

CMS Outlook: The Two-Front Cold War Has Begun – How Should We Handle It?



Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 314 works alongside their Navy counterparts to launch F-35C Lightning II through the rain on the flight deck of USS Abraham Lincoln as an integrated part of Carrier Strike Group 3. U.S. 3rd Fleet works together with U.S. allies and partners to advance freedom of navigation, the rule of law and other principles that underpin security for the Indo-Pacific region. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / 1st Lt. Charles Allen*

A two-front Cold War has begun, and history seems to repeat. Putin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and partnership with China's President Xi mirrors Kim Il-sung's invasion of South Korea, which was only possible due to Stalin and Mao's blessing.

Aggressors in both invasions badly miscalculated the opponents' resolve and the free world's swift response. China itself is also a major aggressor. In addition to continued territorial disputes and military base buildups in South China Sea, China is predicted to resolve its "unfinished business" with Taiwan by invading the island nation by 2027. One major difference is that there is no sign of a China-Russia split today, as Xi declines to condemn Russia and is reportedly considering support for Russia's invasion. Contemplating the history that Mao's disappointment over Stalin's decision to not participate in the Korean War exacerbated the Sino-Soviet split, which the United States took advantage of by focusing only on one autocratic great power. The current crisis in Ukraine, and unified autocracies, pose a critical implication to the U.S.: How are we going to fight a two-front Cold War?

Without a division between the two autocratic, revisionist and

nuclear-armed adversaries, the two-front Cold War in Europe and Indo-Pacific will be “difficult” and “expensive,” as the White House Indo-Pacific policy coordinator Kurt Campbell explains. For that reason, numerous politicians and defense experts asserted Washington must prioritize Indo-Pacific over Europe. Due to its geopolitical and strategic implications, Indo-Pacific is indeed the most consequential region to the United States. Stretching from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific covers over 60% of global GDP, 64% of global population, 65% of the world’s oceans and 50% of global trade traffic. To prevent coercion by any of the states that are seeking national priorities over international law, the U.S. government has been supporting partners and allies in the region by actively reaching economic partnerships and conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations and joint military exercises. Nonetheless, China’s aggressive resurgence continues. China’s ambition and intentions are increasingly evident with its military modernization to have a “world-class” military by 2049, featuring 400 ships and Type 004 nuclear aircraft carriers. Furthermore, China continues territorial contestations with democratic nations in the region while gradually expanding military ties and pursuing naval base establishments in strategically critical nations. Even in the face of the largest of the U.S. Navy fleets, the 7th Fleet, and the only continuously forward deployed carrier strike group, CSG-5 in the Indo-Pacific theater, China continues to expand.

However, picking one important region over the other will only cause a strategic catastrophe. American interests in Europe are too significant to be benched. It is the European Union, not Asia, that is the largest trade and investment partner. Furthermore, European allies have been with the U.S. at the forefront in advocating for the human rights and democratic values against Chinese actions. For example, the EU extended its human rights sanctions against China in November 2021, targeting private entities and government officials

responsible for genocide of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and political oppression in Hong Kong. Also, the EU most lately pressed China to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, aiding the United States' two-front Cold War in both theaters. Accordingly, the European allies are by far the most important partners for Washington in addressing a wide spectrum of trade and human rights policy issues against Beijing.

In the wake of the invasion in Ukraine, increasingly more European allies are taking up the mantle. Although hesitant initially, Germany announced their plan to raise defense spending to more than 2% of their GDP, exceeding the NATO pledge. This would make Germany a country with the third highest military spending (\$113 billion) after the U.S. (\$778 billion) and China (\$252 billion). The prime ministers of Sweden and Denmark also educated their public about the need to increase defense spending in the light of the invasion, and Finnish President Sauli Niinistö discussed possible membership with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recently. Also, the NATO Response Force has been activated for the first time and deployed to the Eastern Flank to protect Allies near Russia and Ukraine. Ironically, Russia's action not only failed to achieve a quick triumph in Ukraine but also triggered the NATO allies to renew their Cold War-era commitment.

Despite the European allies' increased awareness and arms buildup, it will still not be enough to counter the autocratic aggression. Ukrainians under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are gallantly fighting the invaders with American Stinger and Javelin man-portable air defense systems, but they are completely outgunned on the Black Sea. Russian amphibious battle groups as well as other vessels are approaching Ukraine's southern coast and Russia has already seized Mariupol, Ukraine's port city. As former Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa Adm. James Foggo analyzes, "the balance is tipped grossly in favor of the Russians," and this

will enable the Russians to dominate the maritime domain in and around Ukraine. Georgetown University professor Matthew Kroenig suggests the U.S. Army prioritize Europe while the Navy focuses on the Indo-Pacific. While this is a valid point, as it is critical to continue to reinforce the eastern flank with land forces, one must not be mistaken to forget the strategic importance of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. It is not only Ukraine but also Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Georgia – three NATO members and two prospective members – that encircles the waterway. We remain stronger together.

The challenge is clear. As the Center for Naval Analyses' Michael Kofman depicted, China is a pacing threat and Russia is a persistent threat. The two-front Cold War is placing tremendous amount of pressure on not only the U.S. but also its allies and partners in both theaters. Unlike the past, the two great power competitors have formed a united front and are waging military, diplomatic, and cultural warfare against the Free World. Also, as history points out, allies lose confidence and attempt to seek alternatives when we exhibit bad performance in the global stage. The bungled U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and discount of alliances in the past administrations are good examples.

To secure favorable position and ultimately win the new Cold War, the United States must continue to reinforce the eastern flank and supply more capabilities to NATO allies to ensure they maintain freedom of navigation in the Black Sea; encourage NATO allies and other European allies to follow the example of Germany, fulfilling the commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defense; expand the naval presence in Indo-Pacific to counter China's plan to acquire 400 ships, which will exceed the size of U.S. Navy unless we fund a 500-ship Navy; and reaffirm to the allies we are committed to both regions through active participation of multilateral military and trade initiatives.