**In the 21st century, how can NATO and its member states develop**

**a coherent strategy towards the People‘s Republic of China?**

The word strategy comes from the Greek *“strategia”* and means “art of a general”. It is true that in the past, strategy was mostly related to building up tactics in time of war. Without any intention to romanticize war, it is impossible not to notice the similarity between strategists and artists, as the deployment of military forces on a territory is like having a blank canvas that needs to be filled in.

Nowadays, the definition of strategy has expanded. According to Dennis M. Drew and Donald M. Snow, in the modern era, it is much more accurate and descriptive to consider strategy a complex decision-making process that connects the ends sought (national objectives) with the ways and means of achieving those ends.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, strategy consists of more aspects than just the military one. It encompasses also political, economic, technological, geographical, societal and cultural factors that need to be taken into consideration in order for a strategy to be successfully applied to a concrete international environment that can and does change.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite the fact that strategy is often linked to creating an action plan for future initiatives, the COVID-19 pandemic proved that a strategy often has to be developed with a lot of imponderables and within a short period of time.

Strategy’s expanded scope might seem confusing and even scary. However, it is the result of the normal course of events and the change of the nature of threats in International Relations. States and international organizations now have to deal not only with military threats, but also terrorism, hybrid threats, disinformation, cybercrimes, etc. They also have to act in different operating environments – land, sea, air, space and cyberspace. States are also often inclined to join unions and alliances, and establish international organizations, as no state is able to deal with all challenges on its own.

NATO is a prime example. 71 years after its establishment with a total of 30 member states, it has proven itself to be the most successful military Alliance in history. The Alliance has noted the various threats coming from both state and non-state actors and has turned these observations into strategies in order to address the challenges coherently without neglecting its main objectives, i.e. securing a lasting peace in Europe, based on common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, contributing to peace and stability through crisis management operations and partnerships, stabilizing post-conflict situations and supporting reconstruction.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Bulgarian foreign policy professor Georgi Stefanov illustrates the decision-making process in international relations as consisting of a necessity, interest and objective.[[4]](#footnote-4) Interests appear when the actors become aware that their necessities need to be fulfilled. Taking into consideration NATO’s London Declaration adopted in 2019, it can be acknowledged that NATO has become aware of its necessity to ***“recognise that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance.”[[5]](#footnote-5)*** Thus, China’s actions are of concern to NATO and it is in its interest to approach them. This brings us to the last part of the process, i.e. the objective and how to achieve it. In this regard, the questions that need to be addressed next are 1) in which aspects does the Alliance need to act in order to create a coherent strategy and 2) what will make this strategy successful.

First, it is crucial to point out that the Alliance does not consider China a rival. As Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has stated ***“China is not an adversary to NATO. But we must fully understand what its rise means for us – and for our security.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*** A lot of political scientists draw a parallel between the threat coming from China and the one that the USSR posed during the Cold War. It is important to make this comparison so as to understand what role China is playing, as it is different to what NATO has been used to.

China’s impressive rise is distorting the post-2014 force field between the US and Russia.[[7]](#footnote-7) Economy- and technology-wise, China is much bigger and advanced than the Soviet Union ever was. China’s GDP is, in purchasing terms, already bigger than the US economy. And, unlike the Soviet Union or modern Russia, China is an investor in Europe.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this regard, it must be highlighted that NATO’s strategy towards China should be developed without prejudice to the policy of defending against and deterring Russia.

China will soon be the largest economy in the world.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is the outcome of the new market-authoritarian model, invented by Beijing, where western freedoms, including the possibility of political plurality or opposition, are absent. China’s modernization has demonstrated that economic liberalization is possible without political one. Its success assists with building alliance relationships, for example, with states in economic crisis, such as Angola, Cambodia, Chad, Iran, Myanmar, Sudan, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela, and provides them with an alternative to institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nonetheless, developing countries are not the only ones facing the security implications of China’s global rise. There’s a growing economic reliance on Beijing in the Western Balkans when it comes to the construction of infrastructure roads and ports, made through China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which later ensures that China can influence the entire development process of the country[[11]](#footnote-11). China has not only turned out to be one of the biggest investors in the region, it is also trying to gain more influence in politics, academia, culture and civil society.[[12]](#footnote-12)

When it comes to the military aspect, it is visible that even though China might not pose a direct military threat to the Alliance, it is investing heavily in new, modern military capabilities, including hypersonic weapons. China has the second largest defence budget in the world[[13]](#footnote-13), and therefore, according to NATO Secretary General, as a rising global military power, Beijing has global responsibility to be part of global arms control.[[14]](#footnote-14)

While China’s conventional military threat in the Indo-Pacific is far from NATO’s borders, its hybrid activities are happening in the alliance’s own backyard. These include cyber-espionage, intellectual property theft, debt manipulation, and disinformation.[[15]](#footnote-15) A fine example is the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Beijing started a disinformation campaign regarding the origins of the virus to avoid criticism over its initial handling of the outbreak. The aid that China later provided was dismissed as a stunt and was identified as ***“a struggle for influence”*** by Josep Borrell, the European Union’s foreign policy chief. Doubts were also raised regarding potential China-backed cyberhacking of Western laboratories working on a vaccine, [[16]](#footnote-16) as well as about the quality of masks, vaccines and ventilators, sent by Beijing.[[17]](#footnote-17)

However, China’s most important gains toward global leadership[[18]](#footnote-18) in the past couple of years have not been on the trade, economic or military fronts, but in the country’s effort to lead the next generation technologies by combining political control with innovation and development.[[19]](#footnote-19) NATO Secretery General pointed to 5G, facial recognition and quantum computing as three areas where China has emerged as a global “leader,” and where the alliance must keep pace.[[20]](#footnote-20)From a NATO perspective 5G technology poses challenges for espionage reasons. Member states need to ensure that they have a clean network of communications and that China would not have an ability to disrupt them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the issue regarding the protection of human rights in China. The growth of Chinese power is inextricably linked to an ideology that does not share NATO’s concern for individual freedoms, human rights, democracy and rule of law, and thus is a major normative challenge to the West.[[22]](#footnote-22) NATO should address China’s violations of these principles and its propaganda efforts to cover them up. These include, among others, human rights abuses against ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang and violations of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea in the South China Sea.[[23]](#footnote-23)

It is obvious that NATO’s strategy has to include all those different aspects. But an all-encompassing strategy does not necessarily make it coherent and successful. In order for the strategy to succeed and for the objectives to be achieved, there are also other factors that the Alliance needs to remember.

The Alliance needs to work closely with its partners in the Asia-Pacific region – Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand. This cooperation can serve as important counterweights to Chinese influence in the region. As the Secretary General has pointed out ***“the Pacific may literally be on the other side of the world from NATO Headquarters in Brussels. But that doesn’t mean we are not affected by what happens here. In fact, two NATO Allies are Pacific Nations. We also have close partners in the region whose security matters to us, and with whom we share strategic interests.”***[[24]](#footnote-24)

NATO should also work closely with the European Union. In 2019 the EU acknowledged China as its cooperation and negotiating partner, with whom it needs to find a balance of interests. However, it also described it as an economic competitor in pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival, promoting alternative models of governance.[[25]](#footnote-25) Both alliances share the same 22 Members, values and security environment. Meaningful NATO-EU cooperation will be as important as ever in the coming years.[[26]](#footnote-26) In this regard, the EU coordinated risk assessment of the cybersecurity of 5G networks issued in October 2019 is an important contribution to further work, including in the NATO environment.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Last but not least, NATO needs to work towards solving its own internal problems. The aftermath of the upcoming presidential elections in the USA will surely have an impact on the relationship between the Alliance and the USA. However, it is important to highlight that despite Trump’s current rhetoric regarding multilateralism, the overall US defence commitment to Europe has increased, as in this new era of Sino-American strategic competition, NATO is once again crucial to US interests and values.[[28]](#footnote-28) Other internal questions that need to be solved are linked to burden-sharing, the state of democracy in some of the member states, tackling recurring bilateral issues, and keeping a close eye on some members’ dependence on Russia.

Moreover, when it comes to building up a coherent strategy towards China, it seems reasonable for the Alliance to create a consultative body to scrutinise all aspects of China policy, and even include EU institutions in the meetings, as it is in their competence to carry the interactions on trade and competition policy with China.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Allies need to forge a shared understanding of the risks Beijing poses through reinforced information exchange and dialogue.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Although NATO has announced that it does not consider China an enemy, the rise of the most populated country in the world not only in the economic, but also in the military and technological aspects, cannot go unnoticed. The Alliance has acknowledged China’s new role and the challenges that it poses to NATO, its partner countries in the Pacific, as well as in the Balkans, Africa and the Arctic. Thus, the strategy that NATO has to build must be multidimensional, so that it can tackle the different aspects of the possible threats. However, developing a strong, ambitious and detailed strategy does not mean that NATO’s objectives will be achieved. The Alliance needs to make sure that the strategy is coherent and pursued by all Member States. NATO’s response will be strong enough only when the Alliance works closely with its partners and when there is a consensus between the Member States regarding what the strategy needs to be, i.e. when *the interest for common actions is understood and acknowledged by all of them.* The main reason that would make the strategy successful is simple and it is contained in the unity and cooperation within the Alliance itself. As stated in the London Declaration *“the challenges need to be addressed together as an Alliance”* because *“as long as North America and Europe stand together, we are safe and we are secure.”[[31]](#footnote-31)*

Only in this way, the *“art of a general”* could create an unimpeachable *master****PEACE****.*

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