

The So-called “China Threat”: NATO and America’s “New Cold War” on China

With NATO declaring China a new strategic challenge at its summit in London in early December, the world has inched further in the direction of confrontation.

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The powers that be in the US are now viewing China as a deadly rival in a duel for global supremacy. Their aim at the summit was to draw their European allies into their China containment strategy. This was made clear at a recent meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs in Brussels in November, when US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, called on the alliance to address ‘the current and potential long-term threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party,’ and to stand together in ‘the cause of freedom and democracy,’ to make the world safe against threats of authoritarianism. (1)

Pompeo’s demand came in response to deepening doubts among the European allies about US commitment to their defence following the failure by Washington to consult NATO before pulling forces out of northern Syria. Calling up NATO’s original ideological Cold War mission to once again stiffen its purpose, Pompeo seemed to be suggesting that there was a trade off to be made: if Europe wants commitment from the US, they should themselves commit to the US and forge a united front against China.

But to what extent did the Europeans buy into this call for a NATO anti-China pivot? Whilst the US has cemented a Cold War view of China, Europe has struggled to find a common position on the emergence of the new major power, and besides their own preoccupations over security remain focussed on Russia and the Middle East.

Trump’s Cold War on China

Over the last four years, the Trump administration has single-mindedly sought to turn US China policy right around from engagement to containment, at the same time bringing China’s rise to the centre of the foreign policy agenda. The 2017 National Security Strategy shifted the focus from the ‘war on terror’ to ‘great power competition’ identifying Russia and China as ‘revisionist powers’. The Indo Pacific was seen as ‘the centre of the most fundamental geopolitical change since the end of WW2,’ with China seeking to displace the US, expanding the reaches of its state-driven economic model to reorder the region in its favour. Against this, a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was planned to draw Australia, Japan and India closer to the US; and a massive defence budget was agreed to pay for nuclear weapons modernisation and the establishment of a Space Command.

In October 2018, Vice President Mike Pence proceeded to launch an offensive on China across multiple fronts – trade, technology, ideological, diplomatic and military. (2) Then earlier this year, following the US withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty,

and with the trade war escalating, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper hinted that the first deployments of US intermediate-range missiles would be in the Asia-Pacific region to counter Chinese missiles.(3) China was being lined up as a much more formidable long term strategic rival than Russia. As the world's second largest economy, it has far greater influence around the world than Soviet Union ever had. In the words a former Senior Director of Strategic Planning in the Trump administration, China poses 'the most consequential existential threat since the Nazi Party in World War 2'.(4)

What direction Europe?

No doubt with Trump's earlier remark on NATO's obsolescence in mind, European members have begun to bend to US pressure on increasing defence spending to prove their relevance: by taking a greater share of the costs of containing Russia, the Allies will help to free the US to focus on Asia and China.

However NATO's European members are rather more equivocal about the so-called China threat. Earlier this year, the European Commission, in its *EU-China: a Strategic Outlook Report*, characterised China as a 'systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance'. Nevertheless, the EU has sought to distance itself from the US tactics of trade war with China. Business and economic relations between Europe and China have been growing and, earlier in the year, EU-China negotiations made advances towards an investment agreement to be sealed in 2020. At the same time, Italy, despite warnings from other European leaders, went ahead in signing up to China's Belt and Road Initiative, becoming the 14th EU member state - and the first G7 state - to join in the Chinese project,

For the US now it is imperative to stop this Eurasian drift, resorting then to a Cold War militarism through the heavy hand of the alliance to rein the Europeans in.

Shifting NATO's focus towards Asia

In light of the European Commission's view, the Trump administration's question to the EU has been: if China is a systemic rival, then how should this be managed?

To prepare for the London Summit, NATO began a review of the security implications of China's rise to the EuroAtlantic. This was set as part of a wider overhaul of NATO defence planning and doctrine in the post-INF context. The collapse of the INF treaty has left Europe exposed to Russia missiles, but the US now insists that China's intermediate-range and new missile capabilities must also be included in arms control proposals and that Europe needs to recognise that safety can only be found together in NATO. (5)

Warning of China's rapidly expanding military might, Stoltenberg argued: "...we have to address the fact that China is getting closer to us... We see them in Africa; we see them in the Arctic; we see them in cyberspace and China now has the second largest defense budget in the world.' (6) Chinese hypersonic weaponry and missiles, he argues, are capable of reaching Europe, a de facto 'operational alliance' with Russia is in evidence in recent military exercises in the Pacific, Central Asia and the Baltic, and, with China getting more involved in Europe through its Belt and Road Initiative, it has become necessary to question the strategic intentions of China's Eurasian project. (7)

These effort to link EuroAtlantic security to the Indo-Pacific strategy raise the prospects of a global NATO. The idea of a military alliance, spanning both the Atlantic and Pacific, has long

been an aspiration on the part of the US. A South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) was set up in 1954 as a counterpart to NATO, however it never really established itself, and, with regional states asserting their newly gained independence, was eventually dissolved in 1977. More recently, since 2012, through its 'partners across the globe' programme, NATO has forged new links with US allies in the Asia Pacific region including Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea.

In 2016, NATO began to align with US Indo-Pacific priorities, agreeing to extend its operations to cover maritime security in parallel with US freedom of navigation exercises (FONOPs) which were stoking the militarisation of the South China Sea. In 2018, the UK and France announced their intentions to join the US FONOPs, subsequently sending warships into the vicinity. (8)

At this time also, the Five Eyes security intelligence network began to share classified information with Germany, Japan and France.(9) This Cold War instrument, comprising the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, has gained a new importance with the rapid development of the new technologies and is the main instrument of surveillance of China's foreign activities, such as cyberattacks. Although such information is so far being shared with the other US allies on a bilateral basis, it points the way towards closer links between NATO and the Five Eyes with the potential to upgrade of NATO's East Asian partnerships towards more extensive intelligence sharing, joint planning and military exercises.

Securing technology

This then comes to the heart of the matter: the issue of securing NATO's communications technologies from the so-called Huawei 'threat'. It is China's challenge in the digital world that concerns the US above all else. China's emergence as a global leader in the development of new technologies, and its growing capacity to gather vast amounts of global data, is seen to have brought the world to a turning point.

With NATO and the Five Eyes partners reliant on 5G networks, the hype is of China leveraging Huawei's commercial networks for military purposes to access highly classified information flowing among allies or even to block services in the event of conflict. (10) But Europe has its doubts: GCHQ in the UK has found Huawei involvement to be manageable; and Merkel, rejecting the Cold War logic, has been reluctant to discriminate against a single company or a single country. (11) It is no doubt to enforce the Huawei ban, that Pompeo is turning on the ideological pressure. The rhetoric is all about protecting freedom and democracy and securing the unfettered flow of information across the globe; the real fear is of the US losing the technological edge.

Is China a threat?

China has been upgrading its military forces, including its naval and missile capabilities, on a considerable scale. Its military budget however, despite its increase remains dwarfed by the US military spending and is just a fraction of the budgets of US and its Asian allies combined. US military power is still far superior to that of China however, with China's efforts concentrated on its own defence, it is its strengths in A2AD - anti-access and area denial - that particularly frustrate the US military.

China argues that having capability is not the same as intention to use. It adheres to a no first use nuclear policy. A similar commitment from the other nuclear powers should be at

least one of the conditions of China signing up to any new arms control treaty; the inclusion of sea- and air-based as well as the land-based missiles covered by the INF, being another. China can also point to its years-long efforts together with Russia to gain agreement on a convention on the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS). A Xi-Obama agreement on cyber-security had a degree of success. (12)

With Obama's Asian pivot upgraded by Trump into the Indo-Pacific strategy, together with a deepening of the Cold War mindset, China has drawn closer to Russia to safeguard security and promote safety and stability through multipolarity. Recent Sino-Russian joint military exercises with India, Pakistan and Central Asian states in September and with South Africa in November are a demonstration of this.

China then is not seeking to engage in an arms race with the US; it does not intend to follow the Soviet Union and risk its own downfall. In challenging US hegemony, its chosen battleground is the digital world; its race of choice is to the technological frontiers – a pre-arms race over innovation upon which the US military 'full spectrum dominance' relies for advantage.

An anti-China NATO?

To contain European wavering, Stoltenberg was careful with his words at the summit, recognising China's rise as 'presenting opportunities as well as challenges' to avoid any overt suggestion that China was NATO's next adversary. Macron, in particular, concerned that NATO maintain its focus on the Middle East, had cautioned against China being classified as an enemy in a military way as is ISIS. Nevertheless, there was broad agreement that China was a 'part of our strategic environment' and that NATO needed to coordinate its response to the challenges posed by China's growing influence.

The commitment to a NATO space force was a particular mark of willingness on the part of the Allies to deter China's rise as a rival military power. There was agreement to increase tools to respond to cyber attacks, and whilst a NATO maritime task force in the South China Sea is still a long shot, the organisation's maritime posture is to be bolstered.

With the new US Cold Warriors looking to increase NATO cooperation with Japan and Australia in order to counter the Russian and Chinese multipolar moves, the call to further strengthen NATO's political coordination is of particular significance in opening the door to wider consultation with these Indo Pacific partners. The summit agreement on coordination on arms control may provide such a forum to build the case for the expansion of the INF to include China, in effect a means of containment, as a preliminary step towards a broader international front against Chinese influence.

Conclusion

What lies behind the disagreements among NATO members that have surfaced this year about its future is then the question of how to respond to the rise of China. The US was looking for NATO summit to present a United Front in sending a clear message of deterrent to China. However, European states see China not simply as a 'systemic rival' but also as an economic opportunity. It is not just Greece and Italy which seek dialogue over ideological confrontation – even Macron, who warned Italy earlier this year against naivety in engaging with China, appeared recently at a major import-expo fair in Shanghai, coming away with a host of trade deals.

Around the world, Huawei offers a cheap upgrade to 5G networks. Around half of the 65 commercial deals that have been signed have been with European customers. The US is demanding that its allies to put security first, a security set on its own terms but how much, the Europeans might ask themselves, does the US ambition to monopolise new technologies matter to them? European states have in the past resisted the US when it acted against their interests, for example over the Iraq war. What was perhaps most notable about the NATO summit communique was that, whilst there was a commitment on the part of all the leaders to ensuring their countries had secure 5G communications, there was no mention of Huawei. In this, then, the United anti-China Front fell short.

However, caught between the old TransAtlanticism and a longer term rebalancing towards Eurasia, the Europeans seem incapable of rising to the challenge of repositioning and the kind of radical rethink of the very meaning security that this entails. Instead Merkel appeals to Macron that Europe must still rely on NATO for its defence. An openly anti-China NATO is unlikely – this would divide Europe. The danger nevertheless is that further small shifts towards the US Indo Pacific strategy might embolden the US in its ideological attacks on China and in moves to foment demands for independence in Taiwan with increased military backing. In that case, the outcome of the NATO summit may turbo-charge the already escalating US-China tensions. Indeed the US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper has now designated China the top US military priority ahead of Russia (13). 2020 may prove a momentous year with an EU-China investment deal on the cards but at the same time with a new US-led military build up against Russia and China with two huge exercises, Defender 2020 in Europe, and Defender 2020 in the Pacific. The level of coordination between the two and the extent of participation by European allies in the latter remains to be seen.

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Notes

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