

Towards Coexistence and Cooperation: NATO and China



NATO ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR L'OTAN



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The NATO Association of Canada

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NATO Looks East: Adapting to China's Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

In his speech at the Raisina Dialogue 2021 Conference, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted that “China is coming closer to us. And this requires our collective attention and action.”¹ Though China’s growth both economically and militarily has been on NATO’s radar for some time, it has significantly spiked as a priority in recent years. Recognizing the shifting global dynamics, adapting to them and enhancing internal capabilities will allow NATO to meet the various challenges that China poses in the international arena. Before elaborating upon its China strategy, NATO must reassess its values and objectives for a new era and mend its internal divisions. NATO’s strategy concerning China moving forward should emphasize the enhancement of both its traditional and non-traditional mechanisms of defence, greater engagement with its global partners, reaffirmation of deterrence, and the development of improved trust and communication mechanisms towards China.

¹ Jens Stoltenberg. Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Raisina Dialogue 2021 Conference. Other. *NATO*, April 2021.
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_183011.htm?selectedLocale=ru



Image 1: NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg at Raisina Dialogue. (Source: NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_183009.htm)

Background

Since the London declaration of 2019, where its “opportunities and challenges” were mentioned behind assertive but non-confrontational language, China’s increasing influence and dominance internationally has been a key NATO focus.² Though perceiving NATO as a low-priority, much of China’s hesitancy towards the Alliance’s activity stems from its understanding of NATO as a fundamentally US-centric entity whose function, as a tool of Washington, may threaten China’s ability to build an international network and Beijing-oriented bilateral relationships.³ Under both the Obama and Trump administrations, the United States has promoted a heightened focus on China, with special attention on containing its

² NATO, ‘London Declaration’, 4 December 2019.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm.

³ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. “China’s Rise as a Global Security Actor: Implications for NATO,” China Security Project in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2020, p. 6.

military modernization.⁴ To China, NATO is a necessary political force for the US to maintain its global hegemony, and consequently, the Alliance acts as a “piece in its broader geopolitical competition with the United States.”⁵ Despite this, there are various perspectives regarding the extent to which NATO factors into China’s strategic security analysis and how this has shifted in recent years in response to the Alliance’s increased focus on China.⁶ Chinese spokespeople, though not necessarily focusing on NATO as a strategic threat, have instead approached NATO by urging the Alliance to stop propagating “China threat” theories and acknowledge China’s interests with more nuance.⁷

China’s reluctant attitude towards collaborating with NATO is also formed, in part, by the legacy of previous negative encounters that fractured relations between the two. A key incident was the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Though then-US President Bill Clinton’s apology aided in restoring some diplomatic relations, it did little to rectify the hostile feelings towards NATO generated by the deaths of three Chinese journalists killed in the bombing.⁸ Further, China believes that this was a deliberate targeting by the US under NATO auspices and this concern resurfaces frequently when NATO cooperation is mentioned.⁹

⁴ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. “China’s Rise as a Global Security Actor: Implications for NATO,” China Security Project in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2020, p. 6.

Marcel De Haas. "Partners and Competitors: NATO and the (Far) East." *Atlantisch Perspectief* 37, no. 3 (2013): 9-14, p. 13.

⁵ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. “China’s Rise as a Global Security Actor: Implications For NATO,” China Security Project in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2020, p. 6.

⁶ BBC. “Beijing Tells Nato to Stop Hying up China Threat.” BBC News. BBC, June 15, 2021.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57479969>.

⁷ Li Wei, ed. “China Urges NATO to View China’s Development in Rational Manner.” Chinese Military Online (Source), June 15, 2021.
http://www.81.cn/jwywpc/2021-06/15/content_10048913.htm.

⁸ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. “China’s Rise as a Global Security Actor: Implications For NATO,” China Security Project in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2020, p. 6.

⁹ Ibid.

The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident that resulted in an arms embargo and arms-trade restrictions imposed by the EU and US has also negatively impacted China's perception of NATO.

In the early 2000s, the potential for limited cooperation emerged. During this time, China's international and military presence was much less ambitious than it is today and it was far from having a robust global presence and blue-water navy.¹⁰ The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the US resulted in the development of mutual interests between China and the US against Islamist extremism.¹¹ At the time, China's interest in the Middle East centred around preventing spillover terrorism and consequently, it benefited from any stability NATO produced in the region.¹² Though NATO enlargement into the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) made China wary, counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden and North-Eastern Africa presented some short-lived opportunities for multilateral *ad-hoc* collaboration and learning opportunities for the People's Liberation Army (PLA).¹³

Internal Strategy and Cohesion

In 2015, China and Russia participated in joint military exercises in the Mediterranean and again in 2017 in the Baltic Sea.¹⁴ It was such moves, in addition to China's increasingly aggressive efforts to establish dominance in European cyberspace and technological sectors, as

¹⁰ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. "NATO's China Challenge," Podcast Interview for *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, November 23, 2020.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 27.

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

Michael Paul. "Partnership on the High Seas: China and Russia's Joint Naval Manoeuvres." *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, no. 26. German Institute for International and Security Affairs, June 2019, p. 2.

https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C26_pau.pdf.

well as enlarge its presence in the Arctic, that have forced European decision-makers to recognize the growing threat that China poses. Such actions have also spurred the US to label China as not only a “long-term strategic competitor” but also the “greatest threat to the West.”¹⁵ Thus far, NATO members have voiced a variety of concerns and ideas regarding how to approach China, with some viewing collaboration more favourably than others. However, the problem for NATO remains that its Allies “are engaged in a contest of liberalisms” that fails to cohesively rally behind NATO’s foundational principles of liberty, democracy and the rule of law.¹⁶

Division within NATO encompasses a variety of components including geostrategy, economy and tactics. The unique great-power tension between the US and China cannot be escaped. Whereas the US is pushing European NATO members for a hardline stance on China, many members within Europe still perceive Russia as the most immediate threat - largely due to Russia’s geographic proximity.¹⁷ Notably, several Eastern and Central European NATO members, that rely more heavily on the US’s support in their efforts to mitigate Russian ambitions, remain aligned with the US’s firm stance on China.¹⁸ Such divisions have also resulted in some European powers rejecting the notion of an inherently binary choice between the US and China, instead favouring a focus on developing “the union as an autonomous pole

¹⁵ Luis Simón. “EU-NATO Cooperation in an Era of Great-Power Competition,” Report. *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2019, p. 3.

¹⁶ Sten Rynning. “A renewed collective defense bargain? NATO in Covid’s shadow.” Report. *NATO Defense College*, September 2020, p. 2.

¹⁷ Mikkel Runge Olesen. “What to do about China?: Forging a compromise between the US and Europe in NATO,” Report. *Danish Institute for International Studies*, 2021, p. 2.

NATO. “NATO 2030: United for a New Era.” NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 27.

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

Marcel De Haas. “Partners and Competitors: NATO and the (Far) East.” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 37, no. 3 (2013): 9-14, p. 13.

¹⁸ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. “NATO’s China Challenge,” Podcast Interview for *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, November 23, 2020.

in great-power politics.”¹⁹ Despite this, many of these European members still maintain a “closer political allegiance to Washington than Brussels.”²⁰

Other key European powers, such as France and Germany, prefer a more flexible approach that aligns with the strategic framework outlined by the EU which states that “China is simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”²¹ This sentiment was also highlighted in NATO 2030 which states: “For most, China is both an economic competitor and significant trade partner. China is, therefore, best understood as a full-spectrum systemic rival, rather than a purely economic player or an only Asia-focused security actor.”²²

The internal division of interests within NATO also stems from the evolution of NATO’s political purpose. Shifting international dynamics have pushed NATO into various roles, including as a crisis management tool, rather than its original purpose as a preventative, collective defence organization.²³ The Trump administration’s approach to China, emphasizing great-power competition, resulted in greater political incentive to support European strategic and political autonomy; however, a “Western house divided will benefit China.”²⁴ In order to ensure a strong trajectory for NATO’s role in the future, its members must reassess the

¹⁹ Luis Simón. “EU-NATO Cooperation in an Era of Great-Power Competition,” Report. *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2019, p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ European Commission. Rep. “EU-China - A Strategic Outlook,” *European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council*, 12 March 2019, p. 1.

²² NATO. “NATO 2030: United for a New Era.” NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 27. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

²³ Ibid, p. 22.

²⁴ Luis Simón. “EU-NATO Cooperation in an Era of Great-Power Competition,” Report. *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2019, p. 2.

principles motivating their mutual commitment to collective defence and define clear strategic goals that support this vision.²⁵

Mending internal divisions on NATO's China response and strengthening the general political cohesion of NATO should be a priority for the Alliance going forward. This is a critical step in establishing a foundation from which NATO can adapt to the growing challenges posed by China as such divergences "enable external actors, and in particular, Russia and China, to exploit intra-Alliance differences and take advantage of individual Allies in ways that endanger their collective interests and security."²⁶ Additionally, this approach is significant when considering both traditional geographical and functional areas of operation as well as emerging spheres, such as cyber security, emerging technologies and strategic communications.²⁷ NATO must adapt to consolidate a comprehensive strategy that addresses numerous interconnected threats and do so with an enhanced commitment to NATO's basis of political cohesion: shared values embedded in "democracy, rule of law and individual liberty."²⁸ An internal revision will allow NATO to re-evaluate its purpose for the 21st century, with particular emphasis on returning to its original purpose of collective defence.²⁹

MENA

Western actors are no longer dominant, independent actors in the MENA, with China and Russia showing increasing initiative and a greater presence in the region.³⁰ Both China and

²⁵ Sten Rynning. "A renewed collective defense bargain? NATO in Covid's shadow." Report. *NATO Defense College*, September 2020, p. 1.

²⁶ NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 9.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 10, 50.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 22.

³⁰ Thierry Tardy. "From NATO's partnerships to security networks," from the Report: *NATO 2030: new technologies, new conflicts, new partnerships*, NATO Defense College, 2021, p. 40.

Russia are also moving further south to compete with Western powers.³¹ Part of this trend is due to a gradual US withdrawal from the region and a general shift in US-MENA interests that became evident under both the Obama and Trump administrations.³² Though this is creating asymmetrical power imbalances between MENA states relying on Chinese support, many are eager to take advantage of this opportunity. As Mostafa Ibrahim, deputy head of the China Committee in the Egyptian Businessmen's Association, noted: "There are economic powers who have the ability to help us but not the desire, and others who have the desire but not the ability. China tops the list of those who have both the ability and the desire."³³ Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has not been shy about his fondness for China, paying several visits to the country since he became president and welcoming more than \$15 billion in Chinese foreign direct investments into Egypt as part of Egypt's diversification policy in response to decreasing Western relations.³⁴

With a similar increase in tense relations between Turkey under President Erdoğan and Europe, Turkey is also benefiting from an increased Chinese presence in the region. In 2013 talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Erdoğan stated that: "If we [Turkey] get into the SCO, we will say good-bye to the European Union. The Shanghai Five [former name of the SCO] is better - much more powerful."³⁵ Moreover, he highlighted the "common values"

³¹ Thierry Tardy. "From NATO's partnerships to security networks," from the Report: *NATO 2030: new technologies, new conflicts, new partnerships*, NATO Defense College, 2021, p. 40.

³² Jonathan Fulton. "China's Changing Role in the Middle East," Report. *Atlantic Council*, 2019: 10-13, p. 10.

³³ Heba Saleh. "Egypt Sees Chinese Investment, and Tourists as a 'Win-Win' Boost." *Financial Times*. *Financial Times*, October 30, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/e490d960-7613-11e8-8cc4-59b7a8ef7d3d>

³⁴ Jonathan Fulton. "China's Changing Role in the Middle East," Report. *Atlantic Council*, 2019: 10-13, p. 12.

³⁵ Raffaello Pantucci, and Alexandros Petersen. "Turkey: Abandoning the EU for the SCO?" *The Diplomat*, November 11, 2013. <https://thediplomat.com/2013/02/turkey-abandoning-the-eu-for-the-sco/>

Turkey shares with SCO member states, foreshadowing a developing, potential territorial security concern for Europe and NATO.³⁶

Israel is one of the few MENA countries hesitant to deepen its ties to China. Much development has been achieved in terms of the Israeli-Chinese economic relationship, however, Israel is wary of greenlighting broader Chinese infrastructure projects within the country as they are seen as potential security threats.³⁷ Moreover, due to Israel's strong relationship with the US, it is unlikely that a warm reception to Chinese influence will be forthcoming.³⁸

China's Eurasian presence and influence is also growing due to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - a global connectivity project for infrastructure, trade and energy.³⁹ Moreover, the BRI provides China with easier access throughout Central, South and Southeast Asia, the MENA region and Europe.⁴⁰ Beyond the potential security threat of enhanced Chinese access to NATO spheres of operation, the BRI also poses serious balance and stability challenges, spanning from territorial disputes to environmental unsustainability.⁴¹ For European NATO states, the BRI is undermining internal cohesion by creating tensions in economic competition for Asian markets and rupturing existing trade patterns in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.⁴²

³⁶ Raffaello Pantucci, and Alexandros Petersen. "Turkey: Abandoning the EU for the SCO?" *The Diplomat*, November 11, 2013.

<https://thediplomat.com/2013/02/turkey-abandoning-the-eu-for-the-sco/>

³⁷ Jonathan Fulton. "China's Changing Role in the Middle East," Report. *Atlantic Council*, 2019: 10-13, p. 12 - 13.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13.

³⁹ Zi Yang. "Securing China's Belt and Road Initiative," Report. *United States Institute of Peace*, 2018, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Anu Anwar. "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward," from *Hindsight, Insight, Foresight: Thinking About Security in the Indo-Pacific*. Report. Edited by Vuving Alexander L. Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2020. 161-78, p. 161.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 162.

⁴² Gustaaf Geeraerts. "Europe and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Growing Concerns, More Strategy," Security Policy Brief. Egmont Institute, 2019, p. 2.

Despite these concerns, there is potential for NATO to take advantage of the challenges posed by this initiative to shape stability and development in the MENA region.

Part of NATO's adaptation strategy must be to evaluate the threat that increased Chinese influence in the Middle East poses and specifically how asymmetrical power relationships and dependencies on China from within the MENA region may influence international dynamics, particularly within global forums and mutual areas of discussion. Within the NATO sphere, NATO should work to maintain some cooperation with China in a clear domain of shared interests, such as containing the threat from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, among other Islamist terrorist groups.⁴³ Until NATO consolidates its political trajectory, a challenge for NATO will be balancing opportunities for collaboration between competing interests and values. China's opportunistic international relations strategy allows it to more broadly spread its influence, with less regard to the domestic policies of given countries and whether their values align. In contrast, NATO is much more determined to build relationships with countries that share some of its values, however, this strategy may need to be reassessed in order to contain Chinese influence in the MENA region.

Arms Control Arrangements and Nuclear Weapons

Expansion of both nuclear weapons and conventional forces has been a key area of China's military modernization.⁴⁴ China has developed "long-range strike capabilities" among other technologies that increasingly pose a threat to the Euro-Atlantic.⁴⁵ China has frequently criticized both the US and NATO more generally for their large military capabilities but has

⁴³ Marcel De Haas. "Partners and Competitors: NATO and the (Far) East." *Atlantisch Perspectief* 37, no. 3 (2013): 9-14, p. 12 - 13.

⁴⁴ NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 36.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

indicated, albeit ambiguously, that it would be willing to enter negotiations if both Russia and the US were to reduce their nuclear arsenals.⁴⁶ Since the end of the Cold War, both Russia and the US have committed to a 90% reduction in their respective nuclear arsenals.⁴⁷ China, on the other hand, has expanded its anti-ship ballistic missile inventory, deployed its military capabilities – including to bases in northern Africa – and placed warheads on its DF-41 ballistic missile inventory.⁴⁸ Though it has maintained a ‘no first use’ policy regarding its nuclear weapons, recent debates among Chinese strategists have proposed amendments to this policy which raised concerns about China’s evolving arms control and nuclear weapons management.⁴⁹ Consequently, the Chinese reduction in its military arsenal based on US and Russian reductions is not guaranteed, particularly within the framework of deteriorated international trust.

The international community, more broadly, has equally criticized P5 nuclear weapon states, who are members of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), of advocating for limited nuclear and conventional capabilities for others, whilst not adhering to their own professed standards.⁵⁰ Finding a way to balance international concerns without negatively limiting their own capacity in the long run will be critical for NATO members moving forward. Moreover, given that China’s arms response is, in part, contingent on how NATO’s nuclear members handle their respective arsenals, NATO should reassess its stance and develop a potential agreement to which China might be receptive.

⁴⁶ Christine Leah and Adam B. Lowther. "Conventional Arms and Nuclear Peace." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2017): 14-24, p. 17.

Patricia M. Kim. "Chinese Perceptions on Nuclear Weapons, Arms Control, and Nonproliferation," Report. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Christine Leah and Adam B. Lowther. "Conventional Arms and Nuclear Peace." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2017): 14-24, p. 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Patricia M. Kim. "Chinese Perceptions on Nuclear Weapons, Arms Control, and Nonproliferation," Report. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018, p. 1 - 2.

⁵⁰ Christine Leah and Adam B. Lowther. "Conventional Arms and Nuclear Peace." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2017): 14-24, p. 17.

Arms control, non-proliferation, disarmament and nuclear deterrence have all been cornerstones of NATO's bid to develop and preserve a stable international arena.⁵¹ Though China is party to a number of multilateral arms control agreements and treaties such as the NPT, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Material and the Biological Weapons Convention, it maintains a high level of opacity to protect its relatively small nuclear arsenal.⁵² Moreover, given the strained communication mechanisms that have resulted in accusations of states violating the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty from both sides, the likelihood for new arms control and nuclear deterrence initiatives seems low.⁵³ However, China has "firmly opposed" the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and has participated in international non-proliferation efforts.⁵⁴ More importantly, the consequences of increased, opaque arms proliferation is unfavourable to international powers more broadly and consequently, this could be a starting point for further discussions between NATO and China.

Much of China's nuclear nonproliferation is contingent on NATO's nuclear member states reducing their arsenal. The problem of deteriorated trust and communication mechanisms has, however, resulted in neither side feeling confident that the other will satisfy its commitments. If NATO is able to rebuild these mechanisms with China, this area could become one of emerging mutual interests. NATO's further ability to strengthen its own political cohesion and enhance its security commitments could also prove to be useful in deterring China. As any regional tensions due to an arms race or broader conflict would be extremely costly to China's goal of becoming a "world class power by 2049," NATO can base its

⁵¹ NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 36.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

⁵² Patricia M. Kim. "Chinese Perceptions on Nuclear Weapons, Arms Control, and Nonproliferation," Report. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018, p. 3 - 4.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

approach in this field on how nonproliferation is advantageous for China's own domestic interests, thereby establishing a basis for cooperation on this front.⁵⁵ By aligning arms control agreements and nuclear nonproliferation within the framework of China's goals, NATO can build a common ground from which to enhance its relations with China and restart communication mechanisms.

Military - To Europe through Russia

Though the emerging challenges that NATO faces from China may take on non-traditional means, recognizing the growing relationship and military partnership between China and Russia is key. In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, China seized the opportunity to expand its relations with Russia, taking advantage of their mutual disaffection with the West and interests-based cooperation. Since 2014, Russia and China have increased their relationship both economically and militarily - this includes a gas megadeal signed in May 2014, worth \$400 billion, and an agreement to a joint design and production project on civil aircrafts.⁵⁶ Moreover, Chinese officials have alluded to a broader strengthening of ties in order to "create a community with a common destiny" which has also been frequently referenced by President Xi and in broader PRC foreign policy strategies, particularly with

⁵⁵ Patricia M. Kim. "Chinese Perceptions on Nuclear Weapons, Arms Control, and Nonproliferation," Report. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018, p. 3 - 4.

⁵⁶ Michal Makocki and Nicu Popescu. "China and Russia: An Eastern Partnership in the Making?" Report. *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, 2016: 27 - 38, p. 27.

Alexander Korolev. "Russia's Reorientation to Asia: Causes and Strategic Implications." *Pacific Affairs* 89, no 1, 2016: 53 - 73, p. 56.

regard to China's neighbours.⁵⁷ The cooperative growth between two NATO adversaries is heightening unease among European member states concerned about Russia's territorial ambitions and the increasing proximity of Chinese power to Europe.

Although China may not yet pose a direct geostrategic threat to European NATO members, increased Sino-Russian military cooperation and Chinese expansion into the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Arctic regions all reveal that China's global ambitions cannot be ignored. NATO's attention should turn to China's increasingly global-scale military developments, particularly its long-range missiles and aircrafts, aircraft carriers, nuclear-attack submarines, space capabilities, and expanded nuclear arsenal, all highlighted by NATO 2030.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Li Fenglin as quoted in Michal Makocki and Nicu Popescu. "China and Russia: An Eastern Partnership in the Making?" Report. *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, 2016: 27 - 38, p. 27.

Jacob Mardell. "The 'Community of Common Destiny' in Xi Jinping's New Era." *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017.
<https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-community-of-common-destiny-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/>.

⁵⁸ NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 27.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.



Image 2: President Putin is awarded the Chinese Order of Friendship. (Source: Presidential Press and Information Office, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_awarded_the_Chinese_Order_of_Friendship_01.jpg)

Though China and Russia are often discussed concurrently, it is necessary to note that these two countries exist with independent and often, varying, interests. One need not look further than the Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War to recognize that shared ideological tendencies or political interests do not guarantee enduring cooperation. Further, the alliance between the USSR and the West during the Second World War demonstrates that, given a sufficient threat, many seemingly insurmountable differences can indeed be, albeit temporarily, surmounted. This fact provides an optimistic prospect for the future of NATO's international ambitions. NATO must develop policies with the understanding that these two countries often act with unique motivations and goals whilst also adapting its military strategy to potentially deal with Sino-Russian cooperation.

NATO should consider encouraging conversations on European security concerns in this domain with the EU, particularly through the expansion of the European Centre of

Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) - a joint project between NATO and the EU aiming to combat hybrid threats from soft power to traditional military mechanisms.⁵⁹ Ambiguity is a key issue within the framework of hybrid warfare and defining its methods and implications for NATO should be a key military adaptation. Additionally, strengthening military mobility throughout Europe will not only be a symbolic demonstration of heightened NATO capabilities but will also act as a form of deterrence in response to increased Russian-Chinese partnerships. Providing European NATO members with adequate assurance of territorial security through reinforcement may also help resolve some of the internal divisions within NATO, allowing NATO states to come together more cohesively in adapting their broader strategy towards China.

Indo-Pacific Concerns

An emerging area of concern for NATO in ensuring global peace and stability is China's push in the Indo-Pacific, particularly the extraction of oil and mineral resources in disputed areas of the South China Sea.⁶⁰ This is a problem for NATO as the Indo-Pacific lies outside its traditional sphere of operations, however, it is well aware that China's actions are stoking tensions in the region and have the potential to decrease international stability. Consequently, though some NATO involvement could ease disputes in the region, too large a commitment would severely over-stretch the Alliance, particularly for smaller members.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Luis Simón. "EU-NATO Cooperation in an Era of Great-Power Competition," Report. *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2019, p. 5.

"What Is Hybrid CoE." Hybrid CoE - The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, April 9, 2021.
<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/who-what-and-how/>.

⁶⁰ "It Will Be Bloody!: Duterte May Send Naval Ships over South China Sea Disputes." *South China Morning Post*, April 20, 2021.
<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3130207/it-will-be-bloody-philippines-duterte-threatens-stake>.

⁶¹ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. "NATO's China Challenge," Podcast Interview for *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, November 23, 2020.

NATO's global partners worldwide have been integral in building cooperative security, information sharing and capacity building networks.⁶² In order to address concerns over growing tensions in the South China Sea, NATO should engage its global partners, particularly Japan and South Korea, who are located in proximity to the region, and who both participated in the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting in December 2020 where the rise of China and shifting balances of power in the international arena were discussed.⁶³ NATO should increase its ties with global partners and enhance its existing relationships in order to neutralize tensions in the region. Moreover, these partnerships, whether new or existing, will have to be engaged in a proactive manner in which NATO outlines its strategic requirements to meet the challenge of developing and shifting international dynamics.⁶⁴

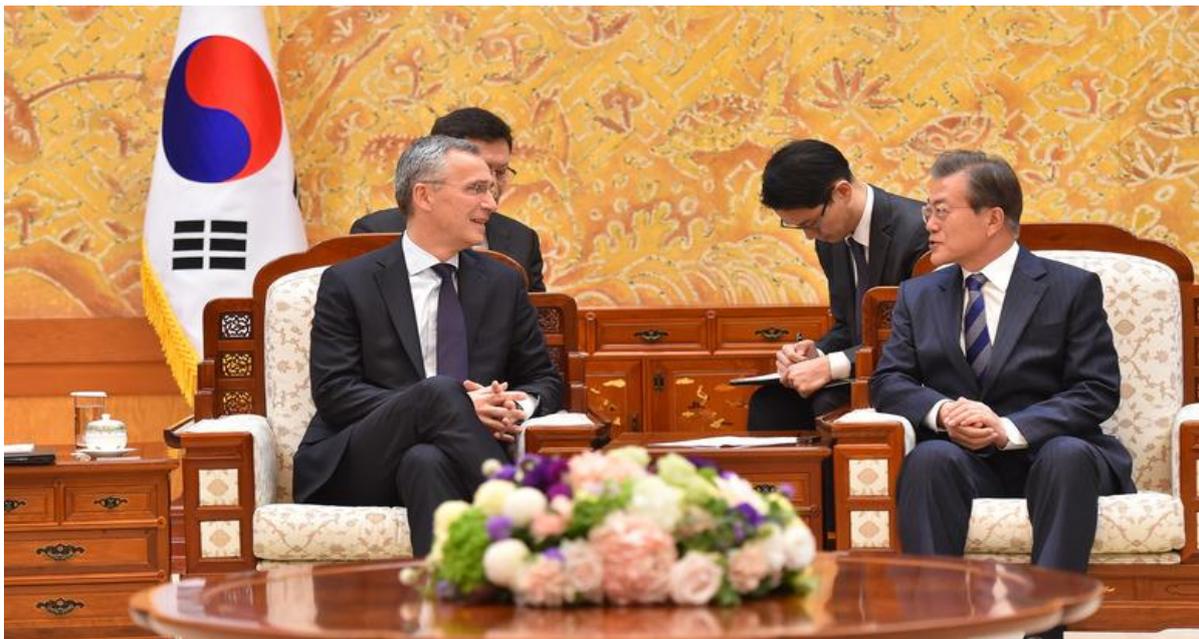


Image 3: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae-in (Source: NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50098.htm)

⁶² NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 57.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

⁶³ NATO. "Relations with the Republic of Korea," *NATO*, November 21, 2019.
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50098.htm.

NATO. "Relations with Japan." *NATO*, July 21, 2020.
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50336.htm.

⁶⁴ NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 58.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

Cybersecurity

Whilst developing its traditional military capacities, NATO must also recognize many rising threats in new domains, particularly in the cyber sphere. Amidst growing concerns of cyber espionage, cybersecurity is a key area of emerging concern between NATO and China. Going forward, increasing cybersecurity failures will result in the deterioration of national economic and privacy interests and will also serve as an indicator of broader national security issues.⁶⁵ NATO is at risk for cyberattacks targeting its networks and classified information. Since 2002, NATO has acknowledged the growing concern of the potential for cyber warfare to disrupt critical communication networks, particularly for the military.⁶⁶ To face this growing challenge, NATO's cyber defence policy of 2014 integrated a key addition - that Article 5 could also apply to a major digital attack.⁶⁷

As highlighted in NATO 2030, "A number of Allies have attributed cyber-attacks to actors based in China, identified intellectual property theft with implications for defence, and been subjected to disinformation campaigns originating in China, especially in the period since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic."⁶⁸ These disinformation campaigns aim to distract negative attention surrounding the origins and handling of the outbreak of Covid-19 by promoting "positive discourse" on China, such as the country's containment response to the pandemic and its donation of masks to Italy.⁶⁹ As outlined by the Atlantic Council, "In

⁶⁵ Luukas K. Ilves, Timothy J. Evans, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Alec A. Nadeau. "European Union and NATO Global Cybersecurity Challenges: A Way Forward." *PRISM* 6, no. 2 (2016): 126-141, p. 127.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ NATO. "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 27.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

⁶⁹ Atlantic Council, "Chinese Discourse Power: China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition." Atlantic Council. December 2020, p. 6.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/China-Discourse-Power-FINAL.pdf>

propagating disinformation, China is deliberately undertaking large-scale operations of producing and reproducing false or misleading information with the intention to deceive.”⁷⁰ The CCP and PLA often rely on outsourcing disinformation dissemination to content farms and freelancers in Malaysia or to overseas Chinese nationals as this prevents “detection and direct association” with the Chinese government.⁷¹ Further, “the produced content relies on the psychological bias that promotes tribal affiliations within target audiences with the end goal of instilling paranoia, one-dimensional critical thinking, and cognitive blindspots.”⁷²

Additionally, China employs a variety of cyber tools to influence NATO members, as well as independent NATO allies and partners through cyber-digital attacks and other digital disruption mechanisms.⁷³ This, in conjunction with China’s stated policies that emphasize its goal to become a “world leader in Artificial Intelligence by 2030” as well as the “world’s leading global technological superpower” by 2049, indicates that NATO should devote internal coordination to building a comprehensive cyber strategy that is capable of ensuring the integrity of NATO cybersecurity and information communications systems.⁷⁴

China has also demonstrated its willingness to promote cyber-governance ideas through the UN - particularly in voting with Russia to “create new cyber norms and standards that would enshrine the principles of ‘cyber sovereignty.’”⁷⁵ With increasing technological

⁷⁰ Atlantic Council, “Chinese Discourse Power: China’s Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition.” Atlantic Council. December 2020, p. 7.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/China-Discourse-Power-FINAL.pdf>

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 20 – 22.

⁷² Ibid, p. 7.

⁷³ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. “China’s Rise as a Global Security Actor: Implications for NATO,” China Security Project in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2020, p. 7.

⁷⁴ NATO. “NATO 2030: United for a New Era.” NATO, November 25, 2020, p. 27.
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

⁷⁵ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. “China’s Rise as a Global Security Actor: Implications for NATO,” China Security Project in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2020, p. 8.

infrastructure spreading throughout NATO states, cyber sovereignty principles are an emerging, intentional tool for China to spread its influence from within the borders of other sovereign states.⁷⁶ In 2015, EU governments put forward a common position on cyber diplomacy and the key questions it poses in cyber dialogues.⁷⁷ NATO must follow suit and provide not only a position reflective of increased internal political cohesion but one that specifies how the Alliance will address and counteract Chinese influence and targeting of NATO cyber domains. Potential Chinese-directed infringements on cyber sovereignty are likely to push NATO members closer together if they can consolidate internal cohesion on their foundational principles.

Since July of 2016, when NATO Allies made a “Cyber Defence Pledge” to make the enhancement of their cybersecurity networks a priority, all Allies have upgraded these defences. With greater information-sharing and mutual aid in “preventing, mitigating and recovering” from cyber-attacks, NATO has placed a growing emphasis on cyber “education, training and exercises” designed to enhance cybersecurity and defence operations.⁷⁸ NATO has also developed programs targeting cyber concerns, such as the NATO Cyber Rapid Reaction and the Cyberspace Operations Centre, as well as working more closely with the EU on a Technical Arrangement on Cyber Defence and as industry partners on a NATO Industry Cyber Partnership.⁷⁹

NATO’s cyber defence capabilities, including those at the NATO Computer Incident Response Capability (NCIRC), are focused on providing centralized cyber defence support and

⁷⁶ Luukas K. Ilves, Timothy J. Evans, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Alec A. Nadeau. "European Union and NATO Global Cybersecurity Challenges: A Way Forward." *PRISM* 6, no. 2 (2016): 126-141, p. 128.

⁷⁷ Luukas K. Ilves, Timothy J. Evans, Frank J. Cilluffo, and Alec A. Nadeau. "European Union and NATO Global Cybersecurity Challenges: A Way Forward." *PRISM* 6, no. 2 (2016): 126-141, p. 135.

⁷⁸ NATO. “Cyber Defence.” NATO, February 19, 2021. nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_78170.htm.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

updating cyber defence strategies in a rapidly-evolving technological environment.⁸⁰ Targets for NATO's cyber defence strategy are highlighted in its Defence Planning Process in order to facilitate a common, Alliance-wide adoption. Additionally, NATO's Smart Defence has been expanded to enable countries with limited resources to develop greater cyber defence capabilities.

As cybertechnology continues to advance at rapid rates, it is becoming increasingly clear that disputes and outright attacks on countries may be carried out in significantly new and evolving domains. Consequently, in order to ensure its collective defence capabilities, NATO must prioritize the development and enhancement of its cybersecurity technology and call on its global partners to supplement their information systems with robust security measures.

Signaling Trust and Communication

With a growing list of NATO concerns surrounding China, a further fracturing between the two may be on the horizon. The Covid-19 pandemic has done little to bolster the relationship and has instead intensified existing divides and weakened potential areas of shared cooperation between NATO and China. With international trust in China degraded and governments worldwide seeking to hold China accountable for its inability to contain the virus and its uncooperativeness in supporting WHO investigations, trust and communication mechanisms have reached an all-time low.⁸¹

China's growing presence in Europe and influence worldwide has prompted NATO to urge the use of "the language of power," a strategy consistent with the European Commission's call for a renewed focus on a "geopolitical commission" that highlights overlapping

⁸⁰ NATO. "Cyber Defence." NATO, February 19, 2021.
nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_78170.htm.

⁸¹ Brenda Goh. "China Refused to Give WHO Investigators Raw Data on Early Coronavirus Cases: Team Member." Global News. Global News, February 13, 2021.
<https://globalnews.ca/news/7639426/china-who-investigators-data/>.

geographical and foreign policy concerns.⁸² NATO must signal that there is room for a peaceful, prosperous, and stable China within the current international world order whilst also recognizing its own, internal, preventative need to enhance security capabilities in case of escalating tensions. The establishment of a NATO-China Council, similar to the NATO-Russia Council, has long been an idea floated regarding how to ameliorate communication networks between China and NATO.⁸³ In the context of international frustration due to Covid-19, now may be the ideal time to implement such a forum for recommencing communications with China.

Though NATO should be encouraged to improve its communication network with China, it should also be adamant in terms of acting as a collective unit. China's preference for bilateral relations over multilateral ones presents an opportunity for it to subvert NATO's Alliance-wide efforts by engaging individual NATO allies and thereby intensifying issues of political cohesion.⁸⁴ NATO states located in Central and Eastern Europe that are members of the 17 + 1 initiative are likely to be primary areas of focus for China.⁸⁵ However, NATO allies more broadly should be concerned about how their independent relations with China have the potential to undermine progress made within the Alliance. Further, NATO-China relations are bound to hold high levels of uncertainty in the near future. Consequently, NATO must proceed

⁸² Luis Simón. "EU-NATO Cooperation in an Era of Great-Power Competition," Report. *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2019, p. 3.

Financial Times Editorial Board. "A Commission to Stand up for Europe's Interests." *Financial Times*, September 10, 2019.

<https://www.ft.com/content/148cc9de-d3b6-11e9-a0bd-ab8ec6435630>.

⁸³ Marcel De Haas. "Partners and Competitors: NATO and the (Far) East." *Atlantisch Perspectief* 37, no. 3 (2013): 9-14, p. 14.

⁸⁴ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. "NATO's China Challenge," Podcast Interview for *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, November 23, 2020.

⁸⁵ Meia Nouwens and Helena Legarda. "China's Rise as a Global Security Actor: Implications for NATO," China Security Project in *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, December 2020, p. 7.

cautiously in building trust and communication mechanisms capable of achieving lasting peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: NATO must prioritize mending its internal political divisions regarding the growing challenge posed by China. It must clearly establish its vision for collective defence in the future, identify its approach towards China and develop strategic goals to meet the challenges China poses.

Recommendation 2: In order to mitigate tensions in regions beyond its traditional sphere of operations, such as the South China Sea, NATO should deepen ties with its non-member partners in those regions, particularly South Korea and Japan. NATO should engage its non-NATO partners, particularly in Asia, that have significant experience dealing with China, to consult on how best to approach and ensure cooperative, peaceful and stable relations with this rising power in the future

Recommendation 3: Through recognition of the growing threat that cyber technologies play in international relations, NATO must continue to update and advance its cybersecurity capabilities. This includes both NATO's internal strategy and developing closer information sharing networks with its global partners.

Recommendation 4: Rebuilding trust and developing communication mechanisms between NATO and China is integral for maintaining and promoting contact and discussion between the two as well as promoting areas of potential mutual interest, such as nuclear nonproliferation and counter-terrorism.

Recommendation 5: NATO must strengthen its European military capabilities, ensuring that it is able to counter the threat of increased Sino-Russian military cooperation. This includes developing both a coherent military strategy to address a joint threat, as well as advancing and enhancing existing military capabilities.

Conclusion

Though the multi-faceted challenges NATO faces concerning China are significant, they are not insurmountable. Moreover, NATO's ability to successfully resolve them depends firmly on its own ability to address internal political divisions, restore its motives and values behind collective defence, and build a stronger, external framework for future international projects. In approaching China, NATO should engage its global partners to encourage peace and stability, whilst enhancing its own traditional and non-traditional mechanisms of defence. Rebuilding trust and communication networks should also be a fundamental focus for NATO going forward, with particular emphasis on signaling the potential of international peace and security with a rising China.

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