

NATO Summit 2021: Alliance Needs Realistic Strategy for the Challenges of a Rising China

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

NATO has not laid out what its policy responsibilities are toward China, nor does it have a defined policy to address the challenge posed by the Chinese regime.

The rise of China contains myriad challenges for the Alliance, but there are constraints on what NATO can and should do to address them.

Despite these constraints, NATO members should reaffirm their commitment to unity against Chinese pressure, and encourage a coordinated China strategy.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021, offers an opportunity for the Alliance to continue to respond to the growing challenge from China. How NATO should approach this challenge is a controversial and complex issue. NATO has not laid down what its policy responsibilities are regarding China, nor does it have a defined policy to address the challenge.

NATO leaders have belatedly turned some attention toward China. In the 2019 London Declaration, the Alliance stated: “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 NATO’s latest annual report released in March 2021 reiterated the Janus-faced position that the “rise of China poses both challenges and opportunities for NATO.”²

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NATO's more recent reflection document, "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," released in November 2020, was less ambiguous about recognizing a strategic environment of systemic rivalry, stating that while NATO must be "open to constructive dialogue with China when it serves its interests," the Alliance must "provide a position of security and strength to contribute to Allies' relations with China and guard against any attempts by Beijing to employ coercion against them."³ However, while commissioned by NATO, the reflection paper does not represent official NATO policy.

The rise of China contains myriad challenges for the Alliance. Due to geographical limitations for NATO's area of responsibility, along with certain policy competencies outside the Alliance's purview, there are constraints on what NATO can and should do. The China challenge is not going away, though, and at the Brussels Summit NATO must develop a clear-eyed assessment with a focus on those areas that directly affect NATO operations.

The Landscape of the China Challenge

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 Europe's digital infrastructure.** This is particularly relevant to the ongoing debate in Europe about fifth-generation (5G) wireless technology.⁴
- **China's increasing investments in critical infrastructure—especially ports.** In February 2021, Admiral Robert Burke, Commander of the Allied Joint Forces Command Naples, put a fine point on this concern, stating,

Today, the Chinese have a controlling interest in 12 European ports. So, are NATO countries going to be able to count on those ports for Free Trade, and if NATO has to defend Europe, will they allow us into those ports to refuel, resupply, do repairs, rearm? We don't know if we can count on that. It's a troubling pattern and our European partners are increasingly aware and awakened to this potential threat.⁵

- **China’s attempts at dividing European opinion and positions on policy issues** using dependence created through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁶
- **China’s oppressive crackdown and mass internment of its Uighur population** in Xinjiang province.⁷
- **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.⁸
- **China’s increasing closeness with Russia**—especially as it pertains to military cooperation.

While it should be closely monitored, at this time, 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 contributed just over 3,000 soldiers 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. While bilateral military cooperation remains limited to date, NATO’s reflection group recommended that NATO

designate a special unit within the JISD [Joint Intelligence and Security Division] to monitor and assess how Russia–China cooperation in the military, technological and political fields, including coordination in disinformation and hybrid warfare, impacts Euro-Atlantic security, and provide regular updates to the NAC [North Atlantic Council].¹¹

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 economic processes by introducing, however gradually and subtly, a system that benefits China.

China is patient and measures its competition with the West in long horizons. Chinese investments are, in part, meant to build a reservoir of influence to be drawn upon at a later time, and which, in the interim, may erode the democratic political systems of susceptible nations.

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).

NATO Role Should Be Limited

The Brussels Summit offers NATO an opportunity to state clearly what its responsibilities are when it comes to China, and what its approach will be. 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.

Individual NATO member states, and even the supranational EU with its particular policy competencies, have more tools to deal with an emboldened China than does NATO as an institution. 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 does not lose focus on actual military threats closer to home, the Alliance must:

- **Acknowledge NATO's limitations when confronting some of China's non-military threats, and push member states to do more outside the NATO framework.** Some of the biggest challenges posed by China to NATO's member states deal with investments in critical infrastructure, disinformation 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.** 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 the *cause du jour* 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 the threat emanating from Russia.
- **Be realistic about the 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, 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 is Russia.
- **Not let China divide the Alliance.** As seen in the single sentence devoted to China in NATO’s 2019 London Declaration, there is no formal agreement within the Alliance on what role, if any, NATO should play in dealing with Beijing. When 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. That 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 faces a nuclear threat from any part of the world, including Asia, NATO needs to remain a nuclear alliance.
- **Encourage member states to coordinate military strategy regarding 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 United Kingdom. Military training exercises in the Indo–Pacific, or freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea, should be coordinated on a multilateral or a bilateral basis at the member-state level.

Conclusion

The Brussels Summit is an opportunity for NATO 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 toolbox, and not the toolbox itself, that Western policymakers use to confront China.

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Endnotes

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