

# THE LIKELIHOOD OF COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND NATO

*The rise of China has attracted the attention of the world, particularly of NATO with regards to future cooperation between the two parties. China is the second largest economy in the world and NATO is the strongest military transatlantic alliance; thus, a China-NATO collaboration will undoubtedly enhance the ability of human beings to resist global risks such as climate change, pandemics, and other nontraditional security challenges. The possibility of long-term cooperation depends on China's historical and realistic consideration of the relationship between the two, as well as the voices of the US and Europe. These factors form a resultant force, and will determine the future of bilateral relations between NATO and China.*

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According to a Eurostat report, in 2017 the 27 Member States of the EU represented 16 percent of the world's GDP, while China and the US represented 16.4 and 16.3 percent respectively.<sup>1</sup> China's growing economic strength and international influence have attracted the attention of the entire world, but mostly of the US and Europe. On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding, following NATO's London Summit in December 2019, the Alliance issued the London Declaration and addressed the growth of China's influence for the first time. Article 6 of the declaration states: "We recognize that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."<sup>2</sup> NATO has been increasingly paying more attention to China's military investments, and hopes to include China in the new international scope of arms control. Ultimately, whether China's rise will bring opportunities or challenges depends on the development of bilateral relations. Cooperation between China and NATO can not only alleviate the mutual strategic doubts between the two parties, but also provide a united front against the global threats we face today.

### *China's Consideration of China-NATO Relations*

The development of China-NATO relations is hindered by both historical and practical factors. Historically, China and NATO were isolated from each other during the pre-Cold War period as well as the relaxation period in the 1970s. In 1999, the US led NATO to use five missiles to attack the Chinese Embassy in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, causing casualties and property losses. As a result, the isolated relationship came to a freezing point. This was the first frontal contact between China and NATO. The two parties began to reconnect after 9/11. However, the event of the embassy bombing has left its mark on the Chinese people, affecting China's stance toward NATO. Therefore, if we want the relationship between China and NATO to move forward in a cooperative manner, we must face the past, bear in mind the lessons of history, respect the sovereignty of all countries, and resolutely resist hegemonism.

In reality, China's consideration of its relationship with NATO revolves around Russia and geopolitics, rendering Russia an important third-party affecting China-NATO relations. While the cooperative relationship between NATO and Russia gradually broke down, the Sino-Russian relationship has rapidly grown, especially

<sup>1</sup> Eurostat, "China, US and EU are the largest economies in the world," *Eurostat Newsrelease*, 19 May 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10868691/2-19052020-BP-EN.pdf/bb14f7f9-fc26-8aa1-60d4-7c2b509dda8e>

<sup>2</sup> NATO, "London Declaration," 3 December 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm?selectedLocale=en)

after the 2014 Ukraine Crisis that ultimately left NATO worried about Russia's pursuit for power. The two countries actively expanded and deepened their business as well as investment cooperation. China and Russia conducted effective coordination within multilateral mechanisms, including the UN, G20, BRICS, and SCO.<sup>3</sup> In 2019, China and Russia's Heads of State decided to upgrade bilateral relations to a new level.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when developing relations with NATO, China must bear in mind the interests of Russia, so as to not infringe China-Russia relations—especially as the conflict of interest between NATO and Russia intensifies. China must act delicately in order to build stronger ties with the Alliance, while also maintaining its relations with Russia.

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The dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region and Central Asia are also important factors that affect China-NATO relations. Although China and NATO's borders geographically do not intersect, with the continuous expansion of NATO and, by extension, their scope of interests, relations between the two have the potential to overcome the lack of a common border. NATO Secretary General's Annual Report in 2019 writes, “NATO has four close partners in the Asia-Pacific region—Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—and is also developing a partnership with Mongolia. The Alliance has also been pursuing a dialogue with China and India to build confidence and understanding.”<sup>5</sup> This shows that NATO regards the Asia-Pacific region as an important area of concern for its future. At the same time, the Chinese government has attached much importance to the western region of China due to its significance for the Belt and Road Initiative. With the continuous expansion of NATO, Central Asia has become the frontier of its border with Asia, particularly after NATO brought Central and Eastern Europe into the sphere of influence. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are all members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.<sup>6</sup> While some of them border China on the west, some are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These intersecting interests display the need for China and NATO to focus on establishing mutual strategic trust and strengthening cooperation in border areas.

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “China and Russia,” [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zzjg\\_663340/dozys\\_664276/gjlb\\_664280/3220\\_664352/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/dozys_664276/gjlb_664280/3220_664352/)

<sup>4</sup> “A new era for China-Russia relationship in 2019,” *China Daily*, 28 December 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201912/28/WS5e06c51ea310cf3e3558138b.html>

<sup>5</sup> NATO, “The Secretary General's Annual Report,” 2019, p.80, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/3/pdf\\_publications/sgar19-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/3/pdf_publications/sgar19-en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> NATO, “Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council,” <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/51288.htm>

### ***The Influence of NATO Internal Differences on China-NATO Cooperation***

NATO played a key role in establishing peace between the East and the West during the Cold War, and provided military and security guarantees for Europe's economic recovery after the war. However, with the disappearance of the common enemy—the Soviet Union—Europe started to construct its own defense mechanism. Various voices subsequently arose within NATO, such as Atlanticism led by the US, Europeanism dominated by France and Germany, and those of Central and Eastern European countries that joined NATO later on.

The United States undoubtedly plays an important role in NATO. First of all, the establishment of NATO was carried out under the leadership of the US. As a commitment to European military security, NATO, together with the Marshall Plan, constituted two aspects of the US leadership in European affairs during the Cold War. After the Cold War, NATO was preserved as a tool for the US to control Europe and expand its global influence, as NATO's transformation has always followed the national strategy of the US. After the Cold War, American military strategy evolved as follows:

- The strategic goal changed from fighting for hegemony with the Soviet Union to seeking global hegemony.
- The strategic guiding ideology of “nuclear deterrence” turned into “preventive defense”.
- The focus of threat response shifted from dealing with traditional security threats to dealing with nontraditional security threats.

Overall, the US' alliance strategy changed from utilizing the Alliance as a tool for hegemony against the Soviet Union to a tool for the US to assert global authority. By extension, NATO's strategy shifted from being defensive to being offensive, expansionary, and flexible.<sup>7</sup>

The United States has used NATO to achieve its hegemony through a series of channels. For example, the Allied Command Transformation (ACT) is located in the US. Moreover, not only is the US the largest contributor and equipment technology provider of NATO, the current Supreme Allied Commander Europe is an American officer. NATO's consensus principle is also a factor that is conducive to achieving hegemony.<sup>8</sup> With this principle, member countries consult one another rather than

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<sup>7</sup> Zhao Junjie and Gao Hua, *NATO: Is Wolf Coming? - NATO's Strategic Adjustment & ESDP: Impact on China's Security Environment* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2011), p.28.

<sup>8</sup> Wang Yiwei, *NATO's Transformation in the Changing World* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2015), preface.

vote, allowing the US to influence NATO's decision-making due to its clout within the organization.<sup>9</sup>

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On the eve of NATO's 70th anniversary summit, the US hoped to draw NATO into the anti-China military front. In different instances, both the US ambassador to NATO<sup>10</sup> and US Secretary of State Pompeo<sup>11</sup> remarked that China was a threat to NATO and the world order. Furthermore, the Trump administration has been lately trying to persuade Europeans to turn down Chinese investment in its vital infrastructure and telecommunications networks.<sup>12</sup> It is evident that the US will continue to exert influence on NATO in the future to the benefit of its own national interests, and hope that NATO will remain under its influence so as to prevent Russian threats and counteract China's rise.

The disappearance of military threats after the Cold War encouraged transatlantic allies to prioritize their domestic rather than collective interests. On that note, the US has been lately showing an increasing tendency to violate its shared values with Europe, particularly with France and Germany, which the US regards as “old Europe”. The US continues to pursue “American priority”, global hegemony, and military means to achieve its goals. Europe pursues more of “soft power” and “model norms”, hoping to change the violent world through deep-seated means, such as social systems, and establish a multipolar world of competition and cooperation. Therefore, although the military strength of Europe cannot fully compete with that of the US, the efforts of European countries in the pursuit of defense integration, construction, as well as establishing a European military, has been eroding the US' dominant influence over Europe.

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<sup>9</sup> NATO, “Consensus decision-making at NATO,” 14 March 2016, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49178.htm#:~:text=Consensus%20decision%20making%20means%20that,to%20disagree%20on%20an%20issue.&text=The%20principle%20of%20consensus%20decision%20making%20applies%20throughout%20NATO](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49178.htm#:~:text=Consensus%20decision%20making%20means%20that,to%20disagree%20on%20an%20issue.&text=The%20principle%20of%20consensus%20decision%20making%20applies%20throughout%20NATO)

<sup>10</sup> “China has become too big to break the rules, America's NATO ambassador says,” *CNBC*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/02/china-is-too-big-to-break-the-rules-americas-nato-ambassador-says.html>

<sup>11</sup> “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks at the McConnell Center's Distinguished Speaker Series: ‘Diplomatic Realism, Restraint, and Respect in Latin America,’” *US Embassy in Argentina*, 2 December 2019, <https://ar.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeo-remarks-on-diplomatic-realism-restraint-and-respect-in-latin-america/>

<sup>12</sup> Wang Entai, “US media: US pushes NATO to deal with China's ‘abnormal,’” *Reference News*, 25 March 2019, <http://column.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2019/0325/2375412.shtml>

To the Central and Eastern European countries within NATO, China is different from Russia after all. Central and Eastern Europe are geographically close to Russia, which has also ruled these regions in history. While China does not and will not threaten the security of the region, the “17 + 1” cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe will promote closer relations between China and NATO.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as for the relations between China and Europe, just like the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated at a press conference during the Two Sessions (NPC & CPPCC), China and the EU should not be institutional competitors, but be all-round strategic partners.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, different voices within NATO will influence NATO’s foreign policy, which is also applicable in developing new lines of cooperation with China. Faced by the rise of China, NATO did not show the tendency to resist, unlike the US. On the contrary, NATO stressed that the rise of China creates a coexistence of opportunities and challenges. The Secretary General of NATO stated that NATO is not going to establish a new adversary.<sup>15</sup> The close economic and trade relations between China and the EU allow European countries to be more flexible in dealing with China’s challenges, rather than conceding to the desires of the US. This also reminds China that NATO and the US cannot constantly be equated, hence opening new doors for cooperation between the two.

### ***The Future of China-NATO Relations***

The world is currently facing many common challenges such as climate change, terrorism, infectious diseases, and other threats to the health and safety of all humankind. The COVID-19 pandemic has proved that the international community has to work together to cope with global threats. In fact, NATO delivered critical medical aid of which many were supplied from China during this period.<sup>16</sup> This alone shows how we share responsibility in shaping the fate of humanity.

China is already economically linked with some members of NATO, which sets up a platform to develop cooperation even further. For example, for many years, Germany has been China’s largest trading partner in Europe. According to Chinese statistics, the bilateral trade volume in 2019 was 184.88 billion US dollars, with a

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<sup>13</sup> Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, “Cooperation between China and Central and European Countries,” <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>

<sup>14</sup> “State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi answers questions from Chinese and foreign journalists,” *Xinhua*, 24 May 2020, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020lh/zb/wzjzh/wzsl.htm>

<sup>15</sup> NATO, “Questions and answers by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the ‘NATO Engages: Innovating the Alliance’ conference,” 3 December 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_171550.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_171550.htm?selectedLocale=en)

<sup>16</sup> For example, see: NATO, “Coronavirus response: Second Dutch flight transports additional medical aid to Montenegro in response to COVID-19,” 15 May 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_175861.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_175861.htm)

year-on-year increase of 0.6 percent.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Britain is China's largest direct investment destination in Europe, and China is Britain's second largest trading partner outside Europe. At present, more than 500 Chinese enterprises have settled in the UK. The economic and trade cooperation between the two countries has been even showing a trend of diversification.<sup>18</sup>

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Although the cooling of China-US relations will affect China-NATO relations, other countries within NATO will undoubtedly maintain their cooperation with China, as it is the second largest trade partner of the EU.<sup>19</sup> On 9 June 2020, during the 10<sup>th</sup> round of China-EU High Level Strategic Dialogue with the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, “The two sides reaffirmed that they will adhere to multilateralism, strengthen international cooperation, improve global governance, and hope to actively carry out international cooperation to better deal with global challenges.”<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that many EU countries are also NATO members; that is, of the 30 NATO members, 21 are also members of the EU. This shows that NATO has to consider the economic interests of most European member countries while developing its relations with China. The future cooperation between China and NATO can be carried out in the following ways:

### 1. The Possibility of NATO-SCO Cooperation

With the continuous transformation after the Cold War, NATO has gradually changed from a military alliance to one with political and security priorities. It has successfully adapted to the changes and development of the international community, and maintained relations between Europe and America. This is the success of NATO. Although SCO is different from NATO in nature, there are similarities. The Central Asia region is where their interests converge, building the foundation for NATO and SCO to take joint action to deal with terrorism and other risks in this area through consultation. As the

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<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “China and Germany,” [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/oz\\_678770/1206\\_679086/sbgx\\_679090/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679086/sbgx_679090/)

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “China and the United Kingdom,” [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/oz\\_678770/1206\\_679906/sbgx\\_679910/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679906/sbgx_679910/)

<sup>19</sup> European Commission, “China,” <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/china/#:~:text=Countries%20and%20regions-,China.is%20China's%20biggest%20trading%20partner>

<sup>20</sup> “Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying presides over a regular press conference,” speech given on 10 June 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgnt/chn/fyrth/t1787630.htm>

founder and member of the SCO, China's cooperation with NATO through the SCO will be a favorable choice. During the development of the SCO, the organization can also learn from the experience of NATO's transformation and play a greater role in the security affairs of the world, especially in Asia.

## 2. The Cooperation in the Field of Nontraditional Security

In its 2010 Strategic Concept, NATO listed collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security as three essential core tasks of the alliance.<sup>21</sup> Today, NATO pays more attention to asymmetric threats focusing on the challenges of non-traditional security such as terrorism. The combination of China's economic strength and international influence with NATO's military deployment will allow to tackle global challenges such as COVID-19, climate change, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks, which are all threatening humanity.

## 3. The Cooperation in Military and High Tech Fields

In a speech in Germany in February this year, the Deputy Secretary General of NATO said:

New technologies, artificial intelligence, automation, facial recognition... And yes, China is leading in many of these areas. It is the second largest economy in the world. Many of you and many of us all over the world and here also in Hamburg, Hamburg has, in China, the largest trade partner. That's a big economy. Transporting tens of millions of tons of goods between Europe and China every year. It is clear that there are enormous opportunities that come with the growth of China.<sup>22</sup>

China is rapidly developing in the fields of science, technology, space, polar, and deep sea exploration. NATO as well has accumulated rich intelligence, combat experience, and weapon R&D technology since its inception 70 years ago. All of these provide a new perspective for the cooperation between China and NATO.

## 4. The Cooperation in Building a New Global Security Order

The global pandemic highlights the short board of the international system in

<sup>21</sup> NATO Public Diplomacy Division, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence-Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 2010, pp.7-8. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_68580.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_68580.htm)

<sup>22</sup> NATO, "Speech by NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoaᅇa at the Matthiae Mahl dinner in Hamburg," 28 February 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_173935.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_173935.htm?selectedLocale=en)

some fields. The continuous regional and ethnic conflicts and terrorist activities show the irrationality of today’s security order. China is a permanent member of the Security Council of the UN, and three of the five permanent members of the Security Council are members of NATO. Therefore, the Security Council is another important platform for cooperation between China and NATO. Under the framework of the UN, China and NATO can jointly discuss new international order arrangements, carry out consultation and cooperation on building a new global security system, and encourage the international community to develop toward a multilateral, orderly, and reasonable direction, which will safeguard the common well-being of humankind.

**Conclusion**

As seen in Figure 1 below, similar to the parallelogram rule, the resultant force of China and NATO will determine the future of their relations. On China’s side, there are historical and practical considerations in dealing with relations with NATO, which affect China’s “force”. Although the event of the embassy bombing, as well as the factors of Russia and, partially, geography, are unfavorable for the cooperation between China and NATO, the close geographical location, common international challenges, and the economic and trade exchanges between China and some NATO member countries make cooperation possible. For NATO, the voices of the US and Europe also influence the likelihood of NATO cooperating with China. The US may want to use NATO as a tool to deal with China’s rise, but European countries want to cooperate with China because of their pursuit of independence and close economic ties with China. Therefore, as long as China and NATO are not the opposite forces on the issue of bilateral cooperation, that is to say, neither China nor NATO want to cooperate at all, they can cooperate. China and NATO can resolve each other’s conflicts through cooperation and a trust mechanism to, ultimately, build a new international security order together.

Figure 1

