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NATO AND THE CHINA-QUESTION: A NEW ROLE FOR THE ALLIANCE

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"China is not a superpower, nor will she ever seek to be one. If one day China should change her color and turn into a superpower, if she too should play the tyrant in the world, and everywhere subject others to her bullying, aggression and exploitation, the people of the world should identify her as social-imperialism, expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it."

Deng Xiaoping, 1974

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine put NATO once again high on the agenda of its Member States. Whereas the Alliance was described as "brain dead" a few years ago, policymakers are now fully convinced of its relevance.¹ The Russian aggression on the eastern flank is certainly not the only threat the Member States face. Another issue that has concerned policymakers for some time is China's growing power and influence in all kinds of security domains. The objective of this paper is therefore to answer the question of whether NATO is equipped to deal with these challenges. By means of a policy report with recommendations, I illustrate in which domains the Alliance can have a lasting impact on the increased Chinese assertiveness.

This paper serves as a set of recommendations on how to implement the 2022 Strategic Concept. The update of this Concept was urgently needed to reorient the Alliance in the thoroughly changed security environment. After all, the previous Concept dated from 2010, and since then, the geopolitical landscape has changed significantly. In 2010, despite the fact that Russia's behaviour had already been highly problematic, the country was still considered a partner. The recent events in Ukraine, Syria and various African countries where Russia is committing well-documented crimes, combined with cyber- and hybrid attacks on several NATO Member States, clearly shows that this is no longer the case. Additionally, China can no longer be ignored in NATO's strategic planning and strategy for the future, whereas the previous Strategic Concept did not even mention

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the People's Republic of China. Despite its geographical location, China is having an increasingly profound impact on Euro-Atlantic security and the global trading system. Moreover, in the previous Strategic Concept, much attention was still given to crisis management and counterterrorism operations against non-state actors. Although the terrorist threat in NATO Member States has not diminished, the organisation needs to reorient itself and will have to focus more on collective defence as its ultimate core task. Due to the increased threat posed by China and Russia, greater emphasis must be placed on full spectrum warfare against an opponent with high-tech, modern capabilities, both in the conventional and nuclear domain. NATO must find a balance between, on the one hand, the continued performance of tasks as an actor in the domain of crisis management and counterterrorism, and on the other hand, the modernisation and development of capabilities to ensure collective defence against powerful state actors.

In the run-up to the update of the Strategic Concept, NATO Allies asked Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the 2019 London summit to prepare the necessary reflections.² This reflection ultimately led to the NATO Agenda 2030 with eight concrete proposals ranging from strengthening collective deterrence to suggestions for increasing resilience in NATO Member States and addressing hybrid threats. Moreover, references to China were made in these proposals, which until then had been a rather rare occurrence in official NATO publications. At the NATO Conference in Brussels, which adopted the Agenda 2030, the People's Republic of China was even described for the first time as a systemic challenge.

This change in the narrative regarding China is not entirely unexpected, as many NATO members

have longstanding concerns about the People's Republic of China. The rapid military build-up of the country, the increasing grip on global supply chains, the substantial foreign direct investments in European technology companies, the Chinese Communist Party's inscrutable decision-making mechanisms, the special Chinese interest in foreign transport infrastructure, and the enormous investments in Emerging and Disruptive Technologies^b (EDTs) are all reasons for unease.^{3&4} In addition, state-led corporate and government espionage is causing growing discontent within NATO Member States.⁵ Likewise, increasing cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, hybrid actions against Member States and the stronger military presence of the Chinese navy and air force in the Indo-Pacific region, are leading to serious concerns for the continued existence of free trade. In addition, growing pressure on Hong Kong and Taiwan is being closely monitored, as well as the ongoing repression in Tibet and China's Xinjiang province. Furthermore, stronger cooperation and joint military exercises between China and Russia are matters of great concern to NATO. Lastly, NATO can no longer ignore the Chinese breakthroughs in hypersonic weapons technology, and the modernisation and expansion of their nuclear triad.⁶

This policy paper will attempt to answer the following central research question: **"In what way can NATO contribute to enhanced security within the domains where increasing Chinese assertiveness poses a challenge to NATO Member States and partners?"** The intention of this policy report is to gain a better understanding of the implications of possible NATO-related strategies in these domains and how the division of labour between Member States, global partner countries and other organisations such as the European Union (EU) should proceed. The policy

^b Emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) are recently developed or emerging technologies that will have a dramatic impact on industries and societies in general. Examples of EDTs include artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computers, blockchain, autonomous weapons systems, big data, hypersonic weapons and certain developments in biotechnology.

report also serves as a wake-up call for policymakers to engage in sustained strategic thinking with respect to the People's Republic of China.

The paper argues that there is a role for NATO to take action against the legitimate Chinese threat in certain domains. Inspired by the domains addressed by the NATO 2030 Agenda, security threats in the domain of hybrid threats, EDTs, space and weapons of mass destruction are discussed. Likewise, threats to critical trade routes will also be addressed, and a brief analysis of potential partners in the region to counter them is made. The policy paper is not blind to the Alliance's jurisdictional limitations, and therefore also pays attention to relevant partners such as the EU, with whom NATO should cooperate even better in the future. It is in these domains that this policy report makes recommendations, and enriching implications for Euro-Atlantic security are detected, since the threats in these domains are not regionally confined.

Before analysing each domain, this paper analyses both the current relationship between NATO and China, and the relationship between China and Russia. These two sections outline a certain worldview and analytical framework that informs and justifies the choices for certain recommendations in the policy report.

The relationship between China and NATO

When writing a policy paper on the future role that China will play in Alliance planning, operations and analysis, it is not a luxury to first analyse the current relationship. In the past, there have been several events and incidents between the People's Republic of China and NATO and its Member States, that have greatly affected the country and its Communist Party military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). For a long time, NATO did not cause much concern in Beijing. The Alliance was seen as an instrument hijacked by Washington, mainly focused on Russia and the European southern flank.⁷ The Alliance was seen as an unwieldy bureaucracy with too many internal disagreements and too little out-of-area capacity to be smoothly

oriented towards the Indo-Pacific region. In China, the focus was on the military strength and threats posed by the United States (US) itself, rather than the alliances of which the US is a part, such as NATO. However, the subtle reference to China in official communications after the 2019 London conference instilled fear in Chinese policy circles that NATO could eventually be effectively deployed in the region to try and stop Chinese aspirations. The fact that China now put NATO - independently of its Member States- on its radar, is also proven by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. China is vehemently lashing out at the perceived role of the Alliance in this conflict, and old, unprocessed incidents are being resurfaced to justify their narrative, such as the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999.⁸ This marks the definitive end of the cooperative atmosphere that was present between NATO and China at the beginning of this century.

The Sino-Russian tandem

When writing about this subject, it is certainly not redundant to also pay attention to the Sino-Russian cooperation. Still, one must always keep in mind the bigger picture: China will assist Russia in certain cases if there is a net benefit, but it will by no means provide unconditional support. This becomes clear if one analyses the consequences of the war in Ukraine and what they mean for the Chinese agenda. Whatever the outcome of the war, Russia will undoubtedly emerge weaker. China will gain a less powerful and more dependent neighbour, which is beneficial for its own regional hegemonic aspirations.⁹ Likewise, this armed conflict forces the US to invest more resources in European security, delaying their Pivot to Asia. Thus, China has everything to gain from the continuation of this conflict, despite its narrative of peace negotiations. Moreover, this war has major economic consequences. It delays the West's economic recovery from the pandemic and may also provide a boost to China's fourteenth five-year plan of a Dual Circulation Strategy (DCS). The goal of the DCS is greater self-reliance whereby the Chinese domestic market becomes the main engine of the economy. In this

way, the Chinese economy becomes less dependent on foreign trade flows and thus less vulnerable to external shocks.¹⁰ This is detrimental to NATO Member States and partners, as China's dependence on foreign markets is a protective mechanism against a major armed conflict. If China is more self-reliant, the PLA could be more easily deployed to resolve threats to Chinese interest without risking huge economic costs.

Yet, we cannot expect NATO to make a major military shift towards the Indo-Pacific region. The active armed conflict on the European Eastern Front eliminates this possibility, and more importantly, unlike Russia, China currently does not pose a direct kinetic threat to NATO Member States.¹¹ The changes in the Strategic Concept regarding China will therefore not be of the nature of the Alliance developing disengagement and defence missions to protect Member States and partner countries directly from the Chinese threat, nor will freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea be organised under a direct NATO flag. This has been confirmed by NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg, who explicitly stated that it is not the Alliance's intention to play an active military role in the South China Sea. NATO forces, which would be deployed forward in the Indo-Pacific, are both politically and militarily undesirable and even unfeasible for NATO Allies and regional partners.

Yet, at the same time, NATO needs to engage more with China because the People's Republic is becoming increasingly active in the European periphery and within the Member States.¹² NATO should, therefore, address certain specific domains in which China poses a threat to its

Member States. Especially in the domains of critical infrastructure protection, social resilience, hybrid threats, EDTs, and threats in the cyber and space domain, the Alliance could play a valuable role. These domains were also mentioned in the NATO 2030 agenda. In the following overview, I outline the main challenges in these domains and the possible measures that NATO can take to respond to them as adequately as possible.

Hybrid threats and resilience

Hybrid threats and resilience were high on the agenda of NATO's 2022 Madrid Summit. Many think tanks and academics argued to include resilience as a fourth core task of the Alliance, but this policy report reasons against it. Resilience must remain a responsibility of the Member States themselves and of partner organizations such as the EU. These, in contrast to NATO, have the legislative powers necessary to implement institutional changes in the civilian sectors that are frequently victim of hybrid attacks. Nonetheless China is pushing hard in the domain of hybrid threats through their own the doctrine of Sang Zhong Zhanfa^c, freely translated as the doctrine of the three warfares.¹³ This is somewhat comparable to the Russian New Generation Warfare.¹⁴ To better equip the Alliance and its Member States against these hybrid challenges, this policy report recommends the following:

- ⊗ *To further develop deterrence by punishment in the domain of hybrid/cyber threats in the NATO context.*

The current initiatives and collaborations to tackle hybrid threats can be situated in the domain of resilience and deterrence by denial.

^c San zhong zhanfa or freely translated: the doctrine of the three warfares. In this doctrine, a situation is created that is highly beneficial to China, through influence in the realm of public opinion, the social psychological fabric and in the legal realm. Strategic psychological operations are meant to intimidate opponents in the pre-conflict phase and manipulate them towards preferred outcomes. Media manipulation, in turn, is influencing domestic and international perspectives on issues where Chinese interests are present through a variety of channels such as news services and social media. Finally, the exploitation of national and international legal systems aims to cause confusion and delay and to set legal precedents favourable to China.

However, resilience has serious limitations as it is impossible to cover all weak spots within society against hybrid attacks. This would require such intensive government intervention that the very fabric of Western democracies that resilience seeks to protect would be undermined.¹⁵ This policy report therefore advocates the expansion of deterrence by punishment e.g. a cyberattack, as both denial and punishment initiatives are needed for a healthy balance to deter hybrid threats.

- ⊗ *Specifying Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in the field of cyber-attacks and hybrid attacks.*

While there are certainly strategic advantages to the ambiguity created by the current vague notions of a possible collective response to these types of attacks, it may also make for a less credible deterrent. Indeed, the broad and ambiguous nature of hybrid threats does not make it feasible to respond to all actions and could therefore lead to an erosion of Article 5. It is therefore better to agree on clear thresholds for triggering Article 5 in hybrid attacks, such as an action that results in fatalities. Of course, such clearly marked red lines may cause adversaries to seek out these thresholds and stay below them. In these cases, their effects must be countered by deterrence by denial and built-in resilience. This again illustrates the need for a balanced mix of deterrents.

- ⊗ *To further develop strategic training in the field of hybrid threats in the different NATO training centres.*

These educational institutions can help by filling the knowledge gaps among analysts and experts. This will become even more important in the future, as President Xi has recently installed a ban on foreign theoretical books in the strategic design of policy makers.¹⁶ It is assumable that Chinese policy makers will increasingly revisit their own strategy classics and it is therefore expected that this will also manifest itself in future strategic thinking in the field of hybrid threats. If NATO can adequately respond to this,

analysts and policymakers can better anticipate future threats.

Emerging and disruptive technologies

In the domain of emerging and disruptive technologies, China is increasingly investing resources in technologies that will determine the fourth industrial revolution. These technologies won't all have peaceful purposes and NATO could be part of the solution to ensure Member States maintain their technological superiority. Where the Strategic Concept deviates from expectations, is in the limited attention paid to this domain.¹⁷ Once an established buzzword of analysts, it has now shifted to a somewhat secondary position since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Almost as much attention is paid to women's empowerment and climate change as to EDT's; while important, there are certainly much better forums and institutions for these issues than a military defence organisation. They have rightly moved away from a global NATO but risk now taking on too many tasks in other areas while others do not deserve the required attention. The policy report advises the following:

- ⊗ *NATO should be a key actor in setting technical standards for EDTs.*

The Alliance has a long tradition in setting standards for military technology and weapon systems via the NATO Standardization Office.¹⁸ It would be strongly recommended that the new Strategic Concept and subsequent documents also entrust NATO with this function in the domain of EDTs, so that interoperability is guaranteed in the future.

- ⊗ *Additional efforts in human capital investment.*

This is necessary to bridge the widening gap between people who have the technical knowledge but are less familiar with the political-military reality and people who have to make the strategic choices but lack the technical finesse.¹⁹

- ⊗ *A target should be set for R&D expenditure in the NATO context.*

At the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO reaffirmed the 2% GDP military spending norm with a pledge to put 20% of it into investment in major equipment and modernization. NATO should opt to adopt a similar arrangement and spend a certain fixed percentage of GDP on Research & Development (R&D). This is necessary as crucial R&D expenditure is otherwise a too tempting budget item for short-term minded administrations to save during a period of successive crises.²⁰

- ⊗ *Improved coordination*

Improved coordination with partners like the QUAD on supply chain security of certain rare earth materials and other critical components, which are crucial for the development of EDTs.²¹

Space

Space is a rather recent operational area for NATO, yet, an indispensable domain for modern warfare. The Alliance thus needs to ensure the success of operations in this area. Today this is done through an extensive network of Member State satellites. However China plays an increasingly assertive role in space and has on several occasions shown hostile behaviour towards allied space vessels. It is therefore recommended to:

- ⊗ *Achieve a treaty amendment on Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty so that Article 5 is also valid in space.*

As of today the geographical limitation, which is restricted to attacks on Member States and their vehicles and vessels above the Tropic of Cancer, excludes spacecraft.²² In order to signal a reliable deterrent to Member States and adversaries, this gap must be closed.

- ⊗ *Purchase an own NATO satellite configuration to obtain operational resilience.*

Arms control

The potential arms race with China causes quite a few concerns within the Alliance, which is not unwarranted given that the People's Republic of China is not bound by the current disarmament treaties. Yet in comparison with the previous Strategic Concept, there is clearly less enthusiasm for arms control as opponents are fully committed to the expansion and modernisation of their respective nuclear deterrent capacities. As the Alliance has rightfully stated in the past, NATO is and will remain a nuclear alliance as long as there are nuclear weapons. This is underlined by the absence of any reference to of the Nuclear Ban Treaty in the new Concept.²³ Therefore the policy report recommends the following:

- ⊗ *NATO should establish itself as a consultative body on arms control with the People's Republic of China.*

NATO already has considerable experience in such talks, not only as an Alliance but also through the efforts of individual Member States. NATO can also use this expertise to avoid an arms race in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁴

NATO has therefore considerable potential to enhance security in these areas in the near future. If the Alliance is sufficiently aware of its jurisdictional boundaries and enters into more intensive relations with partner organisations, a complementary security structure can emerge that fills in each other's gaps and is therefore capable of addressing multidimensional threats. For this reason, this report also makes some suggestions for potential cooperation initiatives with relevant partners. These would allow NATO to be better equipped to tackle the security challenges of this century.

Operational division of labour with the EU

- ⊗ *The development of a pooling and sharing system in the Indo-Pacific between European NATO Allies who possess bases in the region.*

To get even more out of these bases, European countries should expand existing cooperation agreements. Currently, there are limited

agreements under which states can store certain materials in the bases of other countries, such as strategically stored weapons and ammunition.²⁵ These should be expanded to include the storage of spare parts and allowing foreign ships to dock and resupply so that their deployments can be extended during conflict situations.

- ⊗ *Making agreements on coordinated deployments in the Indian Ocean and surrounding waters.*

In this way, a continuous European presence in the Indo-Pacific region can be guaranteed in a more cost-efficient manner. This would also be a good signal to partners in the region that the Indo-Pacific is high on the European agenda. In addition, this autonomous European deployment, which would be independent of NATO, would also contribute to the creation of a separate chain of command, making it more difficult for rival players in the region to anticipate what actions and deployments will take place. This is good for resilience and may contribute to additional deterrence. This contributes to the safety of regional partners and the continued freedom and security of maritime routes.

- ⊗ *Working out a division of labour between the EU and NATO in the southern flank and deciding on extra efforts with regard to related strategic enablers.*

NATO and European NATO Member States will have little influence on the inevitable shift in focus of the US to the Indo-Pacific to try to contain and slow down China's growing influence in the region. The US has an enormous military capacity and only a limited part of it is inscribed in the Alliance's military planning. Nevertheless, the increased focus on the Indo-Pacific region will have consequences for the European NATO Member States, especially in the area of strategic enablers. At present, European Member States are highly dependent on these American strategic enablers to conduct operations. However, it can be assumed that in the future the US will prefer to deploy certain capabilities in the Indo-Pacific as a matter of priority. Due to the active armed conflict on the European Eastern Front and the

Russian threat against (aspiring) NATO members, the need for strategic enablers is more acute in this area today than in the southern flank of Europe, but a new crisis in the South could change that very quickly. Here the EU can play a strong complementary role, as the southern periphery of Europe will remain an unstable region. In the current plans of the EU's Strategic Compass, concrete results in the domain of own strategic enablers are only expected by the end of the second half of the decade.²⁶ This risks creating another gap where EU forces will have to rely on mainly US enablers, which will most likely be less and less available. It is therefore strongly recommended that work be accelerated to obtain sufficient strategic enablers in the European context. Ideally, work should be done on the revision of the Headline Goals, EU Member States should participate in more Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects and, above all, more money should be provided for these projects.

NATO partnerships

- ⊗ *The elaboration of an extended Asia-Pacific Four format.*

NATO should invest in the so called Asia-Pacific (x) format that could seek closer relations with India, the Philippines and Vietnam. These countries were included in my analysis on the basis of several factors which are briefly summarised below:

1. The potential partner's attitude towards China, in particular whether the potential partner also views the People's Republic of China and its actions as a strategic challenge.
2. The contribution the country can make to the Alliance and the Asia-Pacific (x) format. The quality and quantity of the military resources are assessed, but also the capacity and the will to use these resources if necessary. Other factors such as diplomatic power, infrastructure and geographical position are also taken into account.

3. The third factor is the general desirability of entering into closer cooperation with the potential partner. Several risk factors are examined here, such as the status of the country in the international community, the chance that troops and equipment might be at risk, the likelihood of regime change, the domestic perception of the Member States about this potential partner, etc..

⊗ *The establishment of the NATO-Pacific Partnership Council.*

Should closer and comprehensive security cooperation, such as the Asia-Pacific (x) format, prove politically impossible, it would be wise to establish a NATO-Pacific Partnership Council. An akin but less institutionalised format can also be found in the Arctic, another strategically important area. This exists in the form of an Arctic Council, albeit outside a NATO framework. Political consultation within the NATO-Pacific Partnership Council could combine NATO's unparalleled experience in cooperative security with offering it to partners in the region.

⊗ *The creation of an Indo-Pacific centre of excellence.*

This centre would not only provide improved field knowledge for NATO Member States but could also be used to transfer knowledge and skills to regional partner countries. Within this centre, NATO Member States and partners would be able to exchange practical experience in the areas of maritime security, cyber security and social resilience, given the context and the regional challenges. As with the Hybrid centre of excellence in Helsinki, this could also involve private actors who can communicate relevant knowledge and signal undetected problems.

Conclusion and final remarks

This policy paper demonstrates that NATO, despite its purely political-military nature, can still play a role in addressing the multidimensional threat that China poses to Euro-Atlantic security. Too often, people still think in traditional terms that the Alliance is only good for conventional and

nuclear deterrence. However, inspired by the NATO 2030 Agenda, this policy report explores how NATO can contribute to addressing Chinese threats in the areas of hybrid threats, emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs), space and arms control. As the extensive list of recommendations, summarised above, shows, NATO has a great deal of expertise and potential to make a significant impact on security in these areas in the near future. If the Alliance is sufficiently aware of its jurisdictional boundaries and enters into more intensive relations with partner organisations, a complementary security structure can emerge that fills in each other's gaps and is therefore capable of responding to multidimensional threats. The list of recommendations is extensive and it may not be politically feasible to implement them all. Nevertheless, it was considered beneficial to present them all in this policy report, as there is a renewed enthusiasm for NATO due to the war in Ukraine. This armed conflict creates both opportunities and potential challenges for tackling security problems in other regions. The invasion of Ukraine will require the necessary policy changes within the Alliance in terms of collective defence. Nevertheless, this policy report points out that China will become an increasingly pressing issue over the next decade, whatever the outcome of the war in Ukraine. If the Indo-Pacific is going to be considered as a side issue or a long-term problem, the consequences could be far-reaching. In fact, the opposite is true: the war in Ukraine should be an incentive to think more carefully about the division of tasks in both regions. If NATO, and more specifically the European NATO Member States, were to focus too unilaterally on the threat from Russia, this could be seen as an incentive for Beijing to become even more assertive in the region.

It is important to realise that NATO is thus well placed to make a significant contribution to the security of tomorrow. In doing so, the Alliance will be treading paths that have not been explored previously within the organisation. This policy report, however, clearly shows that this will have to be done in cooperation with other

organisations. After all, the final premise of this report is not that NATO will have to transform itself into a global alliance, a so-called global NATO which will add all kinds of new domains and regions to its range of tasks in which China could pose a threat. The message that this policy report wants to send out, however, is that NATO currently has an untapped potential in some domains, such as for instance EDTs. In other domains, NATO will take a more assisting role and, in consultation with partners, tasks can even be left to others in order to achieve a more efficient and durable security structure.

Through the new Strategic Concept, NATO illustrates that it is once again fully engaged in its original task of keeping the Euro-Atlantic region secure and less attention is given to counterterrorism and military competition in the Indo-Pacific. This is the right course of action, however, it is important that the follow-up documents to the Strategic Concept, contain more concrete plans on issues that are now less

well-covered in the final document, such as resilience, EDTs and the challenges in the Indo-Pacific. This will be necessary in order to achieve the full 360-degree security coverage that NATO so heavily aspires to.²⁷

However if there is one constant to be found in NATO's history, it is its knack for evolving in time and adapting to the changing world.²⁸ The NATO structures descended from the Cold War era, are clearly working to address the Russian threat and assist Ukraine as best as possible. However, this does not mean that these structures are ideal for dealing with different types of threats as mentioned before. Other types of challenges posed by our adversaries may require another metamorphosis of the Alliance. This Strategic Concept already puts the Alliance in the right direction but additional efforts are certainly needed, because the security landscape is perpetually evolving and there is no situation that cannot go from bad to worse.

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