



‘A very different kind of challenge’? NATO’s prioritization of China in historical perspective

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Abstract

In 2019, China emerged prominently on NATO’s agenda, growing more prominent ever since. What accounts for this phenomenon? Is it best explained by Chinese behaviour, changing perceptions of its behaviour, or by an internal Alliance snowball effect resulting from the desire to appear dynamic and relevant, particularly following the Trump administration’s prioritization of China over Russia as the United States’ principal security challenge? To help answer this question, this article provides an historic overview of NATO’s policy approaches towards China. Contrary to the belief of many officials and commentators, China is not a new topic for the Alliance. In fact, China has regularly featured in NATO policies since the early Cold War, alternating between adversary to ally and back again. This article argues that despite recently prioritizing China in its discourse, the historical record provides ample reasons to cast doubt on any expectations this will lead to major substantive changes in NATO’s diplomacy or military posture.

Keywords NATO · China · NATO-China · NATO 2030 · Strategic concept

Introduction

At NATO’s December 2019 London summit, Alliance leaders declared: ‘We recognise that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance’ (NATO, 2019c). As Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated prior to the meeting: ‘for the first time in NATO’s history we will ... sit down with the NATO Leaders and address the rise of China’ (NATO, 2019b. See also: NATO, 2019a). These references to China are notable in at least two respects. For one thing, they are misleading as they imply the rise of China had not previously been of concern to the Alliance. Moreover, their timing is curious. As China had been ‘rising’ for many years

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prior to 2019, why did the Alliance supposedly wait so long to identify it as an issue that needed dealing with? Had China finally crossed some invisible red line? In the aftermath of the London summit, and with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, references to China in the Alliance discourse not only increased in frequency but also became more openly critical (NATO, 2020d, g). One high-level report referred to China as ‘best understood as a full-spectrum systemic rival’ (NATO, 2020h, 27). In addition, Stoltenberg criticized Chinese domestic policy matters, calling out Beijing’s oppression of minorities, its crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, and not permitting freedom of speech (NATO 2021d, e). Not only did Stoltenberg prioritize China in his correspondence with the new American president, Joe Biden (NATO, 2020f, 2021a, b), but China was also a prominent theme at the June 2021 Brussels Summit. Although only two of the seventy-nine paragraphs of the Summit communiqué (NATO, 2021f) focus on China, this was still the most significant reference to China in a NATO consensus document, with the upcoming eighth Strategic Concept, expected to be agreed at the 2022 Madrid Summit, almost certain to further reaffirm the growing Alliance interest in China. However, an important distinction needs to be highlighted. For NATO to be interested in China is one thing. It is quite another for an alliance consisting of 30 members, reflecting a wide-range of views and national interests, to reach a consensus on how to deal with it.

To provide useful insights into NATO’s future policy towards China any number of theoretical approaches from the IR literature might suggest themselves, particularly due to the emphasis on ‘systemic rivalry’ implicit, if not explicit, in the contemporary NATO policy discourse, but I will focus primarily on a historical narrative of the Alliance’s interest in, policy discussions about, and relations with, China. There are three reasons for this choice. First, not only do most analyses of the contemporary NATO-China relationship avoid discussion of its history aspects but the officials responsible for crafting current NATO policy are seemingly unaware of it as well. Therefore, enunciating the relationship’s history and providing essential context should be useful for both practitioners and commentators. Second, it is my contention the argument that future NATO-China relations will be fundamentally different than those of the past, is flawed. For one thing, many features of the relationship that are currently cited as being novel and problematic have a long lineage. Expectations of what might be achieved, either to improve relations with China, or to counter its rise, have regularly appeared in the NATO discourse since 1949, and many continuities are apparent. To the extent discontinuities exist (e.g. China is now more politically, economically and militarily powerful in relative terms), I argue that the relevance of these issues can only be properly assessed if set against the historical record, particularly as some may be of less significance than otherwise believed.

In support of my argument, I draw heavily on Timothy Andrew Sayle’s (2020) analysis in this journal of the ‘logic of NATO expansion’. In his effort to understand the motive for NATO expansion, Sayle made a case for identifying patterns of continuity in the Alliance’s history and focused on whether post-Cold War decisions on enlargement were part of a ‘continuing pattern’ or a ‘break with NATO’s Cold War past’, despite the changed circumstances. Sayle’s historical investigation highlighted a pattern of internally generated pressure for NATO ‘to become more dynamic and take on new members or new functional roles’. For Sayle, this internal pressure constituted an important



driver with respect to NATO policy on enlargement (Ibid., 322). I similarly argue that an appreciation of the internal dynamism factor is essential for understanding NATO's contemporary prioritization of China as a security challenge. Given that China has been 'rising' for decades and has engaged in increasingly provocative international behaviour for at least the previous decade, it is difficult to claim that the timing of NATO's new approach is based on Chinese actions. Instead, a more plausible explanation must identify a recent shift within the Alliance that can account for its changed perspective.

As this article will discuss, contemporary NATO conceptions and rhetoric regarding China as a security priority can be explained in large part by intra-Alliance politics, primarily the perceived need to 'keep the Americans in', as well as to demonstrate relevance in an evolving international security environment in which China has already been playing a prominent role and is projected to increase this role in the coming decades. However, this prioritization, whilst evident in the Alliance's rhetoric, should not be confused with meaningful fears of an imminent threat to NATO, nor is it likely to result in a major institutional transformation. To be clear, this analysis is not intended to downplay legitimate concerns about China's international ambitions, military build-up and controversial domestic policy. Instead, the intention is to critically evaluate NATO's past and contemporary discourse and policy on China to provide appropriate context for understanding how the Alliance will deal with the rising power in the future. One remarkable feature of this discursive and policy evolution since 1949 is that China has shifted from being an adversary to a friend and back again on several occasions. Regardless of how China was characterized, one aspect of NATO policy remaining relatively constant has been the limited amount of substantive engagement. At the best of times, the level of political and military engagement with China was minimal, and at the worst of times, very little was done to oppose Beijing. Assuming this historical pattern will be reflected in future Alliance policy, it can be predicted that at the rhetorical level, NATO leaders will continue to emphasize China as a policy problem, institutionally more resources will be allocated to a 'watching brief', diplomatically the Alliance may become more active in its outreach in the Asia-Pacific with NATO increasingly vocal in denouncing particular Chinese actions, but substantive military involvement in the Asia-Pacific will be highly unlikely. Instead, some existing and planned defense and deterrence initiatives intended to counter Russia will likely be rebranded to focus on China as well.

The origins of China as NATO adversary

When the Alliance came into being in April 1949, China was in the midst of a civil war, and it was not until October that the People's Republic of China was founded. Thereafter, and particularly with the onset of the Korean War, in which many NATO members participated, China was viewed as part of a Kremlin-directed Soviet Bloc, or as described in 1950, 'a junior partner in an axis' (NATO, 1950). Of particular concern to the Alliance was that Chinese aggression in the Far East, where the USA, UK and France had important military commitments, would force these countries to keep their forces tied down there, or to increase their military commitments in that



region, rather than prioritizing the defense of Western Europe (NATO, 1951; New York Times, 1952), a recurrent theme, variations of which have continued up to the present. A related problem was that the Soviet Union might attempt to exploit intra-Alliance divisions on Far Eastern issues to isolate the USA from Western Europe. There was also the risk of escalation in the Far East, including US use of atomic weapons against China, leading to Soviet aggression in Western Europe (Jones, 2011).

During the first Quemoy-Matsu crisis (1954–1955), NATO leaders held consultations on the matter. As Belgian Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak observed, ‘The very fact that the (North Atlantic) Council found it natural and legitimate to debate Far Eastern questions, and particularly Formosa, showed that all problems, wherever they arose in the world, were closely interconnected’ (NATO, 1955). With regard to supporting US policy to oppose China, the Alliance was divided on the issue. Whereas the USA was intent on backing Chiang Kai-Shek, to include defense of all the islands under Taiwanese control from a Chinese takeover, the mainstream European view was that defense of Taiwan should be supported, but not the defense of the outlying islands, nor was there much sympathy for Chiang Kai-Shek. A bigger fear was that in a war between the USA and China, ‘limitation ... was no longer possible’ and ‘all NATO countries would inevitably be drawn in’ (Ibid.; see also: FRUS, 1955–1957).

By the mid-late 1950s, Sino-Soviet tensions over the prospect of Chinese military action against Formosa and China’s interest in acquiring nuclear weapons were already visible, with Moscow playing a restraining role on Beijing’s ambitions (NATO, 1954, 1958a, b). One problem that would become evident in the Alliance’s early years and continue to have implications for NATO over successive decades was member states’ desire to recognize Communist China on the one hand, and the nature of their relationship with Taiwan on the other. The problem first arose with the UK’s recognition of China in early 1950 (Wolf, 1983). However, although an irritant in Transatlantic relations, it did not cause any major fissures. For instance, just months later, the UK sent military forces to Korea following the start of the Korean War in June 1950. The same problem would later arise with other member states such as France (Erasmus, 1964) and West Germany (Brick, 1985). In the case of France, its recognition of China in 1964 would exacerbate growing frictions with the USA, culminating in the French withdrawal from the integrated military structure two years later.

In the 1960s, three topics would dominate the NATO discourse on China: the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons and the Sino-Soviet split. As the USA increased its military involvement in Vietnam, it sought to ‘share the burden’ by pressuring NATO allies to provide military forces. US officials characterized the Vietnam War as one of defending the ‘Free World’ against an aggressive Communist Bloc, and in this respect, China was held up as the potential victor should South Vietnam lose the conflict. NATO allies, and especially their populations, remained unpersuaded and were reluctant to commit forces to the war (Colman and Widen, 2009; Blang, 2004). This lack of enthusiasm was in stark contrast to the European military commitments during the Korean war.



With the Chinese detonation of an atomic bomb in October 1964, US rhetoric began to shift with a focus on the direct threat China posed to NATO. In December 1965, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk stated at a NATO Ministerial, 'In a world where the Chinese Communists will have long-range missiles, NATO must begin worrying about a "Western flank"'. He also told the Alliance ministers that NATO should remember its western defense perimeter 'runs through the Bering Sea'. US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, made similar remarks emphasizing the nuclear threat posed by China (FRUS, 1965; Braestrup, 1965; Los Angeles Times, 1965). This emphasis on a 'Western flank' was also repeated at another ministerial the following December (Chicago Tribune, 1966). Interestingly, the NATO legal office had already prepared an opinion in the Spring 1965 stating that Hawaii was *not* covered by the Article 5 provision of the North Atlantic Treaty (Sulzberger, 1965, 1967). Despite this, the head of the US Pacific Air Force, General Laurence Kuter was reported to have said 'It is strange to think our Pearl Harbor headquarters are now in the NATO area' (Cited in Hall, 1965). Regardless, other NATO members refused to accept the idea of an Alliance role in the Far East. They not only did not view the prospect of a Communist victory in Vietnam in the same way as the Americans, but they did not view China as constituting a nuclear threat to NATO either, despite US efforts to portray it as such.

From adversary to ally

Worsening tensions in the Sino-Soviet relationship in the late 1960s, which helped facilitate the US rapprochement with China during the Nixon administration, sparked a fundamental re-evaluation within NATO of its policies towards China. No longer would a threat to the 'Western Flank' or fear of communist expansion in Asia be cited. Instead, a powerful China that was antagonistic towards the Soviet Union was to be supported. Already in the second half of the 1960s, the Soviets began a massive military build-up in the Far East. Two tangible benefits derived from this. In the first place, a large Soviet build-up along the Chinese border meant that resources were taken away, or at least not immediately available, for use in a conflict with NATO, and that the Soviets were obliged to slow down the modernization of their forces in Eastern Europe. Secondly, the prospect of a two-front war, which became of increasing concern to the Soviet leadership, also reduced the attractiveness of the Soviets launching a conflict against one if there was a possibility that the other would take advantage of the situation (CIA, 1969). Even if the actual military balance of power between the Soviets and NATO wasn't significantly altered (NATO, 1969), it was nevertheless well understood that Soviet attention and resources devoted to the Far East was a positive development. Given the Far East build-up of Soviet forces, better relations with NATO also became a priority for China. To improve their own position relative to the Soviet Union, it was essential that strengthening NATO should be emphasized as part of Chinese diplomacy. To this end, beginning in 1972, the Chinese made 'an active diplomatic effort to persuade Western European leaders to strengthen NATO' (Brown, 1977).



On the other hand, there were also limits to the extent that NATO, from an institutional perspective, would be directly involved in deepening relations with Beijing. Instead, the focus would be on improved bilateral relations with China among NATO members rather than the Alliance as a whole, though the benefits to the Alliance were often cited as a justification for the deepening ties (e.g. Federal Republic of Germany Foreign Office, 1976). In a meeting with Mao Zedong in December 1975, US President Gerald Ford said that ‘some of us believe that China does more for Western European unity and the strengthening of NATO than some of those countries do for themselves’ (US Department of State, 1975). As US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told Alliance ministers at a 1976 meeting, ‘Though I hesitate to say it in this forum, China may be one of the most important NATO allies. This is because despite their ideology they are very cold-blooded analysts of the world balance’ (Kissinger, 1976). A year earlier, Kissinger similarly told a Congressional delegation, ‘They want us to be strong in Asia, strong in the world. They are our best NATO allies. Every European leader [who visits China] gets a lecture on maintaining NATO’ (FRUS, 1975). By the late 1970s, American officials were contemplating ‘how NATO might confront the USSR with more of a perceived two-front strategic problem’ (FRUS, 1978). The only negative aspect to encouraging arms sales to China was concern that this would negatively impact US–Soviet strategic nuclear arms control. As such, a careful balance had to be struck between improving relations with China but only to the extent they did not lead to a breakdown in US–Soviet relations. Among the options discussed were to sell the Chinese anti-tank guided missiles to reduce China’s vulnerability to ‘Soviet armored blitzkrieg tactics’. As these weapons were defensive, they also had the advantage of not threatening Taiwan. Even if the USA would not sell the weapons directly to the Chinese, Washington encouraged allies such as France, Germany and Japan to sell them instead (Ibid.). For example, several years earlier it was reported the USA was facilitating British sales of Rolls Royce engines to China (New York Times, 1975). In response, the Soviets warned the US and European governments not to sell weapons to China (Doder, 1978).

The USA also hoped to improve NATO–China relations in other ways. For example, in October 1977, US Defense Secretary Harold Brown proposed ‘briefing the Chinese on NATO initiatives and exercises and possibly for PRC officials to visit NATO headquarters or observe some of the alliance’s military exercises’ (Keefer, 2017, p. 396). Other US defense officials proposed getting members of the NATO staff to brief the Chinese military attaché in Brussels on ‘current NATO defenses and exercises’ (FRUS, 1977b). Similarly, US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski proposed to President Jimmy Carter that NATO should be encouraged to ‘invite the PRC to send an observer to NATO, or conversely request the PRC to invite a NATO delegation to visit China’ (FRUS, 1977a). As of 1980, US and Chinese policymakers touted the benefits of a strong NATO and China working together to limit Soviet expansionism, which, particularly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, took on added importance (Brown, 1980). The American push to sell arms to China, or at least threatening to do so, continued into the 1980s. In part, this was a means of discouraging instances of Soviet bad behaviour, such as with the looming prospect of Soviet intervention in Poland in 1980–1981 (Halloran, 1981).



Arms sales were also discussed more generally amid worsening NATO-Soviet relations in the early 1980s (Weisskopf, 1983; Hiatt, 1983). Meanwhile, US-China relations had improved to such an extent that the USA was permitted to establish signals intelligence facilities in China to monitor Soviet nuclear tests. Moreover, Beijing assisted US covert efforts to supply weapons to the Afghan mujahedeen (Lardner Jr. and Smith, 1989; Pomfret and Farah, 1998; Daly, 2001).

An ambiguous relationship

With the improvement of NATO-Soviet relations in the years following Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power in 1985, the perceived strategic need for continuing to sell arms to China declined. Following the June 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, both the US and European Economic Community declared arms embargoes on China (Evron, 2019). This was an inauspicious start for the 1990s, but more important for NATO was the existential problem of finding a role for the Alliance in the post-Cold War period. Over the course of the 1990s, 'out of area', at least as far as military activity was concerned, was effectively defined purely in terms of Southeastern Europe, with operations conducted in the former Yugoslavia. NATO also began its first post-Cold War round of enlargement during this period. China opposed both. In the first instance, it opposed NATO enlargement into Eastern Europe (Richardson, 1997). It also criticized NATO's military interventions in the Balkans, beginning with the Alliance's use of force in Bosnia in the mid-1990s (Associated Press, 1994), and opposed NATO air operations during the 1999 Kosovo conflict (Shenon, 1999). Relations reached a historic low with the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 (Myers, 1999; Rosenthal, 1999). The bombing led to large-scale protests in China against NATO in general and the USA in particular, with Chinese hackers attacking various US websites, including the White House website (Barr, 1999).

Though it is often forgotten, before 9/11 China had risen high on the US defense agenda. The USA confronted China during the 1995–1996 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (Gellman, 1998a, b) and five years later another crisis arose when a US EP-3 spy plane was forced to land in China. During this pre-9/11 period, US defense 'transformation' was principally aimed at China as the next peer competitor the USA would be facing over the long term. In late 1998, US nuclear war plans started including Chinese targets again (Grossman, 1999), and would continue to do so thereafter. With 9/11, however, this emphasis on a 'China threat' was shelved and would only be resurrected a decade later with the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' (Koehler, 2013; Heisbourg, 2020).

From this low point in relations before 9/11, improvements were gradually forthcoming after 9/11. With NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, the Alliance was now operating directly adjacent to China. Although Beijing avoided sending military forces to assist NATO in Afghanistan, they were keen to begin a dialogue with the Alliance. To this end, in the autumn 2002, Chinese officials approached NATO with the intent of 'opening up a continuing strategic dialogue' and on 10 October met with NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson (Marcus, 2002). This raised some



expectations of a better relationship (Gill and Oresman, 2002). In the September 2003 issue of the *NATO Review*, an article appeared authored by Zuqian Zhang, director of European Studies at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies. In the article, Zhang stated that ‘given the virtual absence of geopolitical and strategic rivalry’, NATO-China relations ‘are likely to evolve in a much smoother fashion than ... in the case of NATO and Russia’, and concluded by saying ‘the time may be ripe to put relations with China on a more formal footing’. What is notable about Zhang’s article is its framing of two issues. Referring to the controversial long-standing Chinese activities in Xinjiang province, Zhang highlighted that because of the war on terrorism, the US policy shifted, with the US State Department officially classifying the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement as a ‘terrorist organization’. Zhang also complimented Washington’s ‘more pro-Beijing stance’ vis-à-vis Taiwan, claiming it was ‘worth far more in terms of deterrence than the deployment of another 100 Chinese missiles targeted on Taiwan’ (Zhang, 2003). Thus, as a result of a change in Washington’s attitude towards China accompanying its prioritization of the war on terrorism relative to concerns about a rising China, Beijing was now more amenable to closer ties with NATO.

In subsequent years, NATO and Chinese officials would liaise in Kabul directly, with the principal point of contacts being the NATO Senior Civilian Representative to Afghanistan and the Chinese ambassador. Although there was little substance to this cooperation, such as a Chinese military contribution to the International Security Assistance Force, it did provide a first step towards closer relations. This would be taken much further with China’s participation in international counter-piracy efforts off the coast of the Horn of Africa beginning in late 2008 (NATO, 2012).

During the post-9/11 decade, NATO was preoccupied with Afghanistan, and after 2011, with Libya as well. Whilst Afghanistan would gradually transition into a lesser focus for the Alliance, the chaos that emerged in Libya following Qaddafi’s fall, the Syrian civil war that then facilitated the rise of ISIS, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea, forced NATO to simultaneously deal with a multitude of crises on its periphery. In the meantime, China was increasingly active pushing its territorial claims in the South China Sea, for instance with its actions during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with the Philippines and the beginning of its ‘artificial island building’ program (Zhang, 2019). NATO exhibited little interest in these developments. How then to explain this earlier lack of interest compared to the Alliance’s more recent interest? As already noted, internal dynamism seems the most plausible explanation. Given that as of 2012, the war in Afghanistan was still NATO’s main effort, and the Libya intervention had only recently ended, with ongoing calls for possible intervention in Syria, to say nothing of the broader debates within the Alliance about avoiding global commitments and focusing on problems closer to home, the Alliance simply had limited bandwidth to contemplate action as far afield as the South China Sea, not that there were any calls from the region itself to this effect. No doubt fear of negative consequences if the Alliance publicly condemned China’s actions was also a consideration, as was the belief that any action NATO took, limited as it would have been, was unlikely to serve any useful purpose in getting China to back down. Thus, limited bandwidth due to other pressing commitments, fear of



retaliation, and a belief in NATO being ineffective, combined to ensure that the Alliance avoided public criticism of Beijing.

It was against this conducive background, at least from Beijing's perspective, that NATO-China relations remained generally positive, but also quite low-key, particularly compared with NATO's relations with other regional states. NATO officials were reluctant to suggest a forum for discussion similar to the NATO-Russia Council, as some analysts recommended (Benitez, 2011; Pavel and Brzezinski, 2019), nor partnerships similar to those NATO maintained with Japan or Australia. In 2009, in a speech delivered in Beijing, NATO Deputy Secretary General Claudio Bisogniero stated, 'rather than aspire to some kinds of formal partnerships, I believe we should go step by step. Indeed, I believe we should aim for—to begin with—a more pragmatic cooperation and more frequent consultations in areas of mutual concern, at appropriate levels of expertise' (NATO, 2009). In essence, the relationship was limited to periodic visits of senior officials (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2011). Following the 2007 visit to NATO HQ of the Director of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, several senior NATO officials, such as the Deputy Secretary General and Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy, also travelled to China. In Brussels, dialogue was maintained between the NATO Deputy Secretary General and the Chinese Ambassador. Chinese officials were also invited to participate in various NATO-sponsored conferences and courses, including at the NATO School in Oberammergau, and NATO officials were similarly invited to China for the same purpose.

In 2013, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated, whilst on a visit to Japan, 'we do not consider China a direct threat to NATO allies' and he called for 'a more structured dialogue with China. We have some dialogue. But it could be enhanced' (NATO, 2013). Despite this interest in elevating the level of NATO-China dialogue there was no significant diplomatic push on either side to do so. The reasons for this are worth dwelling on, because if a 'natural cap' on NATO-China relations existed in more tranquil times, then the prospect of closer relations in more antagonistic times would presumably be less likely. Suffice to say that the lack of interest was mutual. NATO was internally divided about how far to elevate relations with China, particularly as this had implications for long-standing debates about NATO as a global alliance, or at least an Alliance focused on the globe rather than closer to home. During this period, NATO officials, in their public statements, were cautious not to suggest that the Alliance's interest in Asia had anything to do with involvement in Asian affairs. Instead, NATO's interest in Asia was about finding partners to assist with NATO operations elsewhere. As Chairman of the Military Committee General Knud Bartels put it in 2014, NATO's engagement in Asia was 'about working with partners, who are interested in cooperating with us on issues of common concern. This is about NATO with Asia, not NATO in Asia' (NATO, 2014). This view evolved somewhat over the next several years, so that more rhetorical emphasis was placed on the idea that 'the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region cannot be separated from that of the Euro-Atlantic and NATO has an interest in understanding how these linkages work' (NATO, 2018). Therefore, NATO-China dialogue was deemed to be important for this purpose. As for Beijing's interest in



improving the dialogue with NATO, the Chinese attitude appears to have been lukewarm at best, with no significant overtures emanating from China.

In contrast to the political dialogue, high-level military-to-military contacts were more sporadic. For instance, on at least several occasions NATO military leaders met with their Chinese counterparts on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue conference (e.g. NATO, 2015). The first Chinese military delegation to visit NATO HQ only occurred in June 2010. Afterwards, there were annual meetings between NATO and Chinese military officials although these meetings were interrupted in 2016 and did not resume until 2018. Awkwardly, the official NATO explanation for this long interruption was that it was due to a combination of ‘reforms in the Chinese armed forces and the terror attacks in Brussels’ in March 2016 that ‘led to the cancellation of the planned talks that month’ (NATO, 2018). Whilst a delay of planned talks due to a terror attack is understandable, a several year hiatus is hardly credible. This suggests that either the talks themselves were considered by one side, or the other, or both, as not being worth the effort, or more likely that there was a political objection to holding these talks, on one side, the other, or both. Following the fifth round of NATO-China staff talks in June 2018, it was announced that a sixth round was tentatively scheduled to occur in Beijing in 2019. However, these talks were never held. Curiously, this was despite the fifth round of talks being characterized by NATO as ‘a resounding success allowing NATO to restart its dialogue with a key global player and setting up a methodology for further, deeper and more meaningful engagement’ (Ibid.).

China as NATO priority

The lack of further military staff talks might also be attributable to the important shift that occurred with the Trump administration’s prioritization of China as its main ‘strategic competitor’ (US Department of Defense, 2018). Similarly, NATO began moving away from viewing China as a potential partner to be engaged with on issues of mutual concern towards the Alliance viewing China primarily as a security challenge. In early 2018, the Alliance had already been paying more attention to Asia in general due to the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, the second half of 2018 was a ‘turning point’ due to an increasing US push to devote more attention to China (Phone interview, 2020). At the April 2019 NATO foreign ministerial, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on NATO to consider the implications of China’s rise (Wroughton and Brunnstrom, 2019). NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg echoed Pompeo’s message stating that ‘For all allies, China is becoming a more and more important trading partner... We need to find a right balance in being aware of the increasing strength of China without creating problems’ (Cited in Marson, 2019). The foreign ministerial set in motion a series of actions within NATO, including a ‘scoping exercise’ within the International Staff in which a paper was drafted to examine the impact of Chinese policies on NATO’s security, including in such areas as telecommunications and disruptive technologies. China was viewed more from the perspective of NATO’s resilience agenda rather than as a defense or deterrence problem such as Russia (Phone interview, 2020). In November 2019, Stoltenberg



elaborated on NATO's emerging interest in China but also stressed the limits of this interest, for instance, by stating that 'there is no plans, no proposal, no intention to move NATO into, for instance, the South China Sea'. On the other hand, Stoltenberg stated that NATO's interest in China was a quite natural concern given that China was 'investing heavily in new long-range weapons systems and missile systems that can reach all NATO countries. They are modernizing their maritime capabilities . . . with a more global reach of their naval forces' (NATO, 2020b). Furthermore, it was not simply a matter of NATO becoming more active in the Pacific, as had been the long-standing issue of contention within the Alliance, referred to earlier, between those who wanted NATO to become more global and those members who wanted it to become more Europe-centric, but rather that 'China's coming closer to us. We see them in Africa, in the Arctic, investing in infrastructure in Europe and also in cyberspace' (NATO 2019c). To re-emphasize, it is crucial to make a distinction here between when these aspects of Chinese behaviour started and when NATO started taking an interest, as the former preceded the latter by many years. In other words, it was NATO's attitude to China that changed at this late moment rather than China's behaviour.

Without doubt, the most important issue the USA raised within NATO to highlight the China 'threat' was its opposition to European countries becoming reliant on Chinese 5G technology. Almost overnight, this issue risked fracturing the Alliance, particularly as US officials began threatening the prospect of reducing their links to NATO, including intelligence sharing and communications links, if European governments did not take their concerns seriously (Gilli and Bechis, 2020). As one NATO report described the problem: 'Chinese companies are not only subsidized by the Chinese government but also legally compelled to work with its intelligence services. Whether the risk of such collaboration is real or perceived, the fear remains that adopting 5G technology from Huawei would introduce a reliance on equipment which can be controlled by the Chinese intelligence services and the military in both peacetime and crisis' (Kaska et al., 2019). Pompeo labelled Huawei's 5G technology a 'Trojan Horse', with other American officials using similar terms (Gould, 2020).

By the time of the 2019 London Summit, the major problem for NATO was not so much disputing the need to pay more attention to China but rather conflicting ideas about *how* to deal with it. Questions about the degree of engagement featured prominently as well, especially as one important concern was that if NATO took too hard a line, this would then push China and Russia closer together rather than splitting them apart. For many of the Eastern European states, to focus on China meant risking the possibility that attention would be taken away from Russia. These countries therefore had to play a delicate balancing act with the USA. To deny China as a problem worthy of concern would have alienated the White House. Instead they not only chose to support the American prioritization of China but framed the problem in a self-serving way. By emphasizing that China's rise exacerbated the existing Russian threat to Europe, particularly in the context of long-standing scenarios of Russian aggression, this meant that in practical terms the Alliance's main focus would remain squarely on Russia. The emphasis on a Russia-China linkage was observable in the 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué which referred to China 'cooperating militarily with Russia, including through participation in Russian exercises in the



Euro-Atlantic area' (NATO, 2021f). Incidentally, this mention in the 2021 document referred to exercises that occurred in the Mediterranean in 2015 (Reuters, 2015) and the Baltic in 2017 (BBC, 2017).

Whilst framing the China 'challenge' in local terms, NATO has not neglected discussing it in more global terms. In June 2020, Stoltenberg stated, 'No, NATO does not see China as the new enemy or an adversary. But what we see is that the rise of China is fundamentally changing the global balance of power and the NATO leaders, heads of state and government, when they met in London in December, they, for the first time in NATO's history, agreed that NATO has to address the consequences, the security consequences, of the rise of China'. In a departure from his previous comments about what actions NATO would take, Stoltenberg added: 'And therefore, we need to be able to respond to that, to address that. ... we're working together with partners, not least in the Asia-Pacific, including Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, which are very close and like-minded partners to NATO' (NATO, 2020a). In effect, Stoltenberg was publicly admitting that NATO was working with partners in the Asia-Pacific to counter the rise of China (Sprengr, 2020).

By late 2020, the Alliance discourse featured further signs of a hardening attitude towards China, as well as evidence of further entrenchment of China as a top priority. As Stoltenberg remarked in June: 'As China is becoming more and more a global military power with the ability not only to protect their own waters and their own territory, but to project power far beyond China, then it matters what they do' (NATO, 2020c). Further concerns were raised about Chinese investment in European military-relevant infrastructure, for instance, 'seaports, railroads and bridges' as these could 'potentially hamper NATO's mobility' (Babb, 2020; Garamone, 2020). More generally, it was feared that China's increasingly strong economic ties to NATO members could undermine Alliance cohesion (Olsen, 2020). The NATO 'reflection process' report, published in November 2020, was particularly scathing of China. Its critique was divided into three parts: current, near term and long-term. The report condemned China's ongoing 'disinformation campaign' in 'numerous Allied states', its 'widespread intellectual property theft with implications for Allied security and prosperity' and 'cyber attacks on NATO governments and societies'. It was argued that in the near term, China would likely challenge 'NATO's ability to build collective resilience', and in the longer term there would be the prospect of China projecting military power into the Euro-Atlantic Area (NATO, 2020h). The report's findings were echoed shortly thereafter by Stoltenberg in his comments at the December 2020 NATO foreign ministerial. He warned about the future security implications posed by China due to it having the world's second largest defense budget, not sharing 'our values', and being in 'systemic competition with us' (NATO, 2020i). Stoltenberg also observed: 'Over the past year, we have seen a significant shift in our understanding of China'. Among the highlights of the meeting was that allies agreed on a 'comprehensive report on China' that assessed its 'military development, its growing activity in our neighborhood and the implications for NATO resilience' (Ibid). Other senior NATO officials have also expressed concern about China. For instance, in relation to China's military build-up, Chairman of the Military Committee Air Marshal Sir Stuart Peach said 'What do you do if you're a leader in China with a modernized powerful large force? You deploy it, you move it



around ... You have these large embassy footprints now with very large defence sections, often populated by general officers. And then you simply observe ... what's it all for?' (Warrell and Pell, 2021).

Following Biden's inauguration in January 2021, the NATO discourse shifted to accommodate the new president's policy framing of a confrontation between democracies and authoritarian governments. In his February 2021 internal Food for Thought paper, Stoltenberg described China and Russia as being 'at the forefront of an authoritarian pushback against the rules-based international order'. He proposed to launch 'a security dialogue with democracies in Asia, Africa and Latin America' and said the Alliance should become a 'forum where Allies and like-minded democracies' could consult on shared security challenges. In relation to addressing the security challenges 'stemming from the rise of China', Stoltenberg suggested 'holding a NATO-Asia Pacific Summit in 2022' (NATO, 2021c).

Despite the rhetoric of individual senior NATO officials, and critical views of China as expressed in NATO-commissioned reports, consensus documents, such as the 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué, have taken a more balanced approach when emphasizing the 'opportunities and challenges' presented by China. Of the two paragraphs in the 2021 document, one refers to the systemic challenges China poses to the 'rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security', whereas the other calls for a 'constructive dialogue' on China 'where possible' (NATO, 2021f). In contrast to Stoltenberg's explicit references to the 'imprisonment of tens of thousands of Uighurs in so-called "re-education camps"' (NATO, 2020d) and suppression of 'human rights in Hong Kong' (NATO, 2021d), the communiqué makes no reference at all to China's internal policies, despite the fact that it calls on Belarus to 'respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners' (Ibid.). The document also makes similar references to Russia and human rights. Overall, the communiqué only mentions China 10 times compared with 62 references to Russia and 23 references to terrorism. This prioritization of Russia and terrorism is consistent with the 2019 NATO Military Strategy (MC 400/4) which also explicitly emphasizes these two as the top threats as well as referring to four additional challenges (United States Senate, 2021) of which China is likely one. It is also important to note that some Alliance members are reluctant to make China an issue of importance for NATO. At the Brussels Summit, French President Emmanuel Macron was particularly outspoken, stating, 'NATO is an organization that concerns the North Atlantic, China has little to do with the North Atlantic ... we should avoid distracting NATO which already has many challenges' (Cited in Herszenhorn and Momtaz, 2021).

Beyond differences in characterizing China as a security threat, the Alliance has been relatively restrained in its discussion about what policies it should adopt. The NATO 2030 'reflection process' report (NATO, 2020h) did not recommend any substantive action on the Alliance's part to counter the rise of China. For instance, reference was made to the need to share information and insights, promote 'common approaches, including in cyberspace', and 'strengthening global rules and norms, for instance on arms control', devote 'much more time, political resources and action' to dealing with China, and increasing the Alliance's capacity to 'anticipate and react to Chinese activities'. The report also recommended that NATO 'should infuse the



China challenge throughout existing structures and consider establishing a consultative body to discuss all aspects of Allies' security interests vis-a-vis China' (Ibid., 28). By contrast, there was no discussion of the Alliance becoming more militarily active in the Asia-Pacific. Instead, NATO was merely advised to 'deepen consultation and cooperation' with its partners in that region (Ibid., 60).

Looking ahead, looking back

As of 2021, China is high on NATO's agenda. In the Alliance narrative, the rise of China represents a reason for North America and Europe to 'stand together', though as history has demonstrated, it can also drive a wedge in NATO cohesion if for no other reason than member states having a divergent set of views on how to deal with security challenges they collectively face. Assuming China remains high on the Alliance agenda, the question then becomes: what will NATO do about it? Whilst a consensus exists that the rise of China is a legitimate subject of concern for the Alliance, there is a significant diversity in the way member states view it, particularly in relation to other threats and security challenges such as Russia or terrorism, as well as in the context of the economic risks involved of taking a harder political line against Beijing.

In the contemporary Alliance discourse, China is typically framed as an indirect security challenge rather than a direct one, such as that posed by Russia. It is also characterized as a longer-term problem in the context of changing dynamics in the international system, rather than something to be immediately worried about, albeit with several exceptions, such as the cyber and espionage threat it has already posed to the Alliance for many years. Similarly, China's military build-up is discussed in qualitatively different terms from that of Russia, with the latter being of immediate concern, whereas the former will only be potentially relevant for the Euro-Atlantic region over the longer term. As a practical matter, dealing with an indirect, long-term threat poses unique challenges. Responses can be roughly broken down into four categories: military action, external political and diplomatic action, institutional change and rhetorical emphasis. Unlike a direct threat such as Russian military aggression against the Baltic states that might be countered by the dispatch of military forces to act as a deterrent, the role of military action is less easy to define in the case of China. To the extent China poses a military threat to anyone, it poses it primarily to its neighbours rather than to the NATO area. During the Cold War, despite the efforts of some members to involve the Alliance in out-of-area conflicts, such as Algeria, Vietnam, and the Middle East, there was little interest on the part of NATO members to actively participate. Instead, member states used the Alliance as a forum to discuss these disputes and win political backing by other member states, particularly when it involved utilizing military forces that would otherwise be earmarked for NATO purposes (Pöllath, 2013; Liland, 2001; Sherwood, 1990; Sayle, 2016; Stuart and Tow, 1990).

Alternatively, political statements and diplomatic action might be employed. In practical terms this might amount to a collective political denunciation of some action China takes that crosses a perceived red line. What this red line might be for



the Alliance is difficult to speculate about given that NATO has traditionally avoided condemning Chinese 'bad behaviour' in the past. NATO's policy of collectively condemning other countries is also far from consistent. For instance, when Russia attacked Georgia and Ukraine, neither of which are NATO members, the Alliance publicly condemned this aggression (NATO, 2020e). However, when Chinese soldiers killed Indian soldiers in an unprovoked attack (Jain and Miglani, 2020), NATO remained silent. Notably, that NATO remained silent following the China-India clash ostensibly contradicts realist logic which suggests it would have sought to capitalize on the incident to improve its relations with China's geopolitical rival, India. As for diplomatic action, such as seeking closer cooperation with other governments in the Asia-Pacific, such as Japan, Australia or India, there are obvious limits to this cooperation judging by past experiences.

A third option for the Alliance is to undertake institutional restructuring similar to that proposed in the NATO 2030 report which mainly argues for additional resources to allow NATO institutions to observe China more closely and to defend against hostile Chinese cyber activities. As US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchinson put it, 'We have all 29 allies now committed to assessing and remaining watchful, watching and knowing what is happening in China...I think that starts a process by which we will watch these ports, we will watch the waterways, we will make sure that we're not being complacent if we see a hardening of activity in that area' (Cited in Gehrke, 2019). It is worth observing that the Alliance interest in protecting its ports is mainly related to how these ports would be utilized in a conflict with Russia.

A final option is simply to stress the China challenge in Alliance rhetoric, which in real terms reflects NATO policy to date. Though the Alliance may make institutional reforms in the future, the way NATO has dealt with the China topic in the last several years is to ensure that it is placed fairly high on the Alliance agenda as an issue that future action will be taken in relation to. According to SACEUR General Tod Wolters: 'we pay close attention as a NATO alliance to the activities of China ... I suspect that with each passing day, you'll probably hear more from our NATO Secretary General about China's presence and their influence in the vicinity of NATO, and the things that we have to do to make sure that we have the appropriate vigilance' (e.g. SHAPE, 2019).

Having addressed four categories of possible actions the Alliance may take with respect to China, it is now essential to address the degree to which a consensus on these actions exists among member states. The USA has clearly taken the strongest hard-line stance on China. During the Trump administration, Washington viewed its continued support for NATO at least in part on the extent to which the rest of the Alliance accepted the US characterization of China as a strategic competitor. Essentially this amounted to NATO adopting critical rhetoric about China in support of the American position, but not making any major changes to its diplomacy or military posture. Since his inauguration, President Biden has continued to emphasize the security threat posed by China, though typically framing it in the broader context of authoritarian governments versus democracies. The United Kingdom has closely echoed the American rhetoric about China and is considering adapting its military posture to maintain some presence in Asia (Fisher, 2020; Patalano, 2019). A second



group of member states, particularly in Eastern Europe, are happy to pay lip service to American policy preferences so long as the USA does not detract too much attention and resources away from defense against threats in its immediate neighbourhood. A third group consists of member states that wish to maintain Alliance cohesion but are also unwilling to oppose China in any significant way, especially not with a public condemnation, largely due to fear of economic retaliation. Both of the latter two groups of NATO members are more or less united in their opposition to the Alliance taking anything other than superficial actions against China. This low-key approach has also been replicated, to some degree, in the formation of EU policy towards China (Brady, 2020; Peel, 2020). Of note has been the lack of a pro-China faction seeking to prevent NATO in the first instance from portraying China as a security problem. China is now established on the NATO agenda and is set to become further enshrined in the forthcoming Strategic Concept. Looking ahead, policy positions within the Alliance will reflect a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind.

Conclusion

Though the NATO 2030 report labelled China ‘a very different kind of challenge’, it does not represent a *new* challenge for NATO. Understanding the evolution of NATO’s approach to China provides important clues about the future relationship. For example, without any historical knowledge, the prospect of China posing a direct threat to the NATO area, including a nuclear threat, as discussed by some present-day officials and commentators, as well as in the 2021 communiqué, might seem an ominous prospect. Yet when placed in the context of NATO officials in the mid-1960s making similar claims, the prospect becomes less menacing. That the Alliance has been reluctant to engage militarily in the Asia-Pacific, despite American requests to do so, also has a long lineage, and there are few indications that the reasons for this long-standing reluctance have altered in any fundamental way, particularly given the omnipresent threat posed by Russia. On the other hand, prospects for meaningful cooperation with China lack precedent. During the heyday of good relations in the 1980s or in the post-9/11 decade, neither side seemed interested in establishing more meaningful ties, despite many common interests. Thus, the historical record of NATO policy towards China offers many insights regarding the spectrum of positive and negative relations.

As the Alliance crafts its eighth Strategic Concept, there is little doubt the degree to which China features in the document, beyond what has already been agreed in earlier policy statements, will provoke intense internal debate. Based on historical precedent, the NATO debate will almost certainly be inconclusive given the diversity of views about acceptable and unacceptable actions. Whereas the USA might prefer that NATO replicate its own set of security priorities, essentially by recognizing that China constitutes a more important long-term challenge than Russia, this is not a realistic prospect. It is more likely the Alliance will continue adhering to the US rhetoric on China as a long-term strategic competitor but will avoid any substantive change in policy. It will also avoid making any major institutional



transformation to become an active player in the Asia-Pacific, preferring instead to re-emphasize defensive measures closer to home which will have the added utility of strengthening NATO's defenses vis-a-vis Russia.

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