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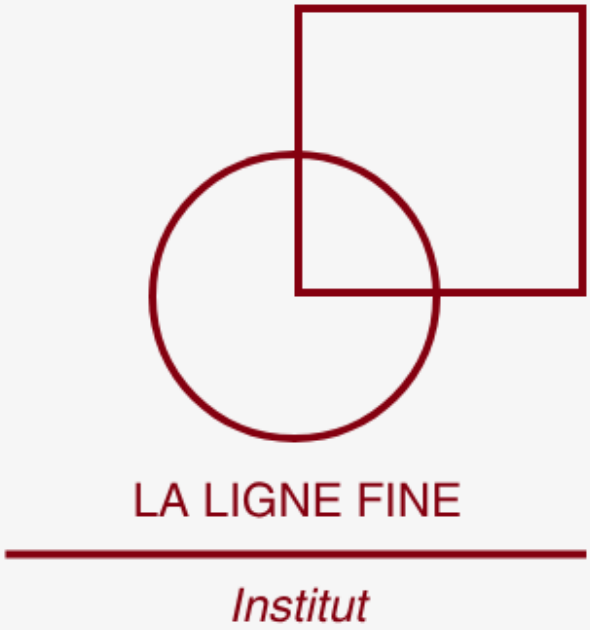

Contemporary Military Alliances: From Solidarity to Strategic Interdependence

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Executive Summary

Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of military alliances has changed profoundly. They are no longer merely mutual defence commitments designed to prevent armed aggression. They have become permanent architectures of strategic integration, organizing the flow of intelligence, operational planning, industrial chains, technological standards, critical infrastructure and, in some cases, nuclear deterrence.

This evolution responds to a simultaneous transformation of power relations and forms of conflictuality. The return of high-intensity inter-state warfare in Europe, the rise of China, the militarization of the Indo-Pacific space, the generalization of cyber and hybrid threats, as well as industrial competition around critical technologies have put alliances back at the heart of national strategies. However, these no longer resemble the large rigid blocks of the twentieth century.

The contemporary strategic landscape is characterized by a superimposition of cooperation formats. Traditional alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), coexist with technological partnerships such as AUKUS, intelligence networks such as Five Eyes, temporary operational coalitions, bilateral defence agreements, regional security organisations or more flexible mechanisms for military cooperation. This diversification reflects a major evolution: collective security is no longer based exclusively on a treaty, but on a set of political, industrial and technological interdependencies.

NATO remains the most successful example of military integration. Its effectiveness lies not only in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, but in a permanent system of integrated command, joint planning, exercises, interoperability standards and force pre-positioning. As the Alliance's founding text recalls, each state nevertheless retains the freedom to determine the measures it deems necessary to respond to an attack on an ally, which underlines that the credibility of collective defence depends more on the concrete preparation than on the legal formulation of the treaty[1].

This logic goes far beyond the Western framework. China favours a network of strategic partnerships rather than a system of alliances comparable to that of the United States. Russia combines the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), its privileged agreements with Belarus, its military cooperation with Iran and North Korea as well as its presence in Africa. In the Indo-Pacific, the United States is simultaneously strengthening its bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia while developing plurilateral formats such as the Quad or AUKUS. Africa, the Gulf and Southeast Asia are also experiencing a proliferation of hybrid security frameworks, where industrial cooperation, military training and political support combine without always leading to an obligation to defend each other.

This apparent fragmentation masks a common trend: alliances have become systems for distributing power. They determine who produces critical equipment, who controls digital infrastructure, who provides intelligence capabilities, who provides nuclear protection, who controls logistics networks, and who sets technological standards. In other words, they organize dependencies as much as they produce security.

The central question is therefore no longer whether or not a state belongs to an alliance. It consists of understanding what place he occupies in it, what critical functions he masters, what dependencies he accepts and what autonomy he retains in the event of a strategic divergence with his partners.

[1] North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (1949, April 4). *The North Atlantic Treaty*. https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the notion of a military alliance seemed relatively straightforward. Two or more states concluded a treaty by which they undertook to defend each other against external aggression. The power of an alliance was then measured mainly by the number of its members, their combined military capabilities and the political credibility of their commitment.

This representation remains widely present in the public debate. However, it has become insufficient.

Contemporary alliances are no longer just instruments for organizing a collective response in the event of war. They now structure the daily functioning of the armed forces. They influence industrial choices, guide technological investments, determine communication standards, condition supply chains and shape innovation policies.

The war in Ukraine is a particular illustration of this development. While NATO is not directly involved in the conflict, the capabilities made available to Kiev — satellite intelligence, secure communication systems, training, logistical support, ammunition transfers, industrial coordination — demonstrate that the power of an alliance is no longer limited to the possible triggering of a collective defense clause. It lies in the depth of its strategic ecosystem.

The same can be observed in the Indo-Pacific. The United States is no longer just looking to protect its traditional allies. They are gradually developing a dense network of military agreements, technological partnerships and industrial cooperation aimed at making any attempt to change the regional status quo much more costly for a potential adversary.

This evolution reflects a fundamental reality: alliances have become instruments for managing permanent strategic competition. In other words, they are no longer just preparing for war. They organize peace under duress.

This transformation is directly linked to the evolution of contemporary conflicts. Modern military operations rely on extraordinarily complex systems. An army can no longer be seen as a juxtaposition of soldiers, armoured vehicles, planes or ships. Its effectiveness now depends on a multitude of invisible infrastructures: satellites, secure digital networks, space capabilities, data centers, navigation systems, electronic components, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, global supply chains, industrial maintenance, and continuous ammunition production.

War thus becomes a profoundly systemic phenomenon.
In this context, no state, including the major powers, can reasonably develop all the necessary capabilities on its own. Interdependencies therefore become inevitable. This reality explains why alliances are now experiencing a paradoxical expansion.

Even as the international system is moving towards greater multipolarity, military cooperation is multiplying. Europe is simultaneously strengthening NATO, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and the joint industrial programmes. The United States is consolidating its bilateral alliances while developing AUKUS, the Quad, and the strengthened agreements with the Philippines, Japan and South Korea. China is multiplying strategic partnerships, joint exercises, security agreements and military cooperation without seeking to replicate an Asian equivalent of NATO. Russia favours a combination of bilateral agreements, asymmetric partnerships and regional organisations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), while developing in-depth military cooperation with Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang.

In Africa, too, cooperation frameworks are diversifying rapidly. States combine bilateral agreements, regional organizations, coalitions against terrorism and partnerships with external powers. The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), created in 2023 by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, illustrates this desire to develop an autonomous security framework, distinct from existing regional arrangements.

This diversity shows that the world is no longer divided into allied and non-aligned states. Each power is now building its own strategic network, made up of partners at different levels, meeting distinct objectives: collective defence, industrial cooperation, access to bases, intelligence sharing, maritime security, the fight against terrorism, cybersecurity or technological development.

The very notion of alliance therefore deserves to be rethought. The real issue is no longer just which states promise to defend each other. It consists of understanding how strategic dependencies are built, how they strengthen collective power and how they can, simultaneously, become new vulnerabilities.

It is this transformation that this paper proposes to analyze. In the contemporary world, political solidarity is no longer enough. It is now concrete interdependencies — industrial, technological, operational and informational — that determine the real value of an alliance.

I. Alliances are no longer promises of war, but permanent systems of strategic integration

The classic representation of military alliances remains largely inherited from the twentieth century. It is based on a simple idea: several states conclude a treaty in order to guarantee each other assistance in the event of aggression. This definition remains legally accurate, but it no longer allows us to understand the way in which alliances work today. The strategic value of an alliance no longer depends mainly on the drafting of a collective defence clause; it lies in the depth of the integration that it organizes among its members.

This evolution is the product of technological as well as geopolitical transformations. Contemporary military operations simultaneously mobilize space, cyber, naval, air, land, industrial and informational capabilities. A high-intensity campaign cannot be effectively conducted without observation satellites, secure communication networks, electronic warfare capabilities, navigation systems, port infrastructure, robust supply chains, and industry capable of sustaining a high rate of ammunition consumption. The experience of the war in Ukraine has reminded us that a major conventional conflict exhausts in a few months stocks that many states had built up for several years of peace. Both the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) have shown that Western industrial capabilities were initially unable to keep up with the pace of artillery shell consumption observed on the Ukrainian front, revealing that military power now depends as much on factories as on armies[2][3].

In this context, an alliance can no longer be conceived as a mechanism that is activated only when a war breaks out. It is a permanent organization designed to prepare for this eventuality in peacetime. The general staffs draw up common plans, the armed forces harmonise their doctrines, the industries coordinate certain productions, the intelligence networks exchange sensitive information on a daily basis and the governments multiply exercises in order to test their decision-making procedures. The war became the eventual outcome of a cooperation that was already largely institutionalized.

NATO is the most successful example of this logic. Public debate frequently focuses on Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, while the Alliance's true uniqueness lies in its integrated military command, permanent structures, planning processes, technical standards and regular exercises. Article 5 provides that an attack on one ally will be considered an attack on all, but it leaves it up to each state to determine what measures it deems necessary to fulfil this obligation. In other words, the treaty does not create military automaticity; It creates a political obligation whose credibility depends entirely on the capacities previously developed[4].

This distinction is fundamental. A treaty is never more than a declaration of intent as long as it is not accompanied by an architecture that allows its execution. States may promise reciprocal assistance without having the material means to provide it. Conversely, some partnerships without a collective defence clause produce such a high level of military integration that their operational credibility sometimes exceeds that of some formal alliances.

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[2] Cancian, M. F. (2023, January 9). *Rebuilding U.S. inventories: Six critical systems*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. https://www.csis.org/analysis/rebuilding-us-inventories-six-critical-systems

[3] Royal United Services Institute. (n.d.). *Special resources*. Retrieved August 11, 2026, from https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources

[4] North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (1949, April 4). *The North Atlantic Treaty*. https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty

AUKUS is a perfect example of this evolution. Contrary to popular belief, AUKUS is not a military alliance comparable to NATO. There is no article in it that provides for automatic assistance in the event of an attack. The partnership is essentially based on two pillars. The first concerns the development of an Australian nuclear attack submarine capability through an unprecedented transfer of American and British technologies. The second aims to jointly develop advanced technologies in the fields of artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, quantum technologies, electronic warfare, hypersonics and cybersecurity. The Australian Department of Defence explicitly presents AUKUS as a partnership designed to strengthen the industrial and technological capabilities of the three countries over several decades[5].

The strategic interest of AUKUS therefore lies not in a promise of military solidarity, but in the creation of a technological interdependence that is practically irreversible. Training nuclear crews, building suitable port infrastructure, developing an industry capable of maintaining nuclear-powered submarines and integrating common supply chains take several decades. Such cooperation goes far beyond electoral cycles and creates a strategic continuity that will probably survive political alternations.

This logic is found in many other contemporary architectures. The Five Eyes network, which brings together the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, is not a military alliance in the traditional sense. However, for several decades, it has been organizing the most integrated intelligence sharing in the world. Information from satellites, electronic interceptions, signals intelligence (SIGINT) or many technical capabilities circulates daily between its members. This depth of cooperation gives the five states a considerable strategic advantage that is not based on a mutual defence clause, but on an institutional trust gradually built since the Second World War.

The same reasoning applies to NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command. Established in 1958 by the United States and Canada, it is one of the few permanent binational military command structures. The two countries share air and space surveillance of the North American continent as well as certain operational responsibilities. NORAD is not just coordinating two militaries; it organizes a permanent fusion of essential strategic functions. This architecture is described in detail on its official website[6].

These examples show that the depth of an alliance is no longer measured solely by the strength of political commitments, but by the degree of functional integration it produces. The more states share their critical capabilities, the more credible they make their cooperation. In return, they also increase their dependencies on each other. An army that builds all its air defense around a single supplier, that depends on a partner's satellites for its intelligence, or that cannot project its forces without an ally's strategic transport aircraft legally retains its sovereignty, but its operational autonomy becomes conditional.

This reality leads to overcoming an often caricatured opposition between national sovereignty and international cooperation. In the military field, absolute sovereignty practically no longer exists. Even major powers depend on partners for critical raw materials, electronic components, supply chains, or specialized industrial capabilities. The real strategic question is therefore no longer to eliminate dependencies, but to control their distribution. A state that depends on a single supplier or partner is exposed to a major vulnerability; a state that diversifies its interdependencies retains more room for manoeuvre.

This evolution explains why contemporary alliances are less and less like temporary military coalitions and more and more like strategic ecosystems. They organize permanent flows of technologies, data, funding, industry standards and know-how. They thus become

[5] Department of Defence. (n.d.). *AUKUS*. Australian Government. https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/projects/aukus
[6] North American Aerospace Defense Command. (n.d.). *North American Aerospace Defense Command*. https://www.norad.mil/

infrastructures of power, the effects of which manifest themselves daily long before a crisis makes their military function visible.

II. The Global Geography of Alliances: From Blocs to Security Networks

One of the main errors of analysis is to look at contemporary alliances through the lens of NATO alone. This approach leads to considering the international system as an opposition between a structured Western alliance and revisionist powers that would be devoid of one. Such a reading no longer corresponds to the strategic reality. The twenty-first century marks neither the disappearance of alliances nor their return in the form of the Cold War blocs. It sees the emergence of a much more complex architecture, composed of cooperation networks whose levels of commitment, objectives and institutional forms vary considerably.

This development responds to a common constraint: no state, including the great powers, today has all the resources necessary to guarantee its security alone. Alliances thus become mechanisms for access to rare capabilities (intelligence, industry, bases, technologies, financing, power projection) rather than simple mutual defense commitments.

The United States remains the central power in this system. Unlike colonial empires or ideological blocs of the twentieth century, their military influence is based less on direct territorial control than on an exceptional network of bilateral, regional and functional alliances. Washington is bound by defence treaties with Japan (1960), South Korea (1953), the Philippines (1951), Australia and New Zealand through ANZUS (1951, although New Zealand has not fully applied the military component since the 1980s), as well as with several partners in the Middle East. In addition, there are base access agreements, pre-positioning arrangements, joint exercises, industrial cooperation and intelligence-sharing mechanisms.

The interest of this architecture lies in its redundancy. The United States does not depend on a single alliance. They have a multitude of overlapping and mutually reinforcing frameworks. A partner can participate in several schemes without them pursuing exactly the same objectives. Japan is a member of the bilateral security treaty with the United States, participates in the Quad with India and Australia, maintains enhanced strategic cooperation with the United Kingdom, develops an industrial partnership with Italy as part of the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) and multiplies security agreements with the Philippines and Australia. This layering of formats creates a network that is much more resilient than a single organization.
The Quad is a perfect example of this logic. Created in 2007 and relaunched in 2017, it brings together the United States, Japan, India and Australia. Contrary to some media analyses, it is neither a military alliance nor an "Asian NATO". No collective defence mechanism is provided for. The Quad functions as a strategic coordination platform on topics as varied as maritime security, supply chains, infrastructure, critical technologies, cybersecurity, naval exercises or regional resilience. Its interest lies precisely in this flexibility: it makes it possible to coordinate the policies of four maritime democracies without imposing on them the constraints of an integrated alliance[7].

The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) exemplify another form of cooperation. Created in 1971, they bring together the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia. They do not provide for NATO's automatic assistance, but have been organising joint exercises, air and maritime cooperation and joint planning for more than fifty years. Their longevity demonstrates that a security architecture can remain relevant without moving towards deeper institutional integration.

At first glance, this proliferation of formats could give the impression of increasing fragmentation. In reality, it reflects a change in American strategy. During the Cold War, the

[7] North American Aerospace Defense Command. (n.d.). *North American Aerospace Defense Command*. https://www.norad.mil/

main objective was to contain the Soviet Union through a few strong alliances. Today, Washington is instead seeking to build a distributed architecture in which each partner brings specific capabilities. This approach is explicitly described in the *U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy*, published by the White House in 2022, which insists on the simultaneous strengthening of traditional alliances, regional partnerships and technological [8]cooperations.

However, this network logic is not unique to the United States.
China is developing a significantly different strategy, but responds to the same need to expand its security environment. Beijing officially rejects the logic of permanent military alliances, which it presents as a legacy of the Cold War. The White Paper on National Defence regularly emphasises that China favours "partnerships" rather than "alliances". This distinction is not only rhetorical; It reflects a different conception of strategic cooperation.

Instead of seeking collective defence commitments, Beijing is multiplying global partnerships with states whose interests occasionally converge with its own. This approach allows it to avoid automatic obligations while gradually developing its military influence. Joint naval exercises with Russia, security cooperation with Pakistan, Cambodia and several African states, the opening of its first permanent military base in Djibouti in 2017, arms sales and training programmes illustrate this gradual strategy.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the main institutional framework for this approach. Founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and then expanded to include India, Pakistan, Iran and more recently Belarus, the SCO should not be interpreted as an eastern equivalent of NATO. Its mandate mainly covers the fight against terrorism, extremism, separatism, regional cooperation and certain aspects of economic security. It nevertheless organises regular joint military exercises and helps to bring the doctrines of its members closer together[9].

Russia is adopting an even different logic. Heir to the Soviet Union, it retains a relatively classic conception of alliances, but its limited means have led it to diversify its tools of influence. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), created in 2002, brings together Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Its treaty provides for a mutual assistance mechanism similar in principle to that of NATO. In practice, its effectiveness depends largely on Russian capabilities, which explains the questions that have arisen after the war in Ukraine and the tensions between Moscow and Yerevan[10].

However, limiting Russia's strategy to the CSTO would be reductive. At the same time, Moscow is developing a set of bilateral military partnerships that escape the classic categories of alliances. The strengthening of cooperation with Iran, particularly in the field of drones and certain military technologies, the strategic partnership agreement with North Korea signed in 2024, naval exercises with China and the defence agreements concluded with several African states are part of a more flexible strategy, based on converging interests rather than an integrated institutional architecture.

The Middle East probably offers the most striking example of this recomposition. The states of the region are multiplying partnerships without locking themselves into exclusivity logics. The UAE cooperates closely with the United States while developing economic relations with China. Saudi Arabia buys Western equipment, dialogues with Moscow within the framework of OPEC+ and deepens some cooperation with Beijing. Turkey remains a member of NATO while acquiring Russian S-400 systems, developing a particularly dynamic national defense

[8] The White House. (2022, February). *Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States*. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf
[9] Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (n.d.). *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*. https://eng.sectsco.org/
[10] Collective Security Treaty Organization. (n.d.). *Collective Security Treaty Organization*. https://en.odkb-csto.org/

industry, and pursuing an autonomous policy in the Levant, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Caucasus.

These trajectories show that membership in an alliance no longer determines the entire foreign policy of a state. Regional powers are now looking to diversify their partnerships in order to reduce their dependence on a single guarantor. This strategy, often referred to as *hedging* in the Anglo-Saxon literature, consists of multiplying the options rather than definitively choosing a side. Evelyn Goh proposed one of the founding analyses in *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies* (East-West Center, 2005), while several recent works by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute show that this logic remains dominant in Southeast Asia.

Africa is experiencing a similar dynamic. For a long time, it was structured around former colonial powers or peacekeeping operations, but now sees the coexistence of regional organisations, bilateral agreements, partnerships with Turkey, China, Russia and the Gulf States, as well as initiatives specific to African states.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), founded by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in September 2023, testifies to this desire to redefine security cooperation frameworks. Although still recent and facing significant capability challenges, it marks a political break with previous arrangements supported by ECOWAS or Western partners.

All in all, the global strategic landscape is no longer organized around a few dominant alliances, but around a mosaic of networks that overlap, complement and, sometimes, compete with each other. This diversification increases the flexibility of states, but it also makes the balance of power much more difficult to read. The central question is no longer who is allied with whom; It consists of identifying what capacities circulate in each network, what dependencies they create and what forms of solidarity they really make credible.

III. Alliances redistribute power, but above all dependencies

The analysis of military alliances is still largely dominated by a quantitative logic. Public debates focus on the number of Member States, defence spending as a percentage of gross domestic product or the number of troops that can be mobilised in the event of war. These indicators are still useful, but they are no longer sufficient to measure the strategic value of an alliance. Contemporary military power is based less on the accumulation of means than on the control of critical functions. A coalition capable of deploying a hundred thousand troops without having an intelligence architecture, secure communications, strategic transport capabilities or a resilient industrial base will be less credible than a smaller network mastering these levers.

The real function of an alliance is therefore no longer simply to add up national capacities. It consists of redistributing dependencies. Each member brings resources that he masters and receives in exchange access to abilities that he does not have. This logic is effective as long as the interdependencies remain balanced. It becomes problematic when an essential function is concentrated in the hands of a single actor.

This evolution is particularly visible in intelligence. Contemporary armies no longer fight only with tanks, planes or frigates; they fight with data. Identifying a target, tracking troop movements, detecting naval activity or anticipating a missile launch requires a set of space, air, sea and digital sensors whose cost exceeds the capabilities of most states.

The United States occupies an unparalleled position in this area. Their constellation of military satellites, signals intelligence capabilities, ocean surveillance capabilities, aerial platforms and digital infrastructure form the information backbone of many allied operations. During the war in Ukraine, a decisive part of the intelligence provided to the Ukrainian authorities came from American means, supplemented by British contributions and several other partners. In addition, the use of high-resolution commercial imagery, in particular that of Maxar Technologies, has profoundly changed the relationship between state intelligence and private capabilities.

This development deserves to be highlighted, as it constitutes one of the major strategic breakthroughs of the twenty-first century. Private companies are now integrated into the alliance ecosystem. SpaceX, through the Starlink network, provided critical connectivity to Ukrainian forces after the first destruction of ground infrastructure. Microsoft has helped protect Ukrainian digital networks from several cyber campaigns. Palantir develops data mining tools used in different military contexts. Large cloud service providers are playing an increasing role in the digital resilience of governments. As the annual Microsoft *Digital Defense Report* showed, contemporary cyberattacks target both civilian infrastructure and military systems, reinforcing the role of technology companies in security policies[11].

This partial privatization of strategic capabilities profoundly modifies the very notion of alliance. States no longer cooperate only with each other; They also rely on industrial players whose technologies are becoming essential to their freedom of action. A security architecture can no longer be analyzed without taking into account the companies that produce the satellites, semiconductors, software, artificial intelligence systems or communication networks.

The semiconductor industry is a perfect example of this new geography of dependency. Modern weapons systems — fighter jets, missiles, radars, drones, command networks or space systems — rely on electronic components that are highly concentrated in production.

[11] Microsoft. (2025, October 16). *Microsoft Digital Defense Report 2025*. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/security-insider/threat-landscape/microsoft-digital-defense-report-2025

According to analyses by Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET), only a few companies have mastered the most advanced stages of global chip manufacturing, while Taiwan holds a dominant position in the production of the latest generation of semiconductors. This concentration explains why the security of the Taiwan Strait goes far beyond territorial issues alone: it directly concerns the continuity of global industrial capacities.

The same reasoning applies to rare earths, critical materials or certain energy supply chains. Contemporary alliances no longer only protect territories; they seek to secure economic flows that are essential to the functioning of economies and armies. The concept of *friend-shoring*, developed in recent years by several Western governments, reflects this desire to relocate certain strategic productions within political spaces considered reliable. Both the US Treasury Department and the European Commission are now using this logic to reduce industrial vulnerabilities in the face of geopolitical tensions.

This redistribution of dependencies also concerns the military equipment itself. The acquisition of a combat aircraft, an air defence system or a submarine is never a purely technical decision. Each program commits a state for several decades. Spare parts, maintenance, software updates, training, ammunition stocks and technological developments create a lasting relationship with the supplier country.

The case of the F-35 is particularly revealing. More than a combat aircraft, it constitutes a global industrial and digital ecosystem. The states that acquire it integrate a common network of maintenance, training, data sharing and software development. This architecture significantly enhances interoperability between allies, but it also increases their dependence on U.S. industrial and digital infrastructure. Conversely, France has been advocating for several years an approach favouring greater European industrial autonomy through programmes such as the Rafale or the future Future Combat Air System (FCAS), developed with Germany and Spain, even if this programme is experiencing governance difficulties.

However, it would be wrong to present this dependence as an anomaly. Any alliance implies a certain specialization. No state can reasonably produce all the equipment, technology and infrastructure necessary for a modern army on its own. The strategic question is less about the existence of dependencies than about their degree of concentration. A dependency spread between several partners is generally manageable; Exclusive dependence on a single actor creates a risk of political or operational paralysis.

This reflection now extends to the normative field. Alliances do not only diffuse military capabilities; They also impose technical standards, doctrines of use, planning procedures and interoperability rules. NATO's *STANAG* (Standardization Agreements) are the best known example. These agreements define thousands of common standards concerning ammunition, fuel, communications, logistics, military medicine or operational procedures. Their objective is simple: to allow forces from different countries to fight together without loss of effectiveness[12].

However, this normalization has a political effect that is often underestimated. Adopting a standard also means accepting a certain vision of military organization, command procedures and sometimes industrial choices. Standards thus become instruments of influence. Economic history shows that standards create *lock-in effects*: once a system is widely adopted, its replacement becomes expensive, even when an alternative appears.

Military alliances reproduce this phenomenon. The more a state invests in a given technological ecosystem, the more difficult it becomes to exit it without incurring considerable financial, industrial and operational costs. Dependencies are therefore not only material; they

[12] North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (n.d.). *NATO Standardization Office*. https://nso.nato.int/

are also institutional, doctrinal and human. Training several generations of officers according to the same procedures, building infrastructures adapted to certain equipment or developing a national industry integrated into an allied production chain creates a strategic inertia that goes far beyond political alternations.

This inertia explains why alliances often survive the diplomatic crises that go through them. Political disagreements between allies can be profound—as in the case of the intervention in Iraq in 2003 or the transatlantic tensions that arose during certain American administrations—without calling into question the whole of military cooperation. Staffs continue to work together, industries continue their joint agendas, and infrastructure remains interconnected. Alliances have become technical as well as political systems.

This evolution leads to a reassessment of the very notion of strategic sovereignty. In the European debate, this is sometimes presented as the ability to act independently of any partner. Such a definition seems unrealistic. No power, including the United States or China, is completely autonomous in all critical areas. True sovereignty lies less in the absence of dependencies than in the ability to choose those that one accepts, to diversify them and to retain sufficient own resources to prevent a partner from being able to transform interdependence into a means of pressure.

A solid alliance is therefore not one that removes dependencies. It is the one that distributes them in such a way that no single actor can, on its own, disorganize the entire system.

IV. Alliances have entered the era of systemic security

For much of the twentieth century, the primary function of a military alliance was to protect territory from identifiable armed aggression. The scenarios were relatively clear: a border was crossed, an army invaded a neighboring state, and collective defense mechanisms were activated. Operational plans focused on the deployment of land, air and naval forces to repel the offensive.

This representation remains relevant to understanding certain conventional conflicts, but it is no longer sufficient to describe the nature of contemporary power relations. War no longer necessarily begins with the crossing of a border. In many cases, it begins much earlier, with operations designed to gradually weaken an adversary's capabilities without immediately reaching the threshold of an open confrontation.

This evolution is not only doctrinal. It is the result of a profound transformation of modern societies. Industrialized states now depend on infrastructure whose interruption can produce strategic effects comparable to those of a military campaign. Power grids, submarine cables, communication satellites, positioning systems, data centres, financial networks, logistics platforms, port infrastructure or telecommunications networks are now potential military targets.

In other words, a state's vulnerability no longer lies only in its air bases or ammunition depots; it also lies in the civilian systems that make it possible for its economy and armed forces to function. This evolution explains why contemporary alliances are increasingly interested in the notion of **resilience**.

For a long time, resilience was mainly associated with civil protection or the management of natural disasters. It has become a major strategic concept. A credible alliance must no longer only be able to defeat an opponent on the battlefield; It must ensure that its members will continue to operate despite simultaneous attacks on their critical infrastructure.

NATO has gradually integrated this dimension. As early as the Warsaw Summit in 2016, Allies adopted **Baseline Requirements for National Resilience**, defining several key areas: continuity of government institutions, energy security, management of population movements, food and water supplies, medical capacities, civil communication networks and transport systems. This approach was then reinforced at the Madrid (2022) and Vilnius (2023) summits, which insist that collective defence relies as much on the robustness of societies as on military capabilities themselves. Official documents are available on NATO's Resilience Portal[13].

This evolution is indicative of a much more profound change. Alliances no longer protect only armies; they protect national systems. The war in Ukraine provides a particularly enlightening demonstration of this. From the first hours of the Russian invasion, the strikes have not only targeted military units. They targeted power grids, energy facilities, railway infrastructure, communication systems, command centers, logistics depots, and industrial capacity. The goal was not only to weaken the Ukrainian army, but to disorganize the entire state apparatus.

Conversely, the Ukrainian resistance has not been based solely on the performance of its armed forces. It also depended on the authorities' ability to maintain electricity distribution, preserve digital communications, quickly repair damaged infrastructure, protect banking networks, and ensure the continuity of public services despite shelling.

[13] North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2024, November 13). *Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3*. https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/resilience-civil-preparedness-and-article-3

The line between national security and military defence is thus becoming increasingly difficult to draw. The cyber domain is a perfect example of this evolution. The first cyber doctrines essentially considered computer attacks as a technical problem for specialized services. This approach now appears to be largely outdated. Cyberattacks can disrupt power grids, disrupt supply chains, disrupt hospitals, compromise financial systems, or disable military communications without a single shot being fired.

The attacks on Estonia in 2007 are often a point of reference in this development. Following a political crisis linked to the relocation of a Soviet monument in Tallinn, several Estonian institutions were targeted by massive distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) campaigns, affecting banks, media, administrations and some digital infrastructures. Although the military consequences were limited, this episode revealed the ability of a cyber campaign to disrupt the normal functioning of an entire state.

This awareness led to the creation of the **NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE)** in Tallinn, which has become one of the world's leading think tanks on cyber operations[14].

Space is another area where alliances are undergoing a rapid transformation. For decades, satellites were primarily seen as multipliers of military capabilities. They facilitated communications, navigation or intelligence without being perceived as a theater of operations in its own right.

Today, virtually all critical military functions depend directly or indirectly on space systems: geolocation, network synchronization, observation, ballistic missile early warning, strategic telecommunications, precision weapons guidance, or weather forecasting. An attack on these capabilities could produce effects comparable to the destruction of many terrestrial infrastructures.

Recognizing this development, NATO recognized space as an operational domain in 2019, joining the land, sea, air and cyber domains. This decision does not mean that the Alliance is militarizing space in the traditional sense; it simply recognizes that contemporary military operations can no longer be thought of in isolation from space capabilities[15].

Submarine cables are another illustration of this change. Nearly 99% of intercontinental data traffic today travels through about 600 submarine fibre optic cables, not by satellite as the general public often believes. These infrastructures provide financial, diplomatic, military, commercial and governmental communications for almost all developed economies. A prolonged interruption of several cables could have considerable economic and strategic consequences.

In recent years, several incidents have drawn attention to this vulnerability. The damage observed on certain cables in the Baltic Sea or the Red Sea has led many governments to strengthen their surveillance of underwater infrastructure. Even when the exact origin of an incident remains uncertain, these events are a reminder that the seabed is gradually becoming a space of strategic competition.

The European Union, NATO and several coastal states are now investing in underwater surveillance capabilities, autonomous drones and critical infrastructure protection systems. Maritime security is no longer just about controlling trade routes; It also involves protecting the invisible networks that keep contemporary economies running.

[14] North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2024, November 13). *Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3*. https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/resilience-civil-preparedness-and-article-3
[15] North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (n.d.). *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. https://www.nato.int/en

However, this permanent extension of the security field raises a major difficulty: how far should an alliance extend its scope of action? As threats diversify, there is a great temptation to integrate each new risk into collective defence missions. Cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, industrial sabotage, electoral manipulation, economic pressure, energy coercion or space operations can all affect the security of a state. Should we therefore consider each of them as likely to trigger a collective response?

The answer is far from obvious. An effective alliance is based on a credible promise. However, the more different situations this promise covers, the more it risks losing readability. If every cyber-attack, sabotage or informational campaign were to automatically lead to a military response, the very credibility of deterrence would quickly be called into question. Conversely, an overly restrictive definition of threats would leave adversaries with a vast scope for action below the threshold of conventional warfare.

This is the challenge of what Anglo-Saxon strategists refer to as grey zone competition. Powers are increasingly seeking to achieve their objectives without crossing the threshold that could provoke a major military response. They favor ambiguous actions, difficult to attribute, limited in intensity but repeated over time. This strategy gradually wears down the opponent's abilities while reducing the risk of direct escalation.

Contemporary alliances cannot respond to this development by military means alone. They must develop a much more graduated approach, combining intelligence sharing, judicial cooperation, protection of critical infrastructure, economic sanctions, diplomatic responses, offensive cyber capabilities, informational actions and, when necessary, military demonstrations of force.

Collective defence is therefore no longer a binary mechanism opposing peace and war. It becomes a permanent capacity to maintain the functioning of a political, economic, technological and military system in the face of a competition that no longer really knows peacetime. This is probably the most profound transformation of alliances since the end of the Second World War. They are no longer just coalitions designed to win a war; They became organizations responsible for preserving the strategic continuity of their members in an environment where confrontation had become permanent, multifaceted and largely infra-conflictual.

V. The real balance of power is now being played out in the defence industrial base

One of the most important lessons of the war in Ukraine is paradoxically one of the least visible. The first months of the conflict naturally drew attention to the military operations, maneuvers, weapons systems or tactical performance of the two armies. Yet, as war has become more protracted, another reality has emerged: the ability to sustain a high-intensity conflict depends less on the equipment available on day one than on the ability to produce it in the months and years that follow.

This distinction is fundamental. An army can have extremely efficient equipment at its disposal while being unable to quickly replace its losses. Conversely, an industry that is able to increase production, secure supplies and repair damaged equipment can gradually change the balance of power, even if initial capacities were more limited.

Military history regularly reminds us of this obviousness. During World War II, American industrial superiority was a determining factor in the Allied victory. Between 1940 and 1945, the United States produced about 300,000 military aircraft, nearly 90,000 tanks, and thousands of ships, demonstrating that industrial warfare is won as much in factories as on the battlefield. This historical parallel must be used with caution: contemporary economies are much more complex and globalized. He nevertheless reminds us of a strategic constant: military power cannot be dissociated from productive power.

The war in Ukraine has brutally reintroduced this reality into Western strategic calculations. Estimates published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Kiel Institute show that the daily consumption of artillery ammunition observed on the Ukrainian front far exceeds the assumptions that had guided the planning of many European countries since the end of the Cold War. Stocks built up for limited expeditionary operations proved insufficient in the face of a protracted conventional conflict.

The problem was not only about the volumes available. It also affected production capacity. Several industrial chains had been sized to meet relatively stable demand in peacetime. The time needed to increase the pace was sometimes counted in years. As the CSIS report *Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment* explains, rebuilding a defence industrial capability is not simply a matter of opening a new factory. It is necessary to recruit a qualified workforce, secure component suppliers, guarantee the supply of raw materials, invest in production tools and offer manufacturers sufficient visibility to justify these investments. Source: https://www.csis.org/analysis/empty-bins-wartime-environment.

This reality profoundly changes the way in which an alliance is evaluated. For a long time, military solidarity was mainly appreciated through political commitments or operational capabilities. From now on, it must also be measured through the depth of industrial cooperation. An alliance that cannot produce enough missiles, ammunition, drones, electronic components or spare parts cannot sustain a high-intensity conflict, even if its armies are fully trained.

In other words, industry is no longer a simple support for military operations; it becomes a prerequisite for it. This development explains the spectacular return of industrial policies to defence strategies.

In the United States, the *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, published by the Department of Defense in January 2024, explicitly identifies industrial resilience as one of the four pillars of

American military power. The document emphasizes the need to strengthen supply chains, expand the supplier base, secure critical materials and accelerate production capabilities to meet the demands of protracted great power competition[16].

The European Union is following a similar trajectory, even if the institutional constraints are different. Since 2022, the European Commission and Member States have launched several initiatives to strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). The ASAP (*Act in Support of Ammunition Production*) regulation aims to rapidly increase European ammunition production. The **EDIRPA** instrument encourages joint procurement between Member States. In 2024, the Commission also presented the first **European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS),** which proposes to strengthen joint purchasing, reduce the fragmentation of the European market and develop a genuine European preference in certain strategic sectors[17].

However, it would be simplistic to interpret this dynamic as a simple increase in military spending. The real challenge is the transformation of the defence economy. For several decades, many states viewed their military industries as relatively autonomous sectors, responding mainly to domestic orders. This logic is becoming more and more difficult to maintain. Major armaments programmes now mobilise extremely complex international value chains. A fighter jet, a satellite or an air defense system integrates components from dozens of suppliers in several countries.

This industrial interdependence has considerable advantages. It makes it possible to share development costs, access to specialized skills and pool certain investments. On the other hand, it also creates new vulnerabilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic had already demonstrated the fragility of global supply chains. The war in Ukraine and then the growing tensions around Taiwan have reinforced this awareness. Western governments are now questioning their dependence on certain foreign suppliers for essential components: semiconductors, energy powders, rare earths, critical metals, electronic equipment or chemicals essential to the manufacture of armaments.

China occupies a central place in this debate. Although it is not dominant in all industrial sectors, it controls a significant part of the global refining of several rare earths and critical materials used in batteries, radars, electric motors, guidance systems and certain space applications. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the geographical concentration of these supply chains is now a major economic security issue[18].
However, it would be simplistic to pit a Chinese industry against a Western industry. The dependencies are largely reciprocal. European and American companies maintain a significant lead in several technology segments, including certain lithography machines, industrial software, aircraft engines and propulsion systems. This interdependence explains why the current strategic competition does not result in a complete break in trade, but in a gradual search for diversification.

This logic is clearly reflected in the so-called de-risking policies, which are now favoured by the European Union. Unlike *decoupling*, which would aim for complete economic separation, *de-risking* consists of reducing dependencies deemed critical without calling into question the entire trade relationship.

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[16] U.S. Department of Defense. (2024, January 11). *DOD releases first-ever National Defense Industrial Strategy*. https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3643326/dod-releases-first-ever-national-defense-industrial-strategy/
[17] European Commission. (n.d.). *Defence Industry and Space*. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/
[18] International Energy Agency. (2021, May 5). *The role of critical minerals in clean energy transitions*. https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transitions

Military alliances are directly affected by this development. Solidarity among allies is no longer based solely on the political will to intervene in the event of a crisis. It also depends on their collective ability to produce the necessary equipment, to protect their supply chains, to share certain industrial capacities and to accept a form of specialization.

However, this specialization raises a major political difficulty. Each state naturally wants to preserve its national defence industry. Military programmes represent thousands of skilled jobs, sensitive technological capabilities and an important lever for industrial policy. Governments are therefore reluctant to abandon certain productions in favour of foreign partners, even when cooperation would be more economically rational.

This tension runs through all contemporary alliances. Europeans regularly call for greater industrial integration while supporting their national champions. The United States is encouraging its allies to strengthen their production capacities while protecting certain sensitive sectors. Multi-country programmes frequently experience disagreements over the division of labour, technology transfer or industrial benefits.

The Future Combat Air System (FCAS), developed by France, Germany and Spain, or the MGCS (Main Ground Combat System) programme illustrate the governance difficulties faced by major European projects when they seek to reconcile operational efficiency, national sovereignty and industrial interests.

These tensions are not unique to Europe. The F-35 program itself required complex negotiations between the various partners in order to distribute production chains and economic benefits. AUKUS raises similar questions about the ability of US and British shipyards to simultaneously produce their own submarines and those destined for Australia.

Industry thus appears to be the most concrete indicator of the depth of an alliance. It is relatively easy to affirm political solidarity in a joint communiqué. It is much more difficult to accept that a partner produces equipment that is essential to its own safety for several decades.

In short, the defence industrial base is today the real material test of alliances. A coalition that can coordinate its investments, secure its supplies, share some critical production, and rapidly increase its industrial capacity will have a decisive advantage in protracted conflicts.

Conversely, an alliance whose industries remain fragmented, competing or dependent on external suppliers may discover, at the time of the crisis, that its political solidarity is no longer sufficient to compensate for its economic vulnerabilities.

VI. Alliances do not eliminate power relations; they organize them

Alliances are often presented as communities of interest based on the sovereign equality of their members. This representation corresponds to international law: each state retains its legal personality, its government, its army and its freedom of decision. However, it only imperfectly describes the strategic reality. An alliance never makes power asymmetries disappear. It institutionalizes them.

This observation may seem trivial, but it is essential. States do not enter into an alliance with comparable resources. Some have a full defense industry, nuclear capability, a global intelligence network, and an ocean fleet. Others mainly bring a geographical position, infrastructure, manpower or strategic depth. The alliance does not erase these differences; it organizes the way in which they are put at the service of a common goal.

The literature in international relations has long distinguished between symmetrical alliances, in which the partners have relatively comparable capabilities, and asymmetric alliances, dominated by a guarantor power. Glenn Snyder, in *Alliance Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1997), shows that the stability of an alliance depends less on the initial balance of capabilities than on the way in which the partners manage two contradictory risks: abandonment (*abandonment*) and entrainment (*entrapment*).

The first risk is that of an ally who fears that he will not be rescued at the decisive moment. The second is that of an ally who fears being dragged into a conflict he did not choose. These two concerns structure practically all contemporary alliances. The Baltic states, Poland and Finland attach particular importance to the credibility of the American commitment to Russia. Their main concern is that of abandonment. Conversely, several of the United States' Asian partners regularly wonder about the risk of being dragged into a major confrontation between Washington and Beijing over Taiwan or the South China Sea.

These two logics are not incompatible; they often coexist within the same alliance. The dominant power seeks to reassure its partners without giving them a sense of impunity. The allies are seeking a credible guarantee without losing their diplomatic freedom.

This tension is particularly visible in the recurrent debate on **burden sharing**. For a long time, this notion was reduced to a budgetary issue. The United States criticized some European allies for devoting an insufficient share of their national wealth to their defense. The Europeans replied that their contribution could not be assessed solely through an accounting indicator.

There was some truth in both positions, but the debate missed the point. True burden-sharing is not about distributing expenses fairly; it consists of distributing strategic functions. An alliance needs space intelligence, strategic lift, air-to-air refuelling, missile defence, cyber defence, command, logistics, industrial capabilities, ground forces, surface ships, submarines, combat aviation and ammunition stockpiles. Not all of these features have the same cost or importance.

A state can devote 3% of its GDP to spending mainly on military pensions or personnel costs without significantly strengthening the collective capabilities of its alliance. Conversely, a targeted investment in integrated air defence, drones, satellites or port infrastructure can produce a much greater strategic effect.

This development has been recognised by NATO itself. At the 2025 Hague Summit, Allies adopted a new spending target of 5% of GDP by 2035, of which 3.5% is dedicated to essential

military needs and 1.5% to critical infrastructure, resilience, innovation and the industrial base. This decision is particularly significant. It reflects the gradual abandonment of a purely accounting vision of defence in favour of a systemic approach, integrating the economy, civilian infrastructure and industry into military readiness.

This evolution reveals a deeper phenomenon. Contemporary alliances no longer seek only to spread costs; they seek to distribute vulnerabilities. A port infrastructure in Poland, a maintenance centre in Germany, a missile factory in France, an American satellite constellation, a British shipyard or an Italian electronic warfare capability are all components of the same strategic system.

This distribution increases collective resilience, but it also reinforces interdependencies. The more critical functions are distributed among several partners, the more essential political cohesion becomes.

VII. Nuclear deterrence remains the invisible heart of many alliances

No military capability better illustrates this asymmetry than nuclear weapons. Most contemporary alliances are based, directly or indirectly, on a nuclear power as guarantor.

Within NATO, the ultimate credibility of collective defence remains linked to the American, British and French arsenals, even if the modalities of their use differ significantly. In Asia, Japan, South Korea and Australia are also benefiting from what Washington calls extended deterrence, i.e. the extension of the American nuclear umbrella to non-nuclear-weapon states.

This architecture has a dual objective. The first is obviously to deter a major attack on the allies. The second is much less often mentioned, but just as important: preventing nuclear proliferation.

Since the 1960s, the American guarantee has convinced several allies to give up developing their own nuclear arsenals. Japan, South Korea, Germany and Italy have the necessary industrial capacity to launch a military nuclear programme if their governments decide to do so. Their choice not to do so rests largely on the credibility of the American strategic umbrella.

This logic is explicitly recalled in the US Department of Defense's Nuclear Posture Review, which presents the extension of deterrence as an instrument of international stability as well as of protection for allies. The document is available on the Department of Defense website: https://media.defense.gov.

However, this architecture raises a question that strategists have been debating for more than sixty years. Would a nuclear power really accept to risk the destruction of its own territory to defend an ally?

Thomas Schelling, in *Arms and Influence* (1966), summed up this dilemma with a formula that has remained famous: the credibility of deterrence is based less on the certainty of a reaction than on the impossibility for the adversary to exclude this reaction. In other words, deterrence works precisely because no one can demonstrate that the guarantor power would remain inactive.

This ambiguity is one of the foundations of contemporary nuclear stability. It also explains why alliances invest so much in political consultations, joint exercises, and forward stationing of certain forces. The permanent deployment of American soldiers in Poland, South Korea or Japan is not only aimed at strengthening local military capabilities. It creates what American strategists call a tripwire. The term is difficult to translate into French. It literally refers to a "trigger wire".
The presence of U.S. military personnel ensures that an attack on an ally would immediately hit U.S. forces, making it politically much more difficult for Washington to make a decision not to intervene. Military integration thus becomes a mechanism for political credibility.

VIII. Alliances remain vulnerable to political change

Military integration has a limit that neither technology, nor interoperability, nor the industrialization of cooperation can completely erase: an alliance remains a political decision that is constantly renewed.

The general staffs can plan together for decades. Industries can develop joint programmes with a life cycle of more than forty years. The armies may share the same doctrines, the same procedures and sometimes the same infrastructures. None of these forms of integration, however, removes the political sovereignty of states. Ultimately, the decision to commit forces, escalate or change strategic priorities remains in the hands of governments.

This reality explains why alliances are often more fragile politically than they appear militarily. Recent history shows that divergences are rarely about available capacity. They are more concerned with the assessment of national interests and the acceptable level of risk. The Iraq crisis of 2003 deeply divided several NATO members without calling into question the existence of the Alliance. Twenty years later, the withdrawal from Afghanistan has reminded us of another reality: even within a highly integrated coalition, the power that provides the bulk of the strategic capabilities retains a decisive influence on final decisions. While the allies were consulted, the timetable and modalities of the withdrawal were first decided in Washington, illustrating the particular weight of the guarantor power in an asymmetrical alliance.

The recurrent debates on burden-sharing within NATO follow the same logic. Behind the controversies over military spending lies a more fundamental question: how far do the allies' strategic interests really remain convergent? Successive US administrations have expressed different expectations of their European partners, whether it is the defence effort, the relationship with China or the distribution of responsibilities in the continent's security. These variations do not call into question the Alliance, but they are a reminder that no treaty definitively freezes the political priorities of a State.

This observation goes far beyond the Euro-Atlantic framework. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) provides a particularly revealing illustration of this. Presented as the main Russian-led security apparatus in the post-Soviet space, its credibility was damaged when Armenia felt that it had not received the support expected during the clashes with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Yerevan's criticisms have highlighted a classic limitation of alliances: the solidarity displayed in the texts can be interpreted differently when the interests of the main members diverge.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is based on a comparable ambiguity. Its gradual enlargement strengthens its geopolitical weight, but also brings together states whose strategic interests do not always coincide. India and Pakistan have a historic rivalry, while Beijing and New Delhi continue to compete on their Himalayan border and for influence in Asia. The SCO works precisely because it does not seek to turn these states into military allies in the Western sense; it is more of a framework for flexible cooperation than a system of collective defence.

Even the rapprochement between China and Russia, often presented as the emergence of a strategic bloc, deserves to be nuanced. The two powers share a common interest in challenging aspects of the US-dominated international order, but their goals are not identical. Russia remains mainly concerned about its European and Eurasian neighbourhood; China is focusing its priorities on the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan and global technological competition. Their

interests converge on several issues, without being confused. This difference explains why Beijing carefully avoids any formal military alliance that could restrict its freedom of action.

These examples remind us of a constant rule of strategy: alliances never suppress national interests; they create a framework in which these interests can converge long enough to produce joint action. Their solidity therefore depends less on the intensity of political declarations than on the permanence of this convergence.

It is precisely to maintain this convergence that contemporary alliances invest so much in the mechanisms of permanent consultation. Regular summits, ministerial meetings, exchanges of officers, joint planning, multinational exercises, joint industrial programmes and cooperation between intelligence services are not mere administrative routines. They make it possible to gradually align threat perceptions, to build a common strategic culture and to limit the risks of divergence when a crisis occurs.

Ultimately, the true cohesion of an alliance is not measured when everyone shares the same analysis of a situation. It reveals itself when interests begin to diverge. As long as governments continue to consider that the cost of disunity would be greater than the cost of the compromises necessary to maintain cooperation, the alliance retains its credibility. When, on the other hand, this belief is eroded, no amount of military integration, no matter how far, can sustainably compensate for the weakening of political will.

Conclusion — Alliances no longer only guarantee security; they organize power

The question is no longer whether alliances remain useful. Recent conflicts have already provided the answer. In Ukraine, the Middle East, the Red Sea or the Indo-Pacific, no state can sustainably sustain a high-intensity military effort without relying on a network of partners. Alliances therefore remain at the heart of security strategies. On the other hand, their function has changed profoundly.

During the Cold War, an alliance served primarily to deter aggression by giving credibility to a collective response. The logic was territorial: to protect a border, to defend a space, to prevent an invasion. This conception has not disappeared, but it is now insufficient. Power relations are now played out as much in supply chains as on the front lines, as much in data centers as in staffs, as much in industrial capacities as in nuclear arsenals.

A contemporary alliance is therefore no longer limited to coordinating armies. It organizes an ecosystem. It connects industries, laboratories, intelligence services, critical infrastructure, digital networks, satellite operators, logistics systems and policymakers. Its real strength lies less in the text on which it is founded than in the interdependencies it builds over time. The deeper these interdependencies, the more costly it becomes – militarily, economically and politically – to break off cooperation.

It is precisely this evolution that explains the multiplication of security formats observed over the past fifteen years. NATO, AUKUS, the Quad, Five Eyes, American bilateral agreements in Asia, European security partnerships, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the CSTO and the cooperation developed by the Gulf powers do not all pursue the same objectives. Some guarantee collective defence, others facilitate intelligence sharing, others accelerate technological innovation or secure maritime spaces. What they have in common is elsewhere: they all seek to structure a favourable strategic environment before a crisis erupts.

This development also requires a review of the notion of sovereignty. For a long time, this was equated with independence. In a world where military superiority depends on satellites, semiconductors, digital networks, critical raw materials and a global industrial base, this definition is no longer operative. No state, not even the United States or China, is completely autonomous. True sovereignty now consists in controlling its dependencies, diversifying them and preventing an essential strategic function from being interrupted by the decision of a single partner.

This is probably where the main transformation of contemporary alliances lies. They do not reduce dependencies; they redistribute them. They determine who produces critical capabilities, who controls critical infrastructure, who sets technological standards, and who ultimately bears the cost of collective security. An alliance therefore never erases the balance of power. It gives them a lasting and institutionalized form.

The result is a consequence that is rarely explicitly formulated: in the twenty-first century, power is no longer measured solely by what a state is capable of doing alone. It is also measured by his ability to organize the resources of others around his own interests. This is undoubtedly what distinguishes the great powers from the middle powers today. The former do not only have larger armed forces; they structure the networks in which others evolve.

Alliances are therefore no longer simple guarantees of security. They have become instruments for the organization of world power. To understand them as defense treaties would be to look at them with the categories of the previous century. Understanding them as

architectures of dependencies, capacities and influence allows, on the contrary, to explain why they now occupy a central place in contemporary strategic competition.