

NATO, Europe, US & China

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“...the rise of China is fundamentally shifting the global balance of power; heating up the race for economic and technological supremacy; multiplying the threats to open societies and individual freedoms; and increasing the competition over our values and our way of life.”¹

This is how NATO chief, Jens Stoltenberg, speaking in June 2020, introduced his outline for NATO 2030, which is all about “how we adapt to this new normal”. Whilst careful not to name China directly as an enemy, lest this unsettle European allies, Stoltenberg’s call for NATO to “stay strong militarily; be more united politically, and take a broader approach globally” seems aimed at transforming the Alliance into a key player in a US-led hybrid New Cold War on China.

The December 2019 NATO summit in London agreed for the first time to address the security implications of the rise of China, and Stoltenberg was tasked to lead “a forward-looking reflection process to strengthen NATO’s political dimension”. The powers that be in the US had clearly come to the view that China was a deadly rival in a duel for global supremacy. The question was: to what extent would the Europeans buy into the call for an anti-China pivot by NATO? 2020 now marks a crucial transition year with NATO under US pressure to adapt in accordance with the hegemonic ‘America First’ agenda.

Trump’s Cold War on China

Over the last four years, the Trump administration has single-mindedly sought to turn US policy on China from

engagement to containment, at the same time bringing China's rise to the centre of the foreign policy agenda. The 2017 National Security Strategy shifted focus from the 'war on terror' to 'great power competition', identifying Russia and China as 'revisionist powers'. In October 2018, Vice President Mike Pence followed this by launching an offensive on China across multiple fronts: trade, technology, ideological, diplomatic and military.²

The Indo-Pacific is now seen as 'the centre of the most fundamental geopolitical change since the end of WW2', with China allegedly seeking to displace the US, expanding the reach of its state-driven economic model to reorder the region in its favour. Against this, a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is being pieced together to draw Australia, Japan and India closer to the US; and a massive defence budget was agreed in 2019 with Republicans and Democrats coming together for nuclear weapons modernisation and the establishment of a Space Command.

Following the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and with the trade war escalating, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper hinted that the first deployments of US intermediate-range missiles would be in the Asia-Pacific region to counter Chinese missiles.³ China was being lined up as a more formidable long-term strategic rival than Russia. As the world's second largest economy, it was seen to have far greater influence around the world than the Soviet Union ever had. In the words of a former Senior Director of Strategic Planning in the Trump administration, China posed "the most consequential existential threat since the Nazi Party in World War 2".⁴

What direction for Europe?

Whilst the US has entrenched its Cold War view of China, Europe has struggled to find a common position on the emergence of the new major power. The European Commission, in its 2019 EU-China: a Strategic Outlook Report, characterised China as a "systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance". Nevertheless, the EU has sought to distance itself from US tactics of trade war with China. Business and economic relations between Europe and China have been growing, looking to make advances towards an investment agreement which was to have been sealed in 2020, only to be interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis. Italy, despite warnings from other European leaders, had already gone ahead in signing up to China's Belt and Road Initiative in March 2019, becoming the 14th EU member state – and the first G7 state – to join in the Chinese project.

For the US, it has become imperative to stop this Eurasian drift. Trump's remark about NATO's obsolescence no doubt cast doubt among the European allies about US commitment to their defence, and they began to bend to US pressure on increasing defence spending to prove their relevance. By taking a greater share of the costs of containing Russia, the Allies would help to free the US to focus on Asia and China. Nevertheless European preoccupations remain with their own security in relation to Russia and the Middle East.⁵

Just prior to the London Summit, at a meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs in Brussels, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, called up NATO's original ideological Cold War mission to once again stiffen its purpose: to face "the current and potential long-term threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party," the alliance should stand together in "the cause of freedom and democracy," to make the world safe against threats of authoritarianism.⁶ What he seemed to suggest was that there was a trade-off to be made: if Europe wanted commitment from the US, they should themselves commit to the US and forge a united front against China.

Shifting NATO's focus towards Asia

In light of the European Commission's view of China as a systemic rival, the Trump administration's question to the EU has been: how then should this be managed?

To prepare for the London Summit, NATO began a review of the security implications of China's rise for its Euro-Atlantic reach. This was to be part of a wider overhaul of NATO defence planning and doctrine in the post-INF context. The destruction of the INF treaty could expose Europe to Russian missiles, with the US now insisting that China's intermediate-range and new missile capabilities must also be included in arms control proposals. Europe, from the US view, needed to be made to recognise that safety could only be found together in NATO.⁷

Warning of China's rapidly expanding military strength, Stoltenberg argued: "we have to address the fact that China is getting closer to us ... We see them in Africa; we see them in the Arctic; we see them in cyberspace and China now has the second largest defence budget in the world."⁸ Chinese hypersonic weaponry and missiles, he argued, are capable of reaching Europe; a *de facto* 'operational alliance' with Russia is in evidence in recent military exercises in the Pacific, Central Asia and the Baltic; and, with China getting more involved in Europe through its Belt and Road Initiative, it has become necessary to question the strategic

intentions of China's Eurasian project.⁹

These efforts to link Euro-Atlantic security to the Indo-Pacific strategy raise the prospect of a global NATO. The idea of a military alliance, spanning both the Atlantic and Pacific, has long been an aspiration on the part of the US. The South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) was set up in 1954 as a counterpart to NATO. However, it never really established itself and, with regional states asserting their newly gained independence, was eventually dissolved in 1977.

More recently, since 2012, through its 'partners across the globe' programme, NATO has forged new links with US allies in the Asia Pacific region including Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. In 2016, the organisation began to align with US Indo-Pacific priorities, agreeing to extend its operations to cover maritime security in parallel with US freedom of navigation exercises (FONOPs). With these exercises stoking the militarisation of the South China Sea, in 2018 the UK and France announced their intentions to join the US FONOPs. Subsequently these two countries, in a display of their 'global power' status, have sent warships into the vicinity to join those from Australia and Japan.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Five Eyes security intelligence network began to share classified information with Germany, Japan and France.¹¹ Five Eyes, comprising the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, has gained a new importance with the rapid development of new technologies, and is the main instrument of surveillance of China's foreign activities such as cyber attacks. Although such information is so far being shared with the other US allies on a bilateral basis, it points the way towards closer links between NATO and the Five Eyes, with the potential to upgrade NATO's East Asian partnerships towards more extensive intelligence sharing, joint planning and military exercises.

Securing technology

This then comes to the heart of the matter: securing NATO's communications technologies from the so-called Huawei 'threat'. It is China's challenge in the digital world that concerns the US above all else. China's emergence as a global leader in the development of new technologies, and its apparent growing capacity to gather vast amounts of global data, is seen to have brought the world to a turning point.

With NATO and the Five Eyes partners reliant on 5G networks, the hype is of China leveraging Huawei's commercial networks for military purposes to access highly classified information flowing between allies or even to block services in the event of conflict.¹² But Europe has its doubts,

and Chancellor Merkel, for one, has been reluctant to discriminate against a single company or a single country.¹³ It is to enforce the Huawei ban that the US has turned up the ideological pressure. The rhetoric is all about protecting freedom and democracy and securing the unfettered flow of information across the globe. The real fear is of the US losing its technological edge.

Is China a threat?

China has been upgrading its military forces, including its naval and missile capabilities, on a considerable scale. Its military budget, despite an increase to \$261 bn, remains dwarfed by US military spending at \$732 bn, and is just a fraction of the budgets of US and its Asian allies combined.¹⁴ US military power is still far superior to that of China, with China's efforts concentrated mainly on its own defence. It is its strengths in A2AD – anti-access and area denial – that particularly frustrates the US military.

China argues that having capability is not the same as intention to use. It has so far adhered to a no-first-use nuclear policy. A similar commitment from the other nuclear powers should be at least one of the conditions for China signing up to any new arms control treaty; the inclusion of sea- and air-based as well as the land-based missiles covered by the INF being another. China can also point to its long efforts together with Russia to gain agreement on a convention on the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS). The Xi-Obama agreement on cyber-security had a degree of success.¹⁵

With Obama's Asian pivot upgraded by Trump into the Indo-Pacific strategy, together with a deepening of Cold War mindset, China has drawn closer to Russia to safeguard security and promote safety and stability through multipolarity. Recent Sino-Russian joint military exercises with India, Pakistan and Central Asian states and with South Africa are a demonstration of this.

China is not seeking to engage in an arms race with the US; it does not intend to follow the Soviet Union and risk its own downfall. In challenging US hegemony, its chosen battleground is the digital world; its race of choice is to the technological frontiers – a pre-arms race over innovation upon which the US military's 'full spectrum dominance' relies for advantage.

NATO takes steps but Europe is more cautious

Whilst Stoltenberg was careful to recognise China's rise as "presenting opportunities as well as challenges", there was broad agreement that China was a "part of our strategic environment" and that NATO needed to coordinate its response to the challenges posed by China's growing influence. The commitment to a NATO space force was a particular mark of willingness on the part of the Allies to deter China's rise as a rival military power. It was also agreed to increase tools to respond to cyber attacks, and whilst a NATO maritime task force in the South China Sea is still a long shot, the organisation's maritime posture is to be bolstered.

With the new US Cold Warriors looking to increase NATO cooperation with Japan and Australia in order to counter the Russian and Chinese multipolar moves, the call to further strengthen NATO's political coordination was of particular significance, opening the door to wider consultation with these Indo-Pacific partners. The NATO summit agreement on coordination on arms control may provide such a forum to build the case for the expansion of an intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty to include China, in effect, a means of containment, as a preliminary step towards a broader international front against Chinese influence.

But what was perhaps most notable about the 2019 NATO summit communique was that, whilst there was a commitment on the part of all the leaders to ensuring their countries had secure 5G communications, there was no mention of an Huawei ban. In this, then, the US aim for a United NATO anti-China front fell short.

Throughout 2020, the US has continued to put pressure on NATO's European members. Turning out in force at the Munich Security Conference in February to press forward with the Huawei ban, US representatives met a lukewarm response from Europe, causing one commentator to declare: "there's never been such a rift with how Americans define security as right now".¹⁶

From the European view, a delay in applying 5G would mean falling further behind in the 4th technological-industrial revolution, risking relegation to the margins in the US-China competitive race. Huawei offers a cheap upgrade to 5G networks and around half of the 65 commercial deals that have been signed have been with European customers.¹⁷ The US is demanding that its allies set aside their economic interests and put security first, a security set on its own terms. But how much, the Europeans might ask themselves, does the US ambition to monopolise new technologies matter to them?

There is another aspect to European reluctance. Western European

allies in particular see NATO's expansion beyond security into matters of economy as interference in the regulatory role of national and EU governance. By raising questions about China's investment in critical infrastructure, Stoltenberg is pushing at the boundaries of NATO's core focus. According to his vision, NATO 2030 would work more closely with industry and scientific research institutes curtailing the powers of European governments to handle matters of foreign direct investment and technology policy to maintain the West's technological edge over China.¹⁸

Conclusion

European states have resisted the US when it acted against their interests, for example over the Iraq war. With the US push for an anti-China NATO threatening to divide Europe, political divisions at the December 2019 summit had taken such a toll that NATO leaders postponed further meetings until 2021. Stoltenberg will then present the results of his 'reflection process' on strengthening NATO's 'political dimension'. Nevertheless, the small shifts achieved in NATO's position were possibly enough to embolden US Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, just days after the meeting, to designate China as the top US military priority ahead of Russia.¹⁹

Since then, as the COVID-19 virus has torn its devastating path across the world, with people crying out for global cooperation to deal with the disaster, US-China relations deteriorated alarmingly, driven not least by Trump's racialised rhetoric. Disputes over trade and technology have been elevated into the ideological domain of a New Cold War with the US increasing pressure to decouple from China. Even though Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in the UK had originally declared involvement with Huawei manageable, the Johnson government caved in to ban the company from UK 5G networks in July 2020.²⁰ All eyes are now on Germany which is likely to decide on the matter soon.

A global NATO, enforcing not only a political-ideological but also an economic and technological bipolar separation, is seen by some as the goal of the decade. Stoltenberg is likely to put forward recommendations for the Alliance to establish some kind of institutional presence, if not a small military headquarters, in the Indo-Pacific region, taking a further step in that direction.²¹

With the US ramping up its ideological attacks on China, some kind of military action by Trump before the US election cannot be ruled out. Moves to foment demands for independence in Taiwan with increased US backing could have terrible consequences.

China, meanwhile, has stepped up its overtures towards Europe, calling for the strengthening of dialogue and cooperation with NATO on such issues as Afghanistan, the Middle East, Iran, and also on arms control, appealing particularly to its concerns.²²

Are Europeans, caught between the old Atlanticism and a longer term rebalancing towards Eurasia, capable of rising to the challenge of repositioning and the kind of radical rethink of the very meaning of security that this entails?

Notes

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