

Managing cross-theatre escalation: perceptions, flashpoints, and constraints on strategic cooperation in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific

A planning toolkit for Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic cooperation to prevent and manage crises

July 2026

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This research was sponsored by the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme under grant id. SPS. MYP. G7935. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of NATO, the European Leadership Network, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, or the other institutions mentioned in this report.

Executive summary

This report is the first in a three-part series produced under the NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) project: *A planning toolkit for Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic cooperation to prevent and manage crises*. Whereas the subsequent reports focus on practical recommendations for strengthening institutional cooperation and wider state-to-state cross-theatre coordination among NATO and the Indo-Pacific 4 (IP4; Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea (ROK)), this report maps the strategic environment within which such cooperation must operate. Given its purpose as the analytical foundation for the wider series, the report examines the structures, actors, flashpoints, and constraints shaping cross-theatre escalation dynamics across both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

Security relations between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions are increasingly framed through the language of strategic indivisibility. Strategic documents, such as the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, explicitly recognise that developments in the Indo-Pacific can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security, marking a shift toward a more globalised understanding of security interdependence.¹ Yet, while this framing has gained traction, what indivisibility means in practice and what it requires for meaningful strategic cooperation remains underdeveloped. The Strategic Concept stops short of specifying how such linkages translate into escalation dynamics in practice. In this context, much of the wider policy debate continues to treat cross-theatre escalation as a function of simultaneity or geographic linkage, where crises occurring at the same time in different regions are expected to interact and reinforce one another.²

The discussions of the working group on cross-theatre crisis dynamics and strategic cooperation, conducted between November 2025 and April 2026, suggest a more nuanced perspective. Cross-theatre escalation is not primarily driven by geography or simultaneity, but by how events are perceived, interpreted, sequenced, and acted upon under conditions of uncertainty. In this context, a key finding is that some of the most consequential escalation risks may arise as much from the perception that developments across theatres are strategically connected as from objectively coordinated developments themselves. Perception can therefore be as consequential as material reality, while the converse risk also holds, since failing to recognise actual coordination among China, Russia, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) would carry dangers of its own. This creates a recurring analytical and policy challenge: distinguishing between opportunistic parallel actions and deliberate strategic coordination, particularly in relation to China, Russia, and DPRK.

To analyse this problem, this report maps the evolving environment for cross-theatre cooperation through four interrelated lenses: structures, actors, flashpoints, and constraints. It finds that while the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are increasingly interconnected, this indivisibility remains asymmetrical, shaped by divergent threat perceptions, alliance expectations, domestic political constraints, and differing interpretations of escalation dynamics across regions.

The report further argues that the most meaningful contribution of cross-theatre cooperation may lie less in crisis-time intervention, and more in shaping the strategic environment before crises

emerge. This includes developing routinised habits of consultation and intelligence-sharing; building shared frameworks for interpreting escalation indicators across theatres; strengthening industrial resilience and supply-chain coordination; improving pre-agreed signalling and crisis communication practices; and preserving credible de-escalatory pathways, such as crisis communication channels, hotlines, multilateral formats, and non-escalatory public messaging toward adversaries. The latter measures can create and broaden opportunities for face-saving restraint under conditions of heightened tension.

Rather than proposing entirely new institutional architectures, the report identifies recurring crisis-management challenges and broader analytical implications that inform the wider policy recommendations developed in the companion reports, *Institutional cooperation between NATO and IP4* and *State-to-state cooperation between NATO and IP4 member states*. The report is organised around four interrelated dimensions of the strategic environment: structures, actors, flashpoints, and constraints. These categories are used to map the principal factors shaping cross-theatre escalation dynamics and strategic cooperation across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, providing the analytical foundation for the recommendations developed in the subsequent reports.

I. Introduction: from indivisibility to interpretation

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, intensifying tensions over Taiwan, deepening China-Russia alignment, and the emergence of North Korea as a more consequential actor in both theatres have sharpened debate over the relationship between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security. These developments have contributed to a growing sense that the two regions are no longer analytically separable, and that crises in one theatre may have direct implications for stability in the other. Yet, while references to 'cross-theatre' dynamics have become increasingly common, the analytical foundations underpinning this concept remain uneven. The existing debate also pays little attention to the implications of finite Alliance resources at a time when the United States, in particular, faces growing questions about how to allocate attention and capacity across Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific simultaneously. In many cases, indivisibility is invoked descriptively rather than analytically. It signals that linkages exist but does not specify how they operate, under what conditions they become consequential, or how they shape escalation dynamics in practice.

Recent developments illustrate both the reality and the complexity of cross-theatre linkages. Russia's war in Ukraine has revealed how developments in one theatre can generate strategic consequences far beyond their immediate geography. In this context, South Korea has emerged as a critical supplier of munitions and defence-industrial support to European partners, while Japan has provided substantial financial and humanitarian assistance, ranking among the largest supporters of Ukraine outside Europe. China's economic and political backing has, by contrast, contributed to Russia's ability to sustain its war effort.³ Most strikingly, North Korea's provision of military support to Russia has made the DPRK a factor in both theatres simultaneously, collapsing what were once treated as distinct strategic spaces.⁴

At the same time, these dynamics are not unidirectional. European naval deployments in the Indo-Pacific, expanding NATO-IP4 cooperation, and growing bilateral and minilateral engagement between European and Indo-Pacific actors reflect a broader shift toward cross-regional strategic interaction. Yet despite an increasingly shared interest in mutual security and strategic stability, greater interaction does not necessarily produce greater coherence. Instead, it often exposes underlying differences in threat perception, strategic culture, political priorities, and expectations regarding escalation management and burden-sharing across regions.

A working group of senior Track-II Euro-Atlantic and IP4 experts met between November 2025 and April 2026 to tease out and better understand the dynamics shaping cross-theatre crises and strategic cooperation. Through a series of structured discussions and scenario-based exercises, the group examined how developments in one theatre may influence perceptions, signalling, and decision-making in another, and vice versa. Across these discussions, one conclusion emerged with particular clarity: cross-theatre escalation is not simply a material or geographic phenomenon. Instead, it is an interpretive one. Whether events in one theatre generate consequences in another depends not only on objective developments, but on how those developments are read, signalled, sequenced, and responded to under conditions of uncertainty.

This report builds on that insight. Its purpose is not simply to map cross-theatre linkages, but to explain how those linkages are constructed in practice, and how they shape the risks of escalation and the possibilities for cooperation.

II. Structures: strategic indivisibility with asymmetry

The Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are increasingly linked, though not in ways captured by simplistic notions of a single, unified strategic theatre. Rather than constituting a coherent geopolitical space, the relationship between the two regions is better understood as one of indivisibility with asymmetry: they are connected through shared actors, signalling effects, alliance politics, and strategic interactions, yet these dynamics are interpreted and operationalised through distinct regional lenses.

Across the scenarios explored in this working group, the United States functioned as the main transmission mechanism linking the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific. This reflects not only US material and economic capabilities, but Washington's enduring role in shaping allied expectations, adversary calculations, and broader cross-theatre signalling dynamics.⁵ Ambiguity in US signalling, whether related to force allocation, consultation processes, or crisis prioritisation, rarely remains confined to a single region. Instead, it is interpreted simultaneously across both theatres, often in ways that amplify uncertainty and reshape perceptions of risk. The link is in some cases territorial as well as interpretive. France and the United Kingdom hold overseas territories in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, among them New Caledonia and French Polynesia. In that context, a threat to one of these could oblige a European response outside the scope of NATO Article 5, a factor that helps explain French force structure in the region. The deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defences in South Korea illustrates the interpretive dimension of these cross-theatre dynamics. Seoul and Washington treated the system as defensive, while Beijing read its radar as a strategic threat and imposed economic retaliation. More recent discussions of relocating THAAD assets toward the Middle East have unsettled Seoul's perception on the reliability of US commitments.

This dynamic was evident across both crisis scenarios examined by the group. In the Indo-Pacific-centred scenario, a Chinese 'quarantine' of Taiwan, conducted under the guise of extended military exercises and accompanied by growing pressure on commercial shipping, generated questions regarding the extent and sustainability of US and partner responses. Concerns regarding the sustainability of US military operations, the willingness of allies and partners to provide support, and the implications of force-allocation decisions shaped wider perceptions of escalation risk and alliance credibility. By contrast, the Euro-Atlantic-centred scenario examined a Russian battlefield breakthrough in Ukraine, enabled in part by expanded DPRK military support and accompanied by parallel DPRK military signalling in Northeast Asia. In this context, delayed or ambiguous US responses were seen as potentially creating windows of opportunity for actors such as the DPRK to probe thresholds, exploit perceived strategic distraction, or test alliance cohesion.⁶ In both theatres, the significance of US behaviour extended beyond immediate operational questions. What mattered equally was how signals of US commitment, hesitation,

or prioritisation were interpreted by allies and adversaries across regions simultaneously.

At the same time, cross-theatre cooperation is no longer mediated solely through Washington. European engagement in the Indo-Pacific has expanded significantly in recent years through naval deployments, bilateral defence agreements, sanctions coordination, defence-industrial cooperation, and deeper engagement with the IP4. NATO-IP4 interaction has also intensified, alongside the growth of minilateral and issue-specific forms of cooperation linking European and Indo-Pacific actors. These developments point toward a more distributed, though still uneven, landscape of strategic interaction. That distribution is fragile, however. A disruption in the Strait of Hormuz or the Red Sea can quickly absorb European naval and political attention, exposing how external demands on European capacity limit the bandwidth available for sustained Indo-Pacific engagement.

Yet despite growing interaction, this emerging landscape remains constrained by important institutional and political limitations. NATO, while central to Euro-Atlantic security, remains politically bound in its ability to function as a cross-theatre crisis-management actor. Its comparative strengths lie more clearly in consultation, signalling, interoperability, and political coordination than in any direct operational role in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, the IP4 framework has become increasingly relevant as a mechanism for strategic dialogue and political coordination, but remains institutionally thin and lacks the formalised structures associated with traditional alliance arrangements. Moreover, broader multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, were widely viewed as even less responsive under acute crisis conditions.

Perhaps more consequential than formal institutional design, however, is the problem of coordination latency. Neither the Euro-Atlantic nor the Indo-Pacific can be treated as internally cohesive strategic actors. Differences in threat perception, domestic politics, historical experience, strategic culture, and alliance dependence generate friction within regions before coordination across regions even begins. Within Europe, for example, Poland's perception of Russia as an immediate and potentially existential threat, shaped by geographic proximity, historical experience, and the ongoing war in Ukraine, often differs markedly from the more calibrated threat perceptions found among some Western European allies. Poland's defence spending, which has risen above four per cent of GDP alongside a forward military posture, places it on a different footing from states that assess the Russian threat as less immediate. Europe itself, therefore, cannot be treated as strategically monolithic.

Similar divergences exist within the Indo-Pacific, where the IP4 differ in their assessments of China, the DPRK, alliance dependence, escalation risk, and the degree of strategic exposure they are willing to assume in a regional contingency.⁷ These internal differences matter because they shape not only political willingness and response timelines, but also determine how signals, thresholds, and escalation risks are interpreted across regions. Cross-theatre escalation risks arise not simply because theatres are linked. They arise because the actors within each theatre reach decisions at different speeds, work from different assumptions about intent and threat, and hold together with varying degrees of

internal cohesion, so that responses across regions fall out of step with one another. Geography shapes these differences directly, since proximity to a given threat conditions how urgently each actor perceives it and how much risk each will accept in response. This raises a basic question about the foundation on which any shared response can rest. In this sense, asymmetry is not peripheral to cross-theatre dynamics; it is one of their defining structural characteristics.

III. Actors: perceptions, signalling, and strategic interpretation

While structures shape the environment for cooperation, actors shape how that environment is interpreted, contested, and strategically navigated. Across working group engagements, a key analytical insight was that actors matter not only because of their capabilities, but because of the assumptions attached to their behaviour. This dynamic was particularly evident in discussions of China.

China cannot easily be reduced to a fixed role, either stabilising or revisionist. Instead, it emerged throughout the discussions as a pivotal variable whose behaviour could significantly alter escalation pathways depending on context.⁸ Internal factors also shape that behaviour. Successive purges across the PLA Rocket Force and senior figures on the Central Military Commission point to constraints on Chinese military readiness and decision-making that are easily missed when China is treated as a fixed strategic actor. Beijing's approach is likely to be shaped less by rigid alignment choices than by evolving assessments of strategic opportunity, escalation risk, regional stability, and long-term geopolitical advantage. Under certain conditions, China may act as a restraining force, particularly where crises risk uncontrolled escalation or potential nuclear use. Beijing continues to place considerable value on avoiding forms of instability that could threaten economic interests, undermine regional predictability, or generate direct confrontation with the United States.⁹ From this perspective, crisis containment may align with China's broader strategic preference for preserving favourable conditions for long-term competition rather than provoking abrupt systemic disruption. At the same time, periods of Western distraction, alliance friction, or prolonged crisis elsewhere may create incentives for calibrated Chinese opportunism. Rather than overt military escalation, this may take the form of expanded grey-zone activity, selective economic assistance, diplomatic positioning, or calibrated, deniable forms of support designed to increase pressure while preserving ambiguity over intent and responsibility. China's record of economic coercion illustrates this calibrated pressure. Restrictions on Australian barley, wine, and coal in 2020, and pressure on Lithuania in 2021 after the opening of a Taiwanese representative office, show how economic tools can be applied below clear escalation thresholds while leaving intent deniable.

The ambiguity surrounding Chinese behaviour is therefore not incidental but strategically useful to Beijing in many respects. Supply-chain opacity, dispersed commercial actors, and blurred boundaries between state and non-state activity create space for actions that may be strategically consequential while remaining difficult to attribute conclusively.¹⁰ This can complicate deterrence, slow allied consensus-building, and preserve room for calibrated pressure below clear escalation thresholds.

Important regional differences also emerged in how China is framed across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific. Several Indo-Pacific states regard China as an acute, in some cases near-existential, security challenge, yet participants from the region tended to emphasise the complexity of managing a relationship defined at once by geography, economic interdependence, and long-term coexistence. European perspectives more frequently emphasised the implications of Chinese support for Russia and the broader challenge China poses to the European security order. The difference lies more in how the challenge is framed than in the level of concern, since both regions treat China as a central strategic problem. At the same time, relationships between China, Russia, and the DPRK should not automatically be treated as reflecting a coherent or unified strategic bloc. Although these actors may share overlapping interests in constraining US influence and challenging aspects of the existing international order, working group discussions repeatedly highlighted that their strategic priorities, escalation thresholds, regional objectives, and tolerance for risk often differ significantly. In practice, periods of simultaneous pressure across theatres may emerge not through tightly integrated strategic coordination, but through opportunistic alignment, parallel signalling, or the exploitation of perceived Western distraction.

This distinction is analytically important because assumptions of adversary coordination risk overstating the degree of operational alignment among these actors, which may in itself distort escalation assessments.¹¹ Although China and Russia increasingly describe one another as priority strategic partners and emphasise forms of “back-to-back cooperation”,¹² they continue to stop short of defining the relationship as a formal alliance, reflecting enduring limits, asymmetries, and divergences in their respective strategic interests. Indeed, despite the political symbolism surrounding the earlier “no limits”¹³ formulation, subsequent PRC and Russian officials have framed political discourse in more flexible, pragmatic strategic terms rather than in alliance language. China’s conduct reinforces this reading. Beijing has declined to recognise Russia’s annexations of Ukrainian territory and has abstained rather than backed Moscow on several United Nations votes, behaviour that sits awkwardly with assumptions of close alignment. In this context, “their respective interests are not always congruent. Historical tensions among Russia, China and North Korea, including from the Korean War, remain. And China looks warily on the burgeoning Russia–North Korea relationship”.¹⁴

Overestimating coordination and cooperation could therefore encourage unnecessarily escalatory responses, reinforce worst-case thinking, or contribute to self-reinforcing perceptions of encirclement and bloc confrontation. At the same time, the ambiguity surrounding the nature of these relationships complicates crisis management precisely because opportunism, signalling, and genuine coordination can appear difficult to distinguish in real time under conditions of uncertainty. Distinguishing between opportunistic alignment, parallel interests, signalling behaviour, and genuine strategic coordination therefore emerged as a recurring analytical challenge throughout the discussions.

These differing interpretive lenses reinforced one of the working group’s central findings: that cross-theatre escalation dynamics are shaped not only by material developments themselves, but by

how those developments are perceived, interpreted, and politically contextualised across regions. The challenge, moreover, lies not only in the ambiguity of actor behaviour itself, but in the cognitive frames through which that behaviour is interpreted. Perceptions of China, Russia, and other actors are often shaped by pre-existing assumptions that can prove resistant to revision even when new evidence emerges.¹⁵ Such interpretive rigidity can narrow the space for de-escalation, reinforce escalation expectations, and increase the risk of strategic miscalculation.

Similar dynamics emerged in discussions of Russia-DPRK cooperation. Concerns centred on possible technology transfer, operational learning, political signalling, and the implications of expanding military cooperation.¹⁶ Yet caution also persisted against assuming deeper operational coordination than available evidence supports. Once again, the core challenge was interpretive: determining whether observed behaviour reflected opportunism, signalling, limited coordination, or something more strategically integrated.

Across all major actors, a central analytical problem therefore remained: distinguishing opportunistic parallel actions from deliberate strategic coordination under conditions of uncertainty. This distinction is analytically important but, in practice, often difficult to make, particularly during the early stages of a crisis when information is incomplete and pressures for rapid interpretation are greatest. Misreading opportunism as coordination may contribute to premature escalation. Underestimating coordination can lead to delayed or inadequate responses. The challenge is not merely analytical; it sits at the centre of crisis decision-making itself.

IV. Flashpoints as stress tests of cross-theatre dynamics

Rather than treating crises as predictive scenarios, this report approaches flashpoints as stress tests for understanding escalation dynamics, alliance behaviour, and the interpretive pressures that shape cross-theatre decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

The Indo-Pacific-centred scenario examined a Chinese ‘quarantine’ of Taiwan in which extended military exercises gradually evolved into a *de facto* blockade of Taiwan-bound commercial shipping, including European vessels. Rather than focusing on the outbreak of large-scale conflict, the scenario explored the ambiguous space between peace and war, where coercion unfolds incrementally, and decision-makers face growing uncertainty about intent, thresholds, and appropriate responses. Drawing on patterns already visible in contemporary cross-Strait dynamics, the exercise highlighted how gradual escalation can complicate efforts to distinguish routine military activity from deliberate coercion, creating a persistent ‘signal-to-noise’ problem that challenges early warning, alliance coordination, and political decision-making. The military response following the August 2022 Pelosi visit, and the later Joint Sword exercises, show this pattern in practice, as repeated incursions and median-line crossings have gradually normalised activity that once would have registered as a clear escalation. This gradualism matters because it creates uncertainty not only about capability but also about intent.

The main challenge is often not centred on recognising whether military pressure is increasing, but rather determining when a

qualitative shift has occurred and whether that shift reflects signalling, coercion, preparation for escalation, or some combination of all three. Under such conditions, the risk of delayed response, misinterpretation, or inadvertent escalation increases significantly. This threshold ambiguity has a further consequence: incremental pressure that never crosses a clear line can shift the status quo over time, while offering no single moment when a shared response is obviously warranted.

The Euro-Atlantic-centred scenario generated a somewhat different set of escalation pressures. Rather than focusing on the outbreak of a crisis in Northeast Asia, the scenario explored the implications of a major Russian battlefield breakthrough in Ukraine, enabled in part by expanded DPRK military support, and the possibility that a more confident or emboldened DPRK might subsequently seek to demonstrate increased strategic leverage in the Indo-Pacific through missile launches, military demonstrations, coercive signalling, or other provocative actions. The core analytical challenge was not simply the actions themselves, but how they would be interpreted by Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific actors.

Particular attention focused on whether such behaviour should be understood as opportunistic action, coordinated signalling with Moscow, or evidence of a deeper strategic linkage between theatres. The real pattern of North Korean munitions transfers and troop deployments in support of Russian operations offers a concrete instance of this problem; the same activity has been read by some as opportunism and by others as evidence of deeper integration between Pyongyang and Moscow. Discussions revealed significant uncertainty regarding the thresholds at which DPRK actions would be perceived as requiring a broader regional or cross-theatre response. Questions surrounding alliance credibility, domestic political tolerance for escalation, and the signalling implications of US responses featured prominently throughout the exercise, particularly regarding how ambiguity, delayed responses, or perceptions of alliance fragmentation might shape DPRK risk calculations and wider assessments of deterrence credibility. More broadly, the scenario illustrated how uncertainty regarding adversary coordination can itself become a source of escalation pressure, even where evidence of direct operational coordination remains limited.

The Euro-Atlantic-centred scenario reversed the direction of analysis by examining how a crisis originating in Europe might generate strategic consequences in the Indo-Pacific. Against this backdrop, participants were asked to consider the roles Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific states might play in managing the crisis, how cooperation between the two regions could be organised, and the constraints that might limit effective collective action.

The exercise exposed important asymmetries in how crises are interpreted across regions. Indo-Pacific perspectives focused heavily on US signalling, alliance reassurance, and the implications of resource allocation for regional deterrence credibility. Questions emerged regarding whether a prolonged European crisis might constrain the US capacity to respond elsewhere, thereby affecting regional calculations regarding deterrence and escalation. European perspectives, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on burden-sharing, alliance cohesion, domestic political sustainability,

and the extent to which China might seek to exploit, mitigate, or otherwise shape the evolving strategic environment. Taken together, these differences highlighted how the same crisis can generate distinct strategic concerns across regions, even among partners broadly aligned in their security interests.

Taken together, these scenarios demonstrated that cross-theatre escalation does not follow a single or predictable pathway. The Indo-Pacific-centred scenario highlighted how gradual coercion, ambiguity, and contested threshold recognition can generate escalation pressures long before the outbreak of major conflict. By contrast, the Euro-Atlantic-centred scenario illustrated how perceptions of adversary coordination, alliance credibility, and strategic opportunism may generate escalation risks following a major triggering event.

Both scenarios also demonstrated that the strategic significance of developments in one theatre is often mediated by their interpretation elsewhere. Events taking place in one region may alter strategic calculations in another not because they are directly operationally linked, but because they shape perceptions of alliance credibility, political resolve, force availability, and adversary opportunity. Questions surrounding US force allocation, the sustainability of simultaneous deterrence commitments, alliance cohesion, and partners' willingness to absorb political or military risk repeatedly emerged as central variables shaping escalation dynamics across regions. For example, a prolonged crisis in the Euro-Atlantic may generate perceptions in the Indo-Pacific that US strategic attention, military bandwidth, or political focus has become constrained, potentially altering Chinese or DPRK assessments of opportunity and risk. Equally, a major Taiwan contingency could reshape European calculations regarding deterrence credibility, burden-sharing, and vulnerability to opportunistic Russian behaviour.

Considered together, the scenarios suggest that cross-theatre crises are unlikely to arise solely from direct causal spillover. Rather, they become strategically interconnected when developments in one theatre begin to alter assumptions, expectations, and risk calculations in another. In this sense, the principal challenge is not simply managing simultaneous crises, but understanding how perceptions of strategic linkage form and shape subsequent decision-making across regions.

Cross-theatre escalation, therefore, appeared less as a moment of spillover than as a process of strategic reinterpretation. A crisis in one region becomes consequential in another when actors begin to treat it as evidence of something larger: weakening alliance resolve, adversary opportunism, overstretched US capacity, or the emergence of a more coordinated challenge across theatres. The danger is that these interpretations can become self-reinforcing. Once policymakers assume that parallel developments are connected, subsequent signals are more likely to be interpreted through that frame, even when the underlying actions are locally driven, improvised, or only loosely coordinated. The opposite error carries its own dangers, since dismissing actual coordination as coincidence could leave allies exposed to a challenge they have failed to anticipate. The task is therefore one of careful assessment under uncertainty rather than a presumption in either direction. This

matters because escalation pressure does not arise only from what an adversary does, but from what others believe that action reveals about the wider strategic environment. A DPRK missile test during a European crisis, for example, may be interpreted very differently if it occurs after a Russian battlefield success, during visible US force allocation debates, or amid uncertainty about Chinese restraint. Likewise, a Chinese exercise around Taiwan may carry different implications if European governments are simultaneously debating their capacity to deter Russia. In each case, the event itself is only part of the problem. Its escalatory significance depends on the surrounding sequence of actions, the assumptions actors bring to the crisis, and the political meaning attached to timing.

The temporal dimension is therefore decisive. The first risk window comes immediately after a triggering event, when information is incomplete, and decision-makers are under pressure to impose order on ambiguity. In this phase, the main danger is premature interpretation. Actors may move too quickly from observing simultaneity to assuming coordination, or from seeing ambiguity to inferring hostile intent. One participant drew on their experience of an India-Pakistan crisis to illustrate how real-time interpretation can become distorted when information is incomplete, and decisions are taken under significant time pressure.¹⁷ This can lead to signalling intended to reassure allies or deter adversaries, but which others interpret as confirmation that a wider confrontation is taking shape.

A second risk window emerges later, once the initial shock has passed, but strategic uncertainty remains unresolved. This phase may be even more dangerous because it gives adversaries and third parties time to assess whether allied responses are coherent, sustainable, and politically credible. Delayed consultations, uneven public messaging, unresolved questions about force allocation, or visible domestic hesitation can create the impression of strategic distraction. Under these conditions, opportunistic escalation may become more attractive, not because actors are following a pre-planned cross-theatre strategy, but because they perceive a temporary opening created by ambiguity and delay.

This distinction matters for crisis management. The early phase requires mechanisms that reduce misinterpretation and prevent actors from locking prematurely into worst-case assumptions. The latter phase requires sustained coordination, credible signalling, and political coherence so that delay is not mistaken for weakness or division. In both phases, escalation management is not simply about responding to events, but about shaping how those events are interpreted over time.

This temporal distinction adds greater analytical depth to understanding cross-theatre escalation. Crises are not static events, but evolving processes in which interpretation, sequencing, signalling, and timing interact to shape escalation pathways over time. As discussions progressed, the analysis moved increasingly beyond escalation triggers themselves toward questions of de-escalatory design, crisis management, and crisis termination. Effective escalation management requires not only deterrent signalling, but also mechanisms that allow adversaries to step back without incurring unacceptable political, reputational, or strategic costs.

V. Constraints: the limits of cooperation and the dynamics of failure

In this sense, off-ramp mechanisms were not treated as secondary or concessionary measures, but as integral components of escalation management itself. This was particularly important in situations where ambiguity, domestic political pressures, concerns about alliance credibility, and fears of reputational loss may otherwise narrow the political space for restraint or de-escalation. The discussions repeatedly highlighted that crises can become more dangerous precisely when leaders perceive that backing down risks signalling weakness, undermining deterrence credibility, or exposing fractures within alliances. Designing credible pathways for de-escalation, therefore, emerged not as an alternative to deterrence but as a necessary complement to it.

If flashpoints tested the possibilities for cooperation, the discussion of constraints revealed why effective cross-theatre coordination remains so difficult in practice. Material constraints were significant and included military capacity limitations, munitions shortages, supply-chain vulnerabilities, and uneven defence-industrial resilience across both regions. Yet the analysis consistently suggested that political, institutional, and cognitive constraints may be equally consequential in shaping escalation outcomes.

One recurring challenge concerned reliance on the United States for crisis interpretation, intelligence sharing, and signalling coordination. A persistent tendency remains to default to US leadership during crises, particularly regarding intelligence assessment and escalation management. While this reflects longstanding US capabilities and alliance structures, it also creates vulnerabilities if US responses are delayed, internally contested, strategically ambiguous, or interpreted differently across theatres. More broadly, growing uncertainty surrounding the future direction of US foreign policy, including concerns regarding transactional approaches to alliance management, burden-sharing, and crisis bargaining, emerged as an additional source of strategic anxiety across both regions. Questions surrounding consultation, reassurance, and the credibility of US commitments were repeatedly identified as factors likely to shape perceptions of escalation, alliance cohesion, and risk calculations during future cross-theatre crises.

Other constraints were more subtle but no less important. Many coordination mechanisms already exist, but remain insufficiently understood, routinised, or embedded within contemporary cross-theatre planning practices. The example of the Oreshnik ballistic missile pre-notification, a Cold War-era risk-reduction mechanism established between the United States and the Soviet Union, illustrated how legacy arrangements may continue to function effectively while remaining poorly integrated into broader strategic thinking and crisis management planning. In this case, ahead of the November 2024 strike, Russia reportedly provided advance notification of the missile launch into Ukrainian territory to the United States through this channel.¹⁸ While the mechanism itself functioned as intended, discussions highlighted that awareness of its existence, purpose, and implications remained limited outside a relatively small policy and arms-control community.

This raised broader concerns about the erosion of institutional memory and the fragmented nature of contemporary crisis-management architectures. Under compressed decision-making timelines and cross-theatre escalation pressures, uncertainty may arise not only from adversary behaviour but also from an incomplete understanding of which coordination mechanisms, signalling arrangements, or communication channels already exist.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply the absence of mechanisms but the uneven integration of existing tools into contemporary strategic planning, alliance coordination, and cross-regional crisis-management practices. In this context, effective cross-theatre coordination may require not only new frameworks, but also shared 'codebooks' or common reference points that help policymakers identify, interpret, and operationalise existing arrangements during crises. This was viewed as particularly important in situations where signalling, ambiguity, and timing may shape escalation dynamics as much as material developments themselves.

Cross-theatre cooperation itself may also be perceived as escalatory. This dynamic reflects a broader security dilemma inherent in cross-theatre coordination, in which actions designed to strengthen deterrence, improve readiness, or reassure allies may simultaneously reinforce adversary perceptions of encirclement, strategic isolation, or long-term coalition alignment against them. In this sense, signalling intended as defensive reassurance in one theatre may be interpreted elsewhere as preparation for coercion, pressure, or future escalation. Measures intended by Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific actors as defensive, stabilising, or reassurance-oriented may for instance be interpreted differently by adversaries, particularly when implemented simultaneously across multiple theatres or framed through increasingly integrated strategic language. Expanding NATO-IP4 cooperation, coordinated signalling practices, enhanced intelligence-sharing, joint military exercises, and discussions surrounding cross-regional resilience or supply-chain coordination may all be viewed by China, Russia, or the DPRK as evidence of emerging containment strategies or efforts to construct a more unified opposing strategic bloc. These actors also have an interest in invoking the language of containment for their own purposes, using it to question the legitimacy of NATO-IP4 cooperation and to encourage division between the two regions.

Chinese concerns regarding the evolution of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) provide another useful illustration of this dynamic. While Quad members generally frame the arrangement in terms of maintaining a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific, Chinese officials and commentators have frequently portrayed it as an emerging containment mechanism directed against China.¹⁹ More broadly, efforts to strengthen coordination among like-minded states may be interpreted very differently by those outside such arrangements, particularly when cooperation expands across multiple domains or theatres simultaneously.

These risks become particularly acute under conditions of uncertainty, where adversaries may struggle to distinguish between precautionary coordination, political signalling, and preparations for broader strategic alignment or crisis response. Poorly calibrated coordination may therefore contribute to the very instability it seeks to mitigate, particularly if simultaneous actions across

theatres create perceptions of cumulative pressure or coordinated escalation. The relationship between reassurance and provocation is therefore highly contingent and context-dependent. Measures viewed by one set of actors as prudent risk management or alliance coordination may be interpreted by others as evidence of deteriorating strategic intentions, shrinking diplomatic space, or preparation for future confrontation.²⁰ Managing cross-theatre escalation consequently requires not only improving coordination among partners, but also careful consideration of how such coordination is likely to be perceived, interpreted, and signalled across multiple regions simultaneously.

Domestic politics further complicates cooperation across both theatres. Public fatigue, economic pressures, political fragmentation, migration debates, electoral cycles, and competing strategic priorities all shape governments' willingness to sustain cross-theatre coordination. These domestic constraints affect not only material commitments but also the political credibility of signalling, alliance solidarity, and escalation tolerance under crisis conditions. Importantly, these constraints should not simply be understood as obstacles to cooperation. They define the practical limits within which cooperation must operate. Effective cross-theatre coordination, therefore, depends not on eliminating friction altogether, but on understanding how institutional limitations, political divergence, interpretive ambiguity, and coordination delays interact under conditions of uncertainty and compressed decision-making timelines.

VI. Implications for toolkit development and tabletop exercise design

The analysis developed through these working group discussions suggests that the most meaningful contribution of cross-theatre cooperation lies less in crisis-time intervention than in shaping the strategic environment before crises emerge. Scepticism persisted throughout discussions of the likelihood or effectiveness of large-scale military intervention across theatres under simultaneous pressure. Instead, the value of cooperation was understood primarily in terms of preparedness, coordination, resilience, and the development of shared analytical understandings before crises occur.

In this sense, the principal contribution of the emerging toolkit of recommended policy measures is not the creation of entirely new institutional mechanisms, but the reduction of interpretive and procedural friction under conditions of uncertainty. Some of the most dangerous escalation risks arise not from the absence of formal cooperation frameworks but from delays in interpretation, divergent assumptions, uncertainty regarding signalling, and coordination failures across alliances and regions. Several areas emerged as particularly important for future toolkit development and tabletop exercise design. These include routine intelligence-sharing practices, shared early-warning and threat-indicator frameworks, pre-agreed consultation and signalling mechanisms, and greater attention to industrial resilience, stockpile coordination, and supply-chain vulnerabilities. These measures matter not simply because they improve operational coordination, but because they help shape expectations, reduce ambiguity, and establish habits of consultation before crises intensify.

The broader strategic logic underpinning these measures is equally important. Shared analytical frameworks can help establish common understandings of escalation thresholds, signalling practices, and adversary behaviour across regions. Regularised consultation mechanisms may reduce coordination latency during crises by familiarising actors with one another's procedures, assumptions, and decision-making cultures before periods of acute pressure emerge. Similarly, industrial resilience and stockpile coordination contribute not only to material preparedness but also to perceptions of strategic endurance, alliance cohesion, and deterrence credibility over time.

A further recurring theme concerned the importance of de-escalatory 'off-ramp' mechanisms. Effective crisis management was consistently framed not solely in terms of deterrence or coercive signalling, but also in terms of preserving pathways for adversaries to step back without appearing to capitulate domestically. This reflected a broader recognition that escalation management requires balancing reassurance, deterrence, coercion, and face-saving mechanisms simultaneously.

Key analytical implications

Several broader analytical implications emerge from the analysis developed across the working group and should inform future toolkit development and policy planning. These dynamics have informed policy recommendations issued in the separate *Institutional cooperation between NATO and IP4* and *State-to-state cooperation between NATO and IP4 member states* reports.

- 1. The importance of institutionalising shared early-warning and cross-theatre consultation mechanisms emerged consistently throughout the discussions.** The core challenge identified was not simply the absence of information, but the difficulty of determining whether developments across theatres represent opportunism, deliberate coordination, or unrelated parallel activity under conditions of uncertainty. Shared threat indicators, routinised consultation practices, and common analytical frameworks may therefore help reduce risks of misinterpretation during crises.
- 2. The analysis underscored the importance of pre-agreed signalling and de-escalatory mechanisms.** Effective crisis management requires more than deterrent signalling alone. Credible pathways for de-escalation, including face-saving off-ramps, crisis communication channels, and calibrated diplomatic signalling, emerged as essential components of escalation management across both theatres.
- 3. Industrial resilience, stockpile coordination, and supply-chain security should not be treated as peripheral technical matters, but as central components of strategic stability and crisis management.** Vulnerabilities in defence-industrial capacity and economic resilience may significantly shape alliance cohesion, signalling credibility and perceptions of strategic endurance during prolonged crises.
- 4. Coordination latency emerged as a persistent structural vulnerability.** Differences in regional threat perceptions, alliance

expectations, domestic political constraints, and strategic priorities generate delays and friction that adversaries may seek to exploit through sequencing, ambiguity, or opportunistic signalling. Future tabletop exercises should therefore focus not only on military escalation, but also on alliance consultation delays, signalling dilemmas, sequencing pressures, and decision-making under compressed timelines.

5. A recurring conclusion across all four meetings was that the most durable contribution of cross-theatre cooperation may lie less in expectations of large-scale crisis-time intervention than in the development of peacetime habits of coordination, consultation, resilience-building, and shared strategic assessment. In this sense, the value of cooperation lies not simply in preparing to respond to crises, but in shaping the strategic environment before crises emerge.

Taken together, these findings underline that the value of cross-theatre cooperation lies less in crisis-time intervention than in the habits of consultation, resilience, and shared assessment built before crises emerge. The Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are becoming increasingly interconnected, but the risks of cross-theatre escalation depend as much on how developments are perceived, interpreted, and acted upon across regions as on the developments themselves. The recommendations developed in the companion reports build on that analytical foundation.

Notes

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- 18 C. Todd Lopez, "Russians Launch New Missile at Dnipro, U.S. Provides Ukraine With New Tactical Weapons", US Department of Defense, November 21, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3975321/russians-launch-new-missile-at-dnipro-us-provides-ukraine-with-new-tactical-wea/>.
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Published by the European Leadership Network and the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, July 2026

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*This project
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