

NATO's Role in Facing China's Challenge to the Transatlantic Community

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

NATO is, above all, a collective security organization committed to protecting the territory of its members from military aggression in the North Atlantic region.

Until China poses a military threat in the North Atlantic region, member states will have the lead role in dealing with the challenges posed by Beijing.

The Alliance must acknowledge its limitations when confronting China's non-military threats and push member states to do more to confront China themselves.

At the 2019 leaders meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in London, the Alliance stated in its declaration: “We recognize that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance.”¹ In the aftermath of China’s cover-up of the COVID-19 pandemic, many European countries are starting to recognize the threat and challenges posed by Beijing. NATO must develop a strategy to deal with China. When doing so, it should be realistic about the tools it has available to deal with Chinese political and economic challenges and threats, push the member states to take on a greater role, and not lose focus of the most immediate and real military threat in the North Atlantic region: Russia.

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NATO's China Challenge

NATO is first and foremost a collective security organization that is committed to protecting the territory of its member states from military aggression “in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.”² This makes the question of which approach NATO should take toward China one that is controversial and complex. Those advocating that NATO take on China as a military challenge fail to see how divisive this issue is inside the Alliance, while also failing to recognize the geographical limitations for NATO's area of responsibility as stated clearly in Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

That there is little agreement within the Alliance on how to deal with China was evident by the fact that here was only *one sentence* devoted to China in the lengthy joint statement released in London. Although this was the first time that NATO mentioned China by name as a “challenge,” in the same sentence it also described Beijing as an “opportunity” for the Alliance.

However, merely mentioning China, much less as a “challenge,” in an official document was quite the departure from previous official statements from NATO. The 2010 Strategic Concept, which runs 40 pages long and was meant to serve as a guide for NATO dealing with future challenges, does not mention the word “China” once. Neither do the subsequent declarations resulting from the Chicago Summit (2012), the Wales Summit (2014), the Warsaw Summit (2016), or Brussels Summit (2018).

Legitimate Concerns

As an organization made up of countries from North America and Europe, there are several aspects of China's behavior that should concern NATO and its members:

- China's attempts through technology giant Huawei to fund and integrate itself into certain parts of Europe's digital infrastructure. This is particularly relevant to the ongoing debate in Europe about fifth-generation (5G) wireless technology.³
- China's increasing investments in critical infrastructure—especially ports and rail.
- China's attempts at dividing European opinion and positions on policy issues using trade and energy dependence created through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁴

- China's oppressive crackdown and mass internment of its Uighur population in Xinjiang province.⁵
- China's cover-up of the COVID-19 outbreak, which led to a global pandemic costing trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives.⁶
- China's increasing closeness with Russia—especially as it pertains to military cooperation.
- China's revisionist territorial claims throughout its littoral and along its border with India, and the accompanying challenge to international norms and law.

A Political and Economic Problem...Right Now

Besides the issue of budding Russian and Chinese military cooperation, these are all mainly economic and political challenges. China's desire to invest in ports and other infrastructure has more to do with its goal of changing Western norms of economic processes by introducing, however gradually and subtly, a system that benefits China.

China is patient and measures its competition with the West in longer horizons. Chinese investments are, in part, meant to build a reservoir of influence to be drawn upon at a later date, and which, in the interim, may erode the democratic political systems of susceptible nations. Chinese loans as part of the BRI threaten to trap countries in a cycle of never-ending debt, which, at times, as in the case of Sri Lanka, ends in Chinese control over strategic infrastructure.

In Europe, Chinese investments have targeted the most vulnerable and fragile nations, especially in the western Balkans. Chinese companies, with Chinese labor, build infrastructure projects funded by Chinese loans, without regard for workers' rights and transparency that characterize American and European investments.

Europe is only now beginning to address the risks inherent in Chinese companies taking part in key technology projects. Both the U.S. and Europe continue to grapple with China's drive to obtain sensitive technologies via company acquisitions, and to outdo the West on future technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI).

Beijing's drive to invest in, and partially own, key European ports and technology infrastructure requires an economic or political response—something that NATO is not well equipped to do. Policymakers should not pretend otherwise.

Russian–Chinese Military Cooperation Remains Limited

In 2015, three ships from the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) joined six ships from the Russian navy in the eastern Mediterranean Sea for the Joint Sea 2015 naval exercise that lasted five days.⁷ This was the first time that such an exercise took place between the two countries, and at the time of this writing, is the only time it has occurred in the Mediterranean Sea.

In 2017, a Chinese destroyer, frigate, and supply ship visited Kaliningrad as part of an exercise called Joint Sea 2017 that lasted eight days.⁸ Again, this was the first and only time that such a military exercise has taken place in the Baltic Sea. In 2018, China’s participation in Russia’s large-scale Vostok-18 military exercise received considerable media attention. However, China only contributed just over 3,000 soldiers (1 percent) of the 300,000 soldiers that participated in the exercise. Also, China’s military presence during the exercise was confined to the regions east of Lake Baikal.

NATO Members Must Do More

Individual NATO member states, and even the supranational European Union with its particular policy competencies, have more tools to deal with an emboldened China than does NATO as an institution. NATO can deepen its existing engagements with Indo–Pacific countries. This will ease cooperation with these governments and militaries in the future, and strengthen them (marginally) against Chinese encroachment. It may also contribute to the governments involved reaching common diplomatic positions, on freedom of navigation for instance. But until China poses a military threat in the North Atlantic Region, as an institution created for the purpose of collective security, NATO should have a very limited role when it comes to dealing with the challenges posed by Beijing.

To ensure that NATO can both do its part in the Indo–Pacific and not lose focus on actual military threats closer to home it must:

- **Acknowledge the Alliance’s limitations when confronting some of China’s non-military threats and push member states to do more.** Some of the biggest challenges posed by China to NATO’s member states deal with investments in critical infrastructure, dis-information campaigns, and encroachments in the technology sector using Huawei’s 5G technology. NATO should not pretend to lead on an issue for which it lacks the needed policy competencies. Therefore,

while policymakers should look to NATO to provide a robust conventional and nuclear deterrence for members of the Alliance, only the national capitals, and in some cases the EU, have the political and economic tools that can reduce the economic and political threats posed by China.

- **Not let itself be distracted from the Russian threat.** With the BRI creeping inside Europe’s borders, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mass internment of the Uighur population, and the ongoing 5G debate in Europe, it is no surprise that China is a major concern for Western policymakers—and rightfully so. However, for NATO, the most immediate threat, and the threat for which it was created and for which it has the tools, is Russia. NATO should focus first and foremost on this threat.
- **Be realistic about the Chinese military threat facing the Alliance in the North Atlantic area.** At the time of this writing, Russian–Chinese military activity in NATO’s area of responsibility as described in Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty has amounted to two different exercises spanning a total of 13 days and, consisting of a total of six PLAN ships over the course of the past five years. While NATO should monitor Russian–Chinese military cooperation, the Alliance must recognize that its number one priority remains Russia.
- **Not let China divide the Alliance.** As seen in the single sentence devoted to China in NATO’s joint statement, there is no agreement inside the Alliance on what role, if any, NATO should play in dealing with Beijing. While Alliance unity in the face of Russian aggression is vital, now is not the time for NATO to divide itself over the issue of China. This would only benefit Moscow and Beijing.
- **Ensure that NATO remains a nuclear alliance.** China is a nuclear power with strategic reach. The threats associated with nuclear proliferation make the world more dangerous today than it was during the Cold War, making it critical that NATO maintain its “nuclear culture.” As long as the West could face a nuclear threat from any part of the world, including Asia, NATO needs to remain a nuclear alliance.
- **Encourage the member states to coordinate a military strategy toward China.** While NATO as an institution should limit its military

focus on China, for certain member states, China is a main driver of foreign and defense policy. This is particularly true of the U.S., and to a lesser extent, Canada, France, and the U.K. Military training exercises in the Indo-Pacific, or Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea, should be coordinated on a multilateral or bilateral basis at the member-state level.

Conclusion

NATO needs to state clearly what its responsibilities are when it comes to China, and what its approach will be going forward. While doing so, the Alliance must be realistic. China will continue to be a challenge for North America and Europe. NATO must be one tool in the tool box, and not the tool box itself, that Western policymakers use to confront China.

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Endnotes

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