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NATO's Strategic Dilemma: Balancing the "China Threat" Amidst Potential US "NATexit"

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When the People's Republic of China and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) emerged in 1949, their trajectories seemed worlds apart. Yet, as these once-distant entities evolved into formidable powers, their paths are now increasingly converging, with some actively pushing for closer interaction.

NATO Has Guaranteed the European Security for Decades

NATO is a US-led alliance established to safeguard Europe from the Soviet Union, ensuring collective defense as outlined in Article 5 of its founding Treaty, an attack on one member is "an attack against them all," prompting the armed force to restore security "of the North Atlantic area."

Article 5 was first invoked after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (2001), marking a pivotal moment in its 52-year history of deterrence. Since then, NATO has evolved into one of the world's most exclusive security forces.

After the collapse of the USSR, former Warsaw Pact countries joined NATO to safeguard their independence and bypass Russian influence. Most European Union (EU) states are NATO members, except for Ireland, Austria, Cyprus, and Malta. The UK, Canada, Türkiye, Albania, Iceland, North Macedonia, Norway, and Montenegro are also full members of NATO.

Despite a period where NATO's purpose seemed diminished, the conflict in Ukraine (2022) sparked an unexpected revival. Russia is again a "threat," and partnerships once deemed obsolete by the US or France, are reactivated.

Contemporary Challenges NATO Confronts

US Unilateral Actions

Former US President Barack Obama's "Pivot to Asia" (2011) marked a shift in US geopolitical strategy, reducing its traditional commitment to the EU. Donald Trump's antagonism further strained relations, exemplified by his claim that "the EU was set up to take advantage of the US," equating it to China in harming American interests.

US President Joe Biden's deterrence policies have encountered criticism. The chaotic departure from Afghanistan, ineffectiveness in preventing the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and struggles in the Middle East have raised doubts about their effectiveness and the notion of the "American pacifier," suggesting that the US is no longer capable of being a global stabilizer—if it ever was.

Trump's potential reelection could further destabilize NATO. He has questioned US commitments to "delinquents" failing to meet defense spending targets, "encouraging" Russian aggression and even sparking discussions of a "NATexit"—a US withdrawal from the alliance.

US administrations have often overlooked that they outspend all other NATO members, maintaining a network of 750 bases across 80 countries—largely beyond NATO's scope—a strategic choice of its own making. Meanwhile, the alliance operates with a modest budget, exemplified by the maintenance of 14 radar planes bought from the US in 1982, reflecting a common pattern in NATO member acquisitions.

Indeed, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg disclosed that in 2022-2023, more than two-thirds of European defense procurements, totaling 140 billion USD, were made from US firms, stating, "NATO is good for US security, good for US industry, and good for US jobs."

Additionally, the United States' China policy differs significantly from that of most transatlantic partners. Washington aims to maintain global hegemony against

Beijing and, since launching the Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022), has revitalized ties with regional players such as India, the Philippines, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—the latter four ("AP4") being NATO's "partners across the globe."

Initiatives like the Quad, Five Eyes, and AUKUS strengthen security alliances in the Asia-Pacific to counter China, including efforts to decouple their technology and supply chains or at least de-risk them.

However, while a heightened NATO presence in the Asia-Pacific may appeal to American allies in the region, it might not align with Europe's priorities. Surely, Europe should act as the balancer within the alliance to prevent overextending efforts and resources beyond its designated operational area.

Europe's Enduring Reliance on External Security

Seventy-nine years after allied forces liberated Europe, the continent remains contingent on the US for defense through NATO. This dependence persists because it has benefited all parties, creating a stable security framework yet also perpetuating a European reliance on external forces.

Despite US advocacy for greater European security autonomy, significant advancements have been hindered by concerns over its arms industry. The American writer Robert D. Kaplan (2012) captured this paradox, "The more united Europe becomes, the greater its tensions with the US. A true European super-state with armed forces and a single foreign policy would be a US 'staunch competitor.'"¹

The US wants Europe stronger and more united, but not excessively so. The EU, conceived as a soft power emphasizing peace, solidarity, and multilateralism, was anticipated by Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997), former National Security Advisor to former US President Jimmy Carter, to rival the US if it became "truly united and powerful," potentially leading to divergent geopolitical interests.² However, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy is hampered by the need for unanimous consensus among its 27 states, outdated national visions, and internal divisions—those focusing on European integration, the transatlantic alliance, or neutrality. As Stoltenberg noted, "The EU cannot defend Europe."

1 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2013).

2 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war dramatically impacted NATO, leaving the EU with no choice but to prompt a renewed US commitment to European security, leading to organizational improvements and expansion including Finland and Sweden. Trump's earlier threats had already highlighted the need for the EU to bolster security, resulting in 23 NATO countries increasing defense spending to exceed 2% of GDP.

Russia-NATO Tenuous Tango

Certainly not trending today, but several Russian leaders, including Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin, expressed interest in joining NATO. In 1994, Russia joined the Partnership for Peace, a NATO program designed to build trust and cooperation with non-members. The then US President Bill Clinton viewed it as a "track that will lead to NATO membership." As a result, in 2000, Putin asked Clinton in Moscow, "How America would react to accept Russia in NATO?"

On February 24, 2022, Putin announced the start of the military campaign in Ukraine, explicitly denying any connection to NATO in his address, "Of course, the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile 'anti-Russia' is taking shape."³

Later, Russia claimed NATO was the cause of the war. Although this argument emerged extemporaneously, it resonated globally, even reaching China. This provided Washington with an opportunity to integrate NATO into its broader strategic rivalry with Beijing.

Thus, Russia's transition from frustrated NATO membership to declaring it a threat illustrates a shifting strategy that has revitalized NATO and fueled global narratives. This evolution underscores how past spheres of influence and actions can morph into modern conflicts, creating unpredictable geopolitical effects.

Are the Sino-Russian Relations Shaping a NATO Narrative for the US?

Over the past five years, NATO's depictions of China have become increasingly assertive. Beijing first came into NATO's spotlight in 2019,

³ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," transcript of televised address on Ukraine, Moscow, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

when Washington called for countering "Chinese strategic competition." Since then, the US has utilized NATO to address its primary geostrategic concern: containing China.

The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept identified Sino-Russian collaboration as a significant challenge yet did not classify China as a potential Article 5 threat, unlike Russia.

The 2023 Vilnius Summit was the first to interconnect the "Indo-Pacific," Atlantic, and Arctic regions, labeling China a "challenge." The 2024 Washington communiqué expanded this narrative, portraying China as a "decisive enabler of Russia" in Ukraine and issuing a direct warning about its alleged support for Russia, despite limited evidence. Truthfully, these claims highlight Western anxieties about China's rising influence and its impact on the conflict's balance.

China's export controls on military items signal a nuanced stance. Moreover, China has not recognized Russia's expansionism in Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia—conflicts where NATO did not intervene—and has warned against nuclear weapon use in Ukraine, instead promoting peaceful resolutions.

This balancing act reveals China's geopolitical priorities: subtly communicating with Russia through trade while avoiding commitments to Ukraine's territorial integrity. Scholars like Yan Xuetong, Director of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua, argued that Russia's invasion had inflicted lasting geopolitical and economic damage on China,⁴ while Feng Yujun, Vice Dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, condemned the war as a UN principle violation and dismisses NATO expansion as a justification.⁵

Despite its increased assertiveness, the United States faces two main defies. First, it struggles to equate China with Russia as a security threat. European capitals view Beijing's actions as less directly coercive and consider the label disproportionate. Including India—an ongoing major purchaser of Russian military hardware and oil—might have altered this perception. Yet, India escapes criticism due to its tactical role in the Asia-Pacific against China, revealing the underlying strategic priorities.

4 Xuetong Yan, "The World Is Likely to Experience Increased Confrontations Rooted in Deglobalization in 2024," interview by The Paper, December 29, 2023, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_25811704.

5 Yujun Feng, "The Ukraine Conflict Is Accelerating the Restructuring of the Global Political and Economic Order," interview by Phoenix, March 14, 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/mOATITjYQZP4NPH-l2lpQ>.

Second, American leaders have attempted to connect NATO's North Atlantic and Asia-Pacific strategies yet lack a clear rationale for this linkage. As a deterrence organization, NATO remains geographically focused, with its defense capabilities based in the Euro-Atlantic region for explicit reasons. Hence, while the US concentrates on the Asia-Pacific, Europe remains fixated on Ukraine.

NATO's China Focus Risks European Security and Global Stability

The US instrumentalization of NATO to address Asia-Pacific concerns neglects genuine European security threats and diverts attention from critical regions including the Atlantic and Mediterranean. This approach not only raises China's apprehensions by casting NATO as a security adversary but also exacerbates anti-Western sentiments and highlights Europe's dependence on US security.⁶ Furthermore, NATO's emphasis on China weakens its monitoring of Russian activities impacting the Asia-Pacific.

For a credible Asia-Pacific strategy, the US should engage key South Asian and ASEAN stakeholders, yet progress has been minimal, revealing a greater emphasis on countering China rather than addressing Asia-Pacific issues. It's crucial to understand how these countries view NATO's potential expansion into their region. Instead, the US relies on Western NATO members who are economically tied to China and less invested in the same concerns, suggesting a path to failure.

Lastly, NATO's focus on China could spark a nuclear arms race, undermine non-proliferation efforts, and escalate global tensions. Overall, if this strategy is not effectively deterring but rather exacerbating security issues, one must question whether this approach truly represents the pinnacle of strategic thinking.

Future Direction

China could bolster its global peace stance by advocating for Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine, thereby strengthening European security and countering NATO's potential Asia-Pacific expansion. China could also engage Moscow to illustrate how its actions harm Beijing's interests, while upholding the six principles of the Global Security Initiative.

⁶ Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa, "Is China a Threat to Europe? NATO's China Stance May Rest on Its Answer," *South China Morning Post*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/world-opinion/article/3270364/china-threat-europe-natos-china-stance-may-rest-its-answer>.

Europe must decisively evolve into a geopolitical entity. Reliance on US protection against Russia is unsustainable. The EU should develop a unified defense strategy, enhance capabilities, and tackle threats collectively, moving from nationalistic approaches to collective efforts. A comprehensive approach must integrate defense spending with diplomatic and economic initiatives across Ukraine and the Asia-Pacific, and balance military investment with diplomacy and trade partnerships.

The US should reassess its NATO strategy, prioritizing the North Atlantic and avoiding Asia-Pacific entanglements to prevent overreach and ensure balance. Expanding NATO into the Asia-Pacific heightens tensions with China and complicates European security. Washington should support European defense autonomy, enabling Europe to handle its own security while freeing the US to act elsewhere. Constructive engagement with China, despite competition, is crucial for global stability.

NATO should concentrate on its primary mission, defending Europe, and avoid overextension into the Asia-Pacific. It must also reidentify the true security threats. NATO's support for Ukraine has been non-interventionist, reflecting Europe's reluctance to engage in distant conflicts, especially without formal agreements. Europe's limited interest in the Asia-Pacific, highlighted by France blocking a NATO office in Tokyo, shows NATO's operational limits. Expanding beyond its core region only heightens unnecessary tensions with China.

Ultimately, *realpolitik* reveals that stability requires more than diplomacy: if you want peace, prepare for war—yet target the right adversaries and battlefields.