

## **Weaving a Net - The Network of New Security Strategies in the Face of China**

It cannot be denied that Beijing wants to become a world power and does not shy away from military conflict with nuclear powers. In the face of this emerging state of crisis in Chinese politics, the West must react if it does not want to endanger its interests. And in this course, NATO must also react, otherwise it will become obsolete.

In his diplomatically reserved manner, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has expressed this challenge: „This is not about moving NATO into the South China Sea,“ he stated, „but it's about taking into account that China is coming closer to us in the Arctic, in Africa, investing heavily in our infrastructure in Europe, in cyberspace.“ He could have also said: China is becoming a military and economic challenge that calls into question the role of NATO and the West as a leading global alliance, which can be seen not least in the fact that China is currently expanding its fleet, as did the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s.

So far, the country has rejected all nuclear disarmament agreements and has instead hinted that it wants to increase the number of warheads to 1,000, although this number need not remain the final quantitative target. Beijing is arming at a pace that leaves no one in any doubt as to where it wants to go. By the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic in 29 years at the latest, China is to be a world power - perhaps even more powerful than all the other states put together.

The consequences for NATO cannot be overlooked. For some time to come, China will be involved in almost every conflict on earth through its own military bases and its global economic investments. At the same time, because of Hong Kong and Taiwan, it finds itself in a similar foreign policy situation to Russia because of the Crimea, eastern Ukraine, Transnistria and Abkhazia - in its view, it has unresolved territorial problems which must be resolved by force if necessary.

China also appears to be a technological challenge for the West. It is a leader in 5G communications, hypersonic weapons, quantum computers and artificial intelligence. It has repeatedly demonstrated that it is willing to use these capabilities against the interests and security of the West. China's cyber-espionage and disinformation campaigns have

become commonplace for all NATO allies - both their governments and private companies.

All of this makes the Alliance's engagement with China one of its most pressing tasks. As in the case of Russia, NATO's unity is a prerequisite for engaging in dialogue with the other side. Illusions about China are out of place, but so are illusions about what will happen if the Alliance remains silent on this global political challenge.

This task seems all the more difficult as the Chinese leadership seems to enjoy its role as an ideological challenge to the West and its practice of liberal democracy. China is using its economic, technological and military power to promote its form of national authoritarianism around the world, with Beijing recently even suggesting that its political model is the most adept and agile response to today's coronavirus epidemic.

So how should NATO respond to China's growing global assertiveness and what might be a NATO strategy to do so?

The Alliance's long-standing relations with the key democracies of the Indo-Pacific region are likely to be of particular relevance to the engagement with China. NATO has established global partnerships with Korea, New Zealand and Mongolia since 2012, Australia since 2013 and Japan in 2014. While these relationships are predominantly consultative, most of these Partners have contributed to NATO missions, including in Afghanistan.

As a further expression of this interest, NATO could establish liaison offices in Japan, Australia or South Korea. NATO can also help to develop and disseminate a transatlantic security strategy and a transatlantic security posture towards China. In any case, the objectives of this strategy should include developing cooperative relations with China and deterring China from undermining the interests of the transatlantic community. The latter would define the appropriate role and means by which the Alliance can contribute to deter and, if necessary, defend against Chinese aggression that threatens those interests.

In this context, NATO's civil and military capabilities should ideally be used to facilitate the defence and security component of a Western strategy towards China, including in the context of engagement, deterrence and defence tasks.

Similar to the NATO-Russia Council, whose roots go back to 1997, the Alliance should consider establishing a NATO-China Council. Its establishment could recognise and respond appropriately to China's growing influence and reach. This forum could also spur Allies to address the challenges posed by China in a more serious and comprehensive coordinated manner. It would demonstrate that this dimension of great-power competition is not a binary one that exists separately between China and the United States, but rather between China and the transatlantic community, which is linked across territories by shared values, interests and history. This forum could be useful in identifying and promoting opportunities for constructive cooperation with China, such as anti-piracy operations.

The launching and implementation of these initiatives will be an enduring effort and some Allies will no doubt be reluctant to add additional missions to NATO and their own forces when their own resources are already strained. The notion that a future NATO will consider combating threats in the Asia-Pacific region as one of its core tasks may seem unrealistic to many Allies today. Most European countries are currently struggling to build sufficient national and Alliance defence capabilities and show little willingness to adapt to new threats. However, it has already become clear in the past how quickly an international situation can change and how quickly NATO must be able to respond. In the 1990s, no one in Europe could have imagined that one day it would be possible to defend its own security interests in Afghanistan, 5500 kilometres away. This is exactly what happened literally overnight when the catastrophe of 11 September 2001 fundamentally changed the world situation. China's political movements are taking place more slowly, there is still time to react. Moreover, the initiatives mentioned above will have comparatively low overall costs and can build on the already common military operations of Europe, the United States and Canada in the Pacific region.

In any case, something must be done now, and pressure is growing - from the population as well.

The European attitude towards China alone has hardened considerably in recent times. Only eighteen months ago, many Europeans were content to regard China, despite its authoritarian political system and aggressive behaviour in the Pacific, as an economic partner that does not take the rules too seriously. They were prepared to turn a blind eye.

That has changed since then, as Europe has increasingly seen Beijing's diplomatic and economic readiness to go to war with those who criticise its actions and policies. In March 2019, the European Union formally described China as a "strategic competitor", "an economic competitor" and "a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance". And Beijing's belligerent behaviour in the wake of the current coronavirus pandemic has only strengthened this new European perspective.

However, a NATO strategy for China alone will not be a sufficient solution to the increasingly tense relationship between the West and Beijing. A coherent and effective transatlantic strategy for China will have to be comprehensive, i.e. a strategy that uses the totality of diplomatic, economic, technological, social and military capabilities and dynamics that define geopolitical power. In order to achieve maximum success, it must create a new identity cohesion, combine the capacities of both Europe and North America and be further strengthened through cooperation with the Community's democratic partners in the Indo-Pacific region. These individual points must be carefully and closely interlinked in order to form a truly draught-proof network.

As the institution that has effectively pooled the military capabilities of the transatlantic community and built relationships with the Indo-Pacific leaders, NATO is well placed to foster this cooperation. Such a NATO engagement would help to underscore that Beijing's belligerence risks provoking a geopolitically costly response from a vibrant and united global coalition of democracies. NATO's potential role in a transatlantic strategy towards China should therefore not be underestimated; in a sense, it is its foundation.

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