordination, and alliance management, but did not utilize any explicit geo-economic instruments related to CRMs. At the same time, European actors, including the European Council and the governments of Germany and the Netherlands, repeatedly highlighted economic fragility, industrial disruption, and energy vulnerability as key constraints on escalation. However, these concerns functioned as reasons for restraint rather than as triggers for pre-emptive economic measures. The closest analogue to CRM weaponization was Poland's decision to cut rail connectivity through Belarus, indirectly affecting China-EU supply chains, but even this was framed in security rather than commercial terms. Overall, the simulation demonstrates that while players intuitively recognize the importance of industrial preparedness for prolonged conflict, they remain strongly biased toward military and sanctions-based escalation, underestimating the centrality of supply chains. This suggests that economic statecraft—especially in the CRM domain—is structurally under-integrated into crisis decision-making, even among highly informed policy experts.

4.2. LESSON 2:

THE EU'S FAILURE TO SANCTION CHINA OR USE THE ACI REFLECTS DEEP STRUCTURAL RELUCTANCE TO SECURITIZE ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE

One of the most consistent findings of the simulation is the EU's complete avoidance of coercive economic tools against China. Across both Move 1 and Move 2, the European Council, German Chancellor, German Foreign Minister, and Dutch players focused sanctions almost exclusively on Russia, even as China imposed a blockade on Taiwan. No actor proposed using the EU's Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI), despite it being explicitly designed for precisely such scenarios (Gehrke and Oertel 2025). Instead, European responses to China consisted of regulatory measures (such as the Dutch TikTok ban), diplomatic signaling, and symbolic naval activities. This behavior closely mirrors real-world EU strategic culture, in which China is framed as a "partner, competitor, and systemic rival," but rarely viewed as a direct security threat. The simulation thus reveals a structural asymmetry: Europe rhetorically supports Taiwan and the rules-based order, but remains unwilling to incur the economic and political costs of confronting China materially. In effect, the EU behaves as a geopolitical actor in discourse, but as a trade bloc in practice. This gap severely limits Europe's credibility as a security provider in Indo-Pacific contingencies.

4.3. LESSON 3: JAPAN EMERGED AS THE ONLY NON-US ACTOR CONSISTENTLY BEHAVING LIKE A FRONTLINE MILITARY POWER

Japan's behavior across both rounds stands out as the most operationally realistic among Indo-Pacific actors. In Move 1, Japan rapidly mobilized the Self-Defense Forces, intensified intelligence sharing with the US and the Philippines, and conducted joint exercises in maritime and air domains. In Move 2, it escalated further by preparing anti-missile deployments, escorting shipping, activating US bases on Japanese territory, and discussing fleet movements toward Taiwan. Unlike European actors, Japan did not rely primarily on symbolic gestures or regulatory tools, but treated the Taiwan contingency as an immediate military problem. This aligns closely with Japan's real-world strategic doctrine, which increasingly frames Taiwan's security as inseparable from Japan's own (Shetler-Jones 2025). At the same time, the simulation underplayed domestic political and constitutional constraints that would complicate such rapid militarization in reality. Nevertheless, Japan's consistent readiness to absorb risk, commit forces, and integrate tightly with US operations positions it as the most credible regional security actor after the United States. The exercise thus confirms Japan's emerging role as the keystone of deterrence in the Western Pacific.

4.4. LESSON 4: SOUTH KOREA'S HEDGING BEHAVIOR SUPPORTS SKEPTICISM ABOUT ITS PARTICIPATION IN HIGH-RISK TAIWAN OPERATIONS

The simulation provides strong evidence that South Korea would be a reluctant and conditional participant in any Taiwan-related military coalition. In Move 1, the ROK player explicitly avoided naval involvement, prioritizing humanitarian measures, diplomatic engagement, and evacuation planning. Even in Move 2, when the crisis escalated, South Korea focused on missile defense, ISR intelligence sharing, and providing civilian aircraft for evacuation, rather than committing naval assets to blockade-breaking operations. Only at a late stage did the ROK consider providing operational support to the US-led efforts. This behavior reflects real-world structural constraints: South Korea's deep economic interdependence with China, persistent threat from North Korea, and domestic sensitivity to regional escalation (Toh and Jo 2025; Cho 2021). Compared to Japan, South Korea behaved as a cautious hedger rather than a frontline ally. While supportive of US leadership in principle, Seoul's actions suggest it would seek to minimize direct exposure to combat risks in a Taiwan scenario. The simulation, therefore, supports skepticism about the extent to which South Korea could be relied upon for sustained high-risk military operations in the Western Pacific.

4.5. LESSON 5: THE US PULLING EUROPEAN NAVIES INTO THE INDO-PACIFIC EXPOSES EUROPE'S STRUCTURAL UNPREPAREDNESS FOR GLOBAL NAVAL WARFARE

In Move 2, the US effectively treated Europe as a secondary theater, redeploying forces to Asia and relying on allies—especially the UK—to contribute naval capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. The UK responded by mobilizing assets and supporting efforts to break the blockade around Taiwan. Germany discussed a freedom-of-navigation operation but could offer only a single vessel, while the Netherlands focused on regional escort missions. This distribution of responses highlights a stark imbalance: only the UK behaves like a genuine global naval power, while most European states lack the capacity or political readiness to operate meaningfully outside the Euro-Atlantic. The US logic—Europe faces a land war, Asia is the decisive theatre—forces Europeans into an impossible strategic choice between defending their own continent and contributing to systemic competition with China (Simón and Fiott 2025). The simulation suggests that Europe's naval scarcity is not merely a resource problem, but a conceptual one: European security planning remains territorially bounded, while US strategy remains more global. In a real two-theater war, this mismatch would generate severe tensions within alliances and operational incoherence.

4.6. LESSON 6: GERMANY'S LACK OF NAVAL POWER IS NOT MERELY RHETORICAL—IT IS REVEALED BY THE GAMEPLAY

The US remark, “you don't have a navy,” directed at the German player, is strongly supported by Germany's behavior in the simulation. In both rounds, Germany focused on diplomacy, hosting business summits, planning evacuations, and coordinating sanctions, but made no meaningful military contributions in the maritime domain. The proposed freedom of navigation operation in the Taiwan Strait was quickly reduced to a single ship, underscoring the symbolic rather than operational nature of German naval engagement. Germany's security role remained overwhelmingly civilian, encompassing economic governance, alliance coordination, and domestic crisis management. This pattern reflects Germany's real-world strategic identity as a “civilian power” that leads through regulation and diplomacy rather than force projection (Wunderlich and Luo 2024). The simulation thus confirms a structural reality: despite its economic weight and political leadership within Europe, Germany is not a military security provider in global crises (Ulatowski 2024). This gap severely limits Germany's credibility in Indo-Pacific security discourse and reinforces its dependence on US and UK military capabilities.

4.7. LESSON 7: EUROPEAN FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION OPERATIONS FUNCTION MORE AS LEGITIMACY THEATRICALS THAN STRATEGIC LEVERAGE

Germany's proposal to conduct a freedom of navigation operation in the Taiwan Strait illustrates a broader European pattern of symbolic military signaling. While normatively consistent with support for international law and maritime freedom, the operation was immediately scaled down to a single vessel, rendering it strategically negligible. Similar patterns appeared in Dutch and British behavior, where maritime deployments were framed more as demonstrations of alignment than as serious attempts to alter the balance of power. The simulation suggests that European FONOPs serve primarily as political communication tools, aimed at reinforcing normative positions and alliance solidarity, rather than as instruments of deterrence or coercion (van Willigen and Blarel 2024). At the same time, these actions carry real escalation risks, especially given China's sensitivity to symbolic challenges in its near seas (Przychodniak 2024). The asymmetry between political intent and military capacity creates a paradox: Europe engages in high-visibility actions that provoke strategic responses, yet lacks the means to manage their consequences. In this sense, European naval signaling operates in a space between diplomacy and warfare, but without sufficient material backing to be strategically decisive.

4.8. LESSON 8: POLAND'S CLOSURE OF THE BELARUS BORDER REVEALS EUROPE'S STRONGEST, YET UNDERAPPRECIATED, GEO-ECONOMIC WEAPON

Poland's decision in Move 2 to close the Belarus border and halt rail imports from China stands out as one of the most strategically consequential actions in the entire exercise. Unlike symbolic naval deployments or regulatory bans, this move directly targeted the physical infrastructure underpinning China-EU connectivity, effectively disrupting one of the European nodes of the Belt and Road Initiative (Sapio and Kość 2025). By acting at a logistical chokepoint, Poland unintentionally demonstrated where Europe's real structural leverage lies not in military power, but in control over trade corridors, ports, and transport networks. This action had immediate systemic implications for European industry, Chinese exporters, and global supply chains. However, it also exposed major risks: economic self-harm, disproportionate retaliation against Poland, and the need for EU-level coordination to prevent fragmentation. The simulation suggests that infrastructure control may be Europe's most potent form of economic statecraft, yet it remains politically under-theorized and institutionally underprepared. Poland's move thus reveals both the potential and the danger of geo-economic escalation in a two-theater crisis.

4.9. LESSON 9: THE SIMULATION CONFIRMS EUROPE'S STRATEGIC PARALYSIS CAUSED BY DEPENDENCE ON CRM

Throughout both rounds, European actors repeatedly acknowledged that sanctions on Chinese critical raw materials would collapse EU industry within months. This fear strongly shaped behavior: the European Council, Germany, and the Netherlands all treated economic stability as a binding constraint on strategic action (see Leichthammer 2025). However, no player attempted to mitigate this vulnerability through stockpiling, diversification, or pre-emptive industrial planning. Instead, dependence on CRMs functioned as an implicit veto on any serious confrontation with China. The result is a form of strategic paralysis: Europe understands its exposure but lacks the political willingness to address it. This creates a structural deterrence effect in favor of China, which can coerce European states without deploying military force. The simulation thus reveals a critical contradiction in the discourse on European strategic autonomy. While the EU aspires to be a geopolitical actor, its current industrial model renders it economically disarmed in major-power competition. Without structural reform of supply chains and industrial policy, Europe's security ambitions will remain fundamentally constrained by material dependencies.

4.10. LESSON 10: THE US-LED BOMBING OF THE HOUTHIS REFLECTS PENTAGON LOGIC MORE THAN US POLITICAL REALITY

In Move 2, the US player initiated bombing operations against the Houthis in the Red Sea, framing it as necessary for protecting global shipping and alliance credibility. European players largely accepted this leadership role without contestation. While militarily plausible, this behavior neglects a crucial real-world constraint: US domestic politics. As reflected in contemporary debates (e.g., JD Vance's critique; Sentner 2025), the Red Sea crisis does not significantly harm US economic interests and is increasingly perceived as a European problem. The gameplay thus failed to adequately incorporate electoral incentives, public opinion, or isolationist tendencies in US politics. This creates a systematic bias toward overestimating the US willingness to sustain costly global operations that do not directly affect core national interests. The exercise, therefore, captures US military logic accurately, but underestimates the growing political constraints on American global policing.

4.11. LESSON 11: THE ABSENCE OF MALACCA STRAIT ENERGY WARFARE REVEALS THEATER-BASED RATHER THAN SYSTEMS-BASED THINKING

One of the most striking omissions in the simulation is the lack of any serious discussion of the Malacca Strait as a strategic energy chokepoint. Despite its central importance for China's oil and gas imports, no player proposed coordinated efforts to disrupt or control this route (Kumar and Vellore 2025). European actors remained focused on Taiwan and Russia as

geographically bounded theatres, while ignoring the systemic economic dimension of maritime warfare. This reflects a deeper cognitive bias: players conceptualized conflict spatially rather than structurally, treating it as a dyad of regional crises rather than as a global economic system shock. In reality, control over energy flows would be far more decisive than symbolic naval presence in the Taiwan Strait. The simulation thus underestimates the extent to which modern great-power war is fundamentally about logistics, trade, and resource flows. This omission suggests that even expert policy communities struggle to think in fully systemic terms when confronted with complex multi-theater crises.

4.12. LESSON 12: THE IMPLICIT US ULTIMATUM LOGIC REVEALS ALLIANCE POWER ASYMMETRY WITHOUT MAKING IT POLITICALLY EXPLICIT

While no player explicitly articulated a US ultimatum—“send your navies to Asia or lose US protection in Europe”—the underlying logic was clearly present. In Move 2, the US prioritized the Indo-Pacific theater, redeployed forces accordingly, and relied on allies such as the UK and Poland to maintain deterrence in Europe. European actors, especially Poland, displayed acute anxiety about US commitment, while simultaneously lacking the capacity to operate independently. This reveals a structural asymmetry within NATO: the US controls escalation across the theater, while Europeans depend on US decisions for their own security (Dunn and Weber 2025). The ultimatum logic remains implicit because making it explicit would politically destabilize the alliance. Nevertheless, the simulation shows that alliance solidarity is increasingly conditional and transactional (Bergmann 2025). In a real two-theater war, this dynamic could force Europeans into strategic choices they are institutionally and politically unprepared to make, potentially accelerating debates about European strategic autonomy, nuclear deterrence, and post-American security architectures.

4.13. LESSON 13: TAIWAN'S APPEAL TO INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS REFLECTS NORMATIVE REALISM BUT INSTITUTIONAL IMPOSSIBILITY

Taiwan's repeated efforts to involve international institutions, including proposals for inspections and humanitarian framing, reflect a highly realistic strategy of norm entrepreneurship. Taiwan consistently sought legitimacy through global rules, transparency, and civilian protection, positioning itself as a responsible democratic actor (Abram and Menet 2025). However, the simulation did not seriously engage with the legal constraints imposed by Taiwan's exclusion from the UN system. Bodies such as the IAEA or UN agencies operate through state membership and voting procedures in which Taiwan lacks formal standing, and the PRC retains veto power (Drun and Glaser 2022). This creates a fundamental gap between normative aspiration and institutional feasibility. While Taiwan's strategy is morally and politically coherent, it is structurally blocked by existing global governance arrangements. The simulation thus reveals a core paradox of Taiwan's international position.

The more Taipei relies on international institutions for protection, the more it encounters their exclusionary logic. This limits the practical utility of norm-based strategies in high-intensity crises, even when they are widely supported in principle.

4.14. SUMMARY

This simulation underscored a simple but uncomfortable reality: a two-theater contingency would not arrive as a discrete “Taiwan crisis” or a standalone “Baltic scare.” Rather, it would transpire as a coordinated pressure campaign designed to exploit Europe’s internal divisions, punish hesitation, and force trade-offs faster than democratic systems can absorb them. In Move 1, coercion operated below the threshold of open war—through cyber disruptions, sabotage of energy shipments, supply-chain restrictions, and influence operations. By Move 2, the coercion became explicit: China institutionalized an inspection regime around Taiwan while Russia paired military mobilization with energy blackmail aimed at fracturing EU and NATO unity. The strategic objective was not territorial gain alone; it was to collapse alliance cohesion and normalize political capitulation as the “least costly” option.

The policy implication is clear: Europe cannot treat the Indo-Pacific as a value-added-on while treating Russia as the only security problem. The EU and NATO should operationalize a dual-theater planning baseline now. First, EU and NATO allies should establish pre-agreed crisis playbooks that integrate sanctions, export controls, cyber attribution procedures, and strategic communications—so that escalation does not begin with improvisation. Second, the EU should treat critical raw materials and energy security as deterrence issues: accelerate stockpiling, supplier diversification, and industrial continuity planning, and clarify *ex ante* what coercive instruments (including the ACI) would be triggered by Chinese economic warfare. Third, European governments should prepare for Beijing’s “selective corridor” diplomacy by developing joint evacuation protocols and a common position rejecting market-access inducements tied to political compliance. Fourth, NATO should institutionalize coordination with key Indo-Pacific partners on maritime security, logistics, and resilience—without assuming that Europe can generate meaningful naval mass in Asia. Instead, Europe’s comparative advantage lies in economic statecraft, infrastructure control, and sustained support functions that make US and allied deterrence credible.

Finally, the simulation reinforced that credibility is cumulative: deterrence fails when democracies wait to coordinate until after the first shock. Europe’s task is not to mirror US power projection, but to deny adversaries their preferred pathway—fragmentation, paralysis, and coerced neutrality.

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