



BACKGROUND REPORT

# NATO and China relations

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# 1 Preface

This background was created for the purpose of the Prague Student Summit NATO simulation. The aim of the text is to introduce the solar basis of relationships between NATO and the People's republic of China, the related current problematics, the position of the Alliance and the international milieu, and the contextual sectors

of possibly missing agendas. This background report should serve as a source of information that can be used by the delegates during negotiations. In the end, please consider the proposed question for future talks and attached sources of further data.

# 2 Introduction

"We recognize that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."<sup>1</sup> With the inclusion of this statement in the final declaration of London Summit 2019, the Alliance has recognized the importance of creating policy directed at relations between NATO and China for the first time in history. The announcement marked the formal beginning of a dialogue between NATO member states that seeks greater strategic cohesion between their approaches to China. Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stressed that NATO's and China's relations are at an intersection. "We have to address the fact that China is coming closer to us: in Africa, in the Arctic, in

cyberspace, and even in Europe," he notably stressed to support his case.<sup>2</sup> Although NATO does not seek to play an active role in the region of Asia, the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region cannot be separated from the Euro-Atlantic area as security threats become "transnationalized". Nevertheless, NATO does not have any formal meeting platform with China as it does with Russia, for example. Instead, separated political and military dialogue is held based on independent diplomatic activities between NATO member states and China. Moreover, while the USA recognizes China's activities as an important strategic threat, its European counterparts perceive investment partnerships with China as opportunities for economic growth.

### 3 China's changing role in the international scene

In recent years, new significant domestic developments have occurred in China itself and in the U.S.–China and Europe–China relations (both on the level of the European Union and bilateral levels) which present a changing landscape that requires better understanding. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, many significant changes have taken place in China, and consequently, heated debates about China and its policy have erupted. Prominent Western political leaders and analysts, predominantly from the United States, approach China in a hard, geostrategic way and perceive it more assertive and confrontational.<sup>3</sup> Further on, these perceptions lead to an increasing tension between the two. The steadily increasing U.S.–China rivalry and competition have consequently affected Europe — with governments, businesses, and other European actors all impacted.<sup>4</sup> Europeans perceive pressure to "choose" between the US and China in many sectors, with the belief that the European Union should find its autonomous path between the US and China.

#### 3.1 Economic punishments and mercantilist trade behaviour

Many NATO and the EU member countries have strong trade ties to China. These ties could be abused in the form of economic coercion. In addition, the strengthening enforcement of Chinese economic interests in Africa or the Balkans possibly threatens the strategic interests of both NATO and the EU through China's growing influence on political leadership within the key regions. In 2019, the European Commission officially described China as a "systemic rival". For Brussels, this new term mainly reflects the Chinese attempts to export its authoritarian model worldwide, for example, through investments in the Belt and Road Initiative and in the EU. In Europe, China seeks to introduce itself to the economically less developed states and acquire advanced technologies from the more advanced ones.<sup>5</sup> Even though the EU is not always on the same page

when dealing with specific issues, the general preference among the EU members is to deal with these commercial concerns multilaterally and via a strengthened World Trade Organisation (WTO).<sup>6</sup> In response to the increased volumes of Chinese investments into sensitive sectors, the European Parliament approved of a new investment screening framework that applies to the entire European Union. If member countries believe an investment could potentially impact their national security, they can request information from the country in which the investment is taking place. However, the EU cannot prevent its members from making the final decision to accept the investment.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, many countries, including the Balkan states, Hungary, Italy or Turkey, prefer to actively initiate economic cooperation projects between China and the Middle East on a domestic level.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the Alliance shares many of Washington's concerns about China. These concerns are directed at the efficiency of employing offensive economic tools, such as export controls. However, NATO predominantly adopts a political-strategic stance toward the Chinese question. In this order, NATO may serve as a coordination platform between the US and the EU, emphasizing the fact that China enters the security realm through 5G technologies, a crucial part of the future critical information infrastructure and through influence campaigns during the recent pandemics.<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.2 Military strategy and rapid modernization capacities

In May 2015, China's State Council Information Office published a white paper titled China's Military Strategy, which outlined how Beijing views the global security environment, what is China's role in that environment, and how it supports that role. Beijing's primary threat perceptions include domestic security issues that could undermine the strategic objective of sustaining the communist rule, notably including territorial

disputes. These concerns include the Taiwanese independence, Uighur and Tibetan separatism, and perceived challenges to China's control of disputed areas in the East and South China Seas.<sup>10</sup>

The overall capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have made significant advances in recent years as China continues to increase investment into the military equipment and modernization of military capabilities, such as long-range missiles or aircraft carriers. China also stands as a nuclear-weapon state and heavily invests in the modernization of its nuclear assembly. For instance, nuclear attack submarines pose potentially serious security implications for the US, given their defence commitments to Taiwan and mounting tensions between Washington and Beijing in the Pacific. Nevertheless, potential conflict between these two does not qualify for the activation of Article 5.

Likewise, China is investing in various space dual-use technologies as space becomes an increasingly critical enabler of military power. Kinetic, electronic, and cyber counter space weapons developed by China threaten to potentially disrupt or destroy any space-based infrastructure of the Allied countries.<sup>11</sup>

Allies are also regular targets of cyberattacks originating from cyber threat actors sponsored by the Chinese government. The majority of cyber operations aim to conduct political and economic espionage. As states become increasingly digitalized, relying on e-services, and data storage and with more people and services going online, hostile cyber actors exponentially gain more opportunities to attack, more information to steal or distort, and more systems to breach and paralyze.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2015, China has significantly modernized and expanded the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which can now conduct a broad range of manoeuvres in the Indo-Pacific area of operation that was unthinkable just a few years ago. China has also broadened and deepened its military presence beyond Asia. It has established its first overseas base in Djibouti, while PLA Navy ships regularly sail through the Gulf of Aden. Chinese ships also frequently pay port call visits

throughout the Asia-Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and Europe.

At the same time, China has also become involved in a range of international security activities overlapping with NATO's security interests, which harbour the potential for cooperation between China and the Allies. These issues include antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden; UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKO) in the Middle East and Africa; pandemic relief in Africa and Europe; environmental security or nuclear non-proliferation.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.3 Critical Infrastructure

Chinese investments in critical infrastructure across Europe, from telecommunications networks, port facilities, railways, and civilian roads, threaten NATO's mobility, as Allied countries might potentially lose control over important transport hubs in their territories. Consequently, this might weaken NATO's ability to respond in times of crisis.

Chinese state firms now control about one-tenth of all European port capacity. Currently, Chinese SOEs have invested in 12 ports in 7 NATO countries that are key for military mobility planning in the East, South, and Southeast of NATO.<sup>14</sup>

This deal followed a series of other acquisitions in Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain in just the last couple of years.<sup>15</sup> As ports represent crucial strategic and economic access points, their acquisition by a foreign power poses a threat to the nations. Moreover, the acquisitions were possibly followed by an increase in Chinese political influence. For example, since Cosco acquired a 51 per cent stake in the Greek port of Piraeus in 2016,<sup>16</sup> Greece has been accused of obstructing the EU's condemnations of China's abuse of human rights and aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea (SCS).

Telecommunications networks also play a crucial part of the critical infrastructure. If some allies were to include Huawei equipment in their 5G networks, the question about the integrity of their telecommunications would be raised, given the company's close ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Officials are especially

concerned about vague Chinese intelligence laws that could force Huawei to hand the data over to the Chinese government. Huawei's 5G infrastructure could contain backdoors, giving the Chinese government access to its inner workings and allowing Beijing to attack communications networks and public utilities. Incorporating Huawei technologies into the upcoming 5G infrastructure could allegedly serve as a gateway for Chinese espionage and sabotage of critical Western infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, these concerns are not shared among all NATO members. While the United States, the United Kingdom, France, or Belgium declared a ban on Huawei tenders, Hungary welcomes these tenders.<sup>18</sup>

China's advances in AI threaten to undermine NATO's current military and intelligence advantages. The New Chinese Generation AI Development Plan requires China to "catch up on AI technology and applications by 2020, achieve breakthroughs by 2025, and become a global leader in AI by 2030."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, China's rapid evolution of reconnaissance and disruptive technologies powered by AI has the potential to radically change the very character of the military conflicts, and therefore jeopardize the credibility and the functionality of the Alliance's collective defence. NATO, therefore, relies on its members to individually incorporate Artificial intelligence (AI) into their national defence capabilities.<sup>20</sup>

## 4 Conclusions and recommendations: NATO in the Pacific?

Despite the geographical distance, NATO can no longer ignore China's growing international presence and ambitions. NATO now seeks to form a coherent strategic approach towards Beijing which poses both direct and indirect challenges to the security and strategic interests of NATO, the Allies, and Partners. In August 2019, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that it was essential for "NATO to address the rise of China...not least by working closely with our partners in this region... This is not about moving NATO into the Pacific, but this is about responding to the fact that China is coming closer to us."<sup>21</sup> NATO then fully addressed China in Brussels Strategic Communique of 2021. The document bashed China's "challenges to the rules-based international order", expressed concerns over its "rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal" and "military modernization", criticized its "lack of transparency and use of disinformation", as well as China's increasing military cooperation with Russia. Simultaneously, however, NATO stressed its desire to maintain a constructive dialogue with Beijing.

During the upcoming NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022, NATO plans to outline its new Strategic Concept and reiterate its fundamental strategic purpose, nature, and security tasks vis-à-vis the increasingly non-military security challenges of the 21st century. These notably include China's growing political and economic influence in the Transatlantic region. However, as NATO is formed

by 30 Allies with at times opposing views of Beijing, forming a strong strategic approach towards the growing Chinese power will not be an easy task. <sup>22</sup>

### 4.1 Political recommendations

To address the security challenges addressed above, Allies should build on the existing points of consensus presented in the 2021 Brussels Communique and focus on the following:

→ Enhancing coordination among Allies to ensure that China's influential activities and initiatives will not allow Beijing to gain political support for positions that challenge the rules-based international order, including human rights abuse and unjust territorial claims, among the Allies and Partners.→ Despite sustaining unofficial political and military dialogue through high-level diplomatic interactions,<sup>23</sup> NATO does not have any existing formal dialogue platform with China.<sup>24</sup> Creating such a platform would be highly beneficial for sustaining diplomatic relationships.

→ Since 2016, NATO has increasingly engaged politically with its four Asia-Pacific partners – Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand. NATO should primarily focus on strengthening partnerships with these key states in the SCS and further developing cooperation, notably for example, through meetings of the North Atlantic Council (NAC).<sup>25</sup> Strengthening

information and intelligence sharing among these partners who possess better experience regarding China, and increasing the sharing of analytical outcomes would greatly benefit the resistance against threats that China embodies.

→ When developing an official platform for dialogue, NATO should predominantly emphasize activities of shared interests.<sup>26</sup> These include antipiracy patrols in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, the UN peace-keeping operations (UNPKO) in the Middle East and Africa, and pandemic relief and climate change across the planet. Strengthening cooperation with the EU is also desirable, as the EU possesses enforcing mechanisms in certain aspects (economic influence, disinformation) where NATO lacks mandates. This allows the EU to address the Chinese influence better.

## 4.2 Military recommendations

To date, China has not indicated its interest to demonstrate its military power outside of the Asia-Pacific region and instead relies on a soft-power approach to influence expansion. Nevertheless, China's increasing presence across the Allied and Partner ports and other transport hubs calls for a strategic vigilance, should Beijing's military posture change in the future.

→ Increased Chinese naval activity in the Mediterranean Sea, Baltic Sea, and the Arctic (often collaborating with Russia) is a viable concern for NATO.<sup>27</sup> While NATO does not need to anticipate a military conflict with China in the North Atlantic in the near or long-

term future, the Allies should be prepared to “monitor and interact with new growing naval power operating in waters of key interest to the Alliance.”<sup>28</sup>

→ NATO should enhance military mobility in Europe and secure a more robust, integrated civilian-military infrastructure through increased cooperation with European states, including tabletop exercises, intelligence sharing, and analyst-level information exchanges.<sup>29</sup>

→ NATO and Allies should continuously assess and share information on technologies originating in non-NATO countries that might represent a threat to Allied systems and defensive capabilities.<sup>30</sup>

## 4.3 Technological recommendations

NATO should improve coordination with its EU counterparts in many technology-related fields. Since this issue concerns mainly civilian networks, NATO does not have robust tools to tackle this problem alone. China poses highly advanced cyber capabilities, including the highly sophisticated cyber reconnaissance presently used to target the Allied and Partner countries. In times of conflict, it is possible that China will also leverage disruptive or even destructive cyber capabilities. NATO should, therefore, significantly improve its resilience to cyber network operations, as the level of resilience varies substantially between the Allies, for it is detrimental to the effective strategic and military defense of the Alliance.

# 5 Conclusion

The need for developing a complex and comprehensive strategic approach towards China has become an important issue for NATO. However, this task is a difficult one.

As China's presence in the Allied countries is currently limited to non-military threats, which fall outside of NATO's mandate, NATO struggles to find its role in addressing the Chinese issue. Simultaneously, attitudes of different Allies towards China vary substantially on different agendas, which makes the Chinese issue a challenge to the increasingly frail coherence within NATO.

At the same time, China threatens NATO and individual Allies through its political and economic influential activities, undermines the rules-based international order across the globe, and diminishes regional stability in NATO's outstanding areas of interest. Allies thus need to correctly name and appropriately address the increasing threat posed by China, put forward a political agenda that will unite the differing interests on both sides of the Atlantic, and respond to the rapidly changing environment of the upcoming century.

## 6 Questions for negotiations

- How should the Alliance approach China? As a systematic challenge, rival, or potential partner? (Note that the Alliance is still undecided on which stands it should adopt in the area of the hybrid threat, where the military mixes with the civil questions of security. The essence of the Chinese threat is based on China's soft-power; therefore, the hard-power oriented NATO is still on the lookout for the proper approach)
- What role should NATO play in addressing Beijing's growing influence, given that China's presence in the Transatlantic region is primarily focused on political and economic expansion?
- In what areas and how can NATO strengthen its cooperation with the EU to better tackle the increasing influence of China in Europe?
- Should NATO's European counterparts elaborate their agenda on China, regardless of NATO interests?
- Should NATO create an official dialogue platform with China, as it has with Russia?
- Is there space for evolving a dedicated partnership structure concerning the greater Pacific area?
- What are the areas where NATO could potentially cooperate with China?
- Should the Alliance respond to the increased levels of Chinese investment into sensitive sectors, even though such concerns are outside the scope of Alliance's responsibilities?

## 7 Recommended further reading

**Meia Nouwens speaks with Helena Legarda, Senior Analyst at Mercator Institute for China Studies, on NATO's evolving, and often complex, relationship with China:**

- <https://youtu.be/qYeAnZTHF6c>

**TED talks: Taking lessons from a historical pattern called "Thucydides's Trap," political scientist Graham Allison shows why a rising China and the dominant United States could be headed towards a violent collision no one wants:**

- <https://youtu.be/XewnyUIgyA4>

**Further reading on Countering Russian and Chinese Cyber-Aggression by the Center for European Policy Analysis:**

- <https://cepa.org/countering-russia-and-chinese-cyber-aggression/>



## Pražský studentský summit

Pražský studentský summit je unikátní vzdělávací projekt existující od roku 1995. Každoročně vzdělává přes 300 studentů středních i vysokých škol o současných globálních tématech, a to především prostřednictvím simulace jednání tří klíčových mezinárodních – OSN, NATO a EU.

## Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky

AMO je nevládní nezisková organizace založená v roce 1997 za účelem výzkumu a vzdělávání v oblasti mezinárodních vztahů. Tento přední český zahraničně politický think-tank není spjat s žádnou politickou stranou ani ideologií. Svou činností podporuje aktivní přístup k zahraniční politice, poskytuje nestrannou analýzu mezinárodního dění a otevírá prostor k fundované diskusi.

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Autor je spolupracovníkem Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky a členem přípravného týmu Pražského studentského summitu.

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