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# China's Expanding Footprint within NATO's Evolving Agenda

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Tweet



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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949 under U.S. leadership to safeguard European collective defense from the USSR threat, held its 2023 summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, last July. The summit [communiqué](#) extensively covered the war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical issues. Topics spanned the critical raw materials' significance, global supply chain resilience, and international collaboration, all areas reflecting China's interconnectedness with other nations.

NATO began shaping a China strategy following a [call](#) in April 2019 by the U.S. Secretary of State under Trump to counter "Chinese strategic competition." The [2022 NATO Strategic Concept](#), however, did not classify China as a potential Article 5-triggering threat. Nevertheless, this directive for the next decade highlighted the notable challenge posed by Sino-Russian collaboration.

Presently, the comprehensive measures from the Vilnius summit underscore NATO's evolving stance towards China, now deemed as a "challenge," intensifying pressure on Beijing. A consensus has emerged acknowledging the need to tackle China's multifaceted concerns. The assertive communiqué underscores China's significance by mentioning it fifteen times.

### NATO's Real Concerns

The statement iterated twice that "China's ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values." Additionally, NATO outlined China's intricate tactics that combine politics, economics, and "opaque" military expansion. The alliance highlighted hybrid and cyber threats, citing confrontational rhetoric and disinformation as tools against allies' security. Beijing is reportedly aiming technological control, infrastructure dominance, economic leverage for strategic dependencies, and undermining the international order.

Criticism sharpens towards China's alignment with Russia and the rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal, now aiming for a sophisticated nuclear triad. NATO denounced the need for transparent engagement, nuclear arms control, and addressing concerns about dual-use plutonium production. Encouraging China's participation in risk reduction discussions and promoting transparency in nuclear policies remain top NATO priorities.

China's drive for advanced military and nuclear capabilities raises concerns, especially for the U.S. actively striving to curtail its dominance. South China Sea expansion and Taiwan tensions

heighten unease. China's influence extends across technology, supply chains, critical materials, and global infrastructure networks, exemplified by the 'String of Pearls' network via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Indo-Pacific.

## China's Response and Stance

China [dismissed](#) Vilnius assessments as "Cold War rhetoric," refuting accusations and criticizing NATO's eastward Asia-Pacific expansion, warning against jeopardizing their "legitimate rights and interests." A Global Times [editorial](#) labeled NATO an "arrogant, terrible monster" serving as "Washington's axe, spears and shovels," the "war provocateur."

China perceives NATO, aligning American and European (including Turkey and the U.K.) viewpoints, as a security concern. This stems from enduring overall U.S. influence in Europe, European reliance on U.S. security, and American hegemony within the alliance. Nevertheless, complex global dynamics also shape these interactions. Europe's stance of China's threat contrasts with that of the U.S. and other Asian nations, devoid of evident conflict triggers.

Specifically, Europe's apprehensions about China stem from its history of divisive strategies to destabilize the EU. Although China now pursues diplomatic engagement, the complexity is evident. China's past actions, including direct engagement with member states, bypassing institutions, and creating coalitions like the Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries (today known as '14+1'), as well as bilateral BRI agreements, left a lasting impact. This history colors the evolving EU-China relationship and shapes Europe's caution.

## Unveiling the Actors and the Geopolitical Context

Vilnius saw the participation of 31 NATO members alongside "partners across the globe" like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. These Indo-Pacific allies also backed Ukraine via sanctions and military aid and already participated at the 2022 Madrid summit. Simultaneously, they pursue the "Individually Tailored Partnership Programme" to [enhance](#) NATO collaboration, strengthening existing U.S.-aligned defense ties to counter China. Trump's NATO dissolution is today overshadowed by its growth, actively shaping global trends.

NATO's inclination to connect the Indo-Pacific with the Atlantic and Arctic was anticipated by Secretary General Stoltenberg's in a July 2023 [op-ed](#), revealing, "When I visited Japan and South Korea, their leaders were clearly concerned that what is happening in Europe today could happen in Asia tomorrow." China sees the assimilation with the war in Ukraine as evidence of NATO's containment approach, Xinhua [suggests](#). Consequently, the U.S. intensifies Indo-Pacific military leadership efforts and security alliances' enhancement. Interestingly, NATO does not propose membership for Indo-Pacific partners; for instance, Japan remains disinterested, but the coalition plans an Asia office in Tokyo. This initiative, however, sparks China's and ASEAN's concern and meets [French](#) opposition (decisions require unanimity).

Biden strategically nurtures U.S. security alliances to enhance collaboration, targeting China's regional influence. Initiatives like AUKUS, the reinforced Quad, Five Eyes, and the recent Trilateral alliance (August 2023) - including a potential Philippines trilateral for South China Sea presence, especially near the Taiwan Strait - underscore this strategy. Participant nations span

the U.S., Canada, U.K., India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. China is increasingly concerned by these developments.

## Awakening NATO Dynamics: Is China a Real Threat?

Macron's 2019 "[brain death](#)" declaration and Putin's 2022 war in Ukraine jolted NATO. In 18 months, the alliance transformed, bolstered by renewed U.S. commitment, organizational improvements, expansion (Finland joined as the 31st member in April 2023, and Sweden awaits Turkish approval) and increased resources (11 countries surpass 2% of GDP in defense spending). The U.S., covering 70% of allies' military spending, leverages NATO to advance its primary concern: containing China, seizing this influential alliance as a tool to realize its goals.

However, the extent of this fear's projection appears disproportionate. China and Russia differ significantly, with China lacking a direct military threat to NATO members. The organization should clarify this stance and provide realistic perspectives. Thus, collective apprehensions about China's evolving military stance should be viewed as a nuanced understanding of deterrence, stability, and transparent communication. Safeguarding Taiwan today, beyond the organization's "North Atlantic" scope, represents a departure from existing agreements and responsibilities, exemplifying a noticeable divergence in approach.

Is China's hypothetical aggression towards Europe or the U.S. truly plausible? It appears unlikely. The U.S. should furnish compelling reasons to secure European allies' and Turkey's resources for containing China, without undermining European security interests. However, despite EU's increased military investment, reliance on the U.S. persists. The growing importance of NATO undermines the EU's common defense initiative. While countries pursue individual trajectories, they still lean on the coalition, potentially hindering efficient coordination of EU members' defense spending. This dynamic threatens to prolong fragmentation, impeding a united, self-sufficient European defense.

Is NATO adequately countering the authentic China threats impacting its members? The real concerns affecting Sino-European relations exceed the Alliance's scope, amplifying the challenge of executing the evolving alliance's China strategy. Discrepancies possibly mirror internal debates between hawkish and dovish stances on China. Nevertheless, the Vilnius summit signifies a transformative shift, engaging Indo-Pacific nations in security challenges that cross borders. This collaborative approach underscores the requirement for cooperative efforts that transcend norms and regions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of resources, technology, and autonomy as imperative factors. With mounting military tensions, global leaders must ensure a future that betters today.