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The Future of NATO

*Chinese Views on NATO:
Global Opponent to a Rising China*



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Introduction

Since 2022, the subject of NATO has become increasingly prominent in Chinese official statements and expert discourse. Shortly before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China had joined its strategic partner in condemning NATO expansion in Europe (The Kremlin 2022). Subsequently, NATO listed China as a "challenge to NATO's interests, security and values" and proposed countering it through intensified engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific (NATO 2022). In China, this has widely been interpreted as turning NATO into a platform for an American-led containment strategy against their own country. What is more, the breakdown of the European peace order has increased the salience of this issue in Chinese discourse; with most voices placing the blame for it on NATO expansion. This has led to both state propaganda and many expert views on NATO adopting strong language: NATO is now predominantly described as "a vestige of the Cold War and a product of bloc confrontation and bloc politics", "disrupting peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific" (FMPRC 2024), "serving only the interests of US hegemony" (Feng 2023) and "endangering world peace and stability" (Huang 2023). For some, however, the current debate about reforming NATO through greater contributions (and ideally policy influence) from its European members also offers an alternative vision for the future that could dispel this image and pave the way for a more cooperative relationship.

In China, critical attitudes towards NATO are not a new phenomenon. Already during the Kosovo war in 1999, the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO warplanes caused widespread outrage in China. NATO's post-Cold War shift to interventions beyond its home region has also attracted Chinese criticism. This was most notable in the case of the 2011 campaign in Libya, which China accused of "mission creep" and the pursuit of an unmandated regime change (Garwood-Gowers 2012). These interventionist practices fundamentally contradict the sovereignty-centric normative agenda championed by China on the international stage; while their fallout has also materially harmed Chinese overseas interests. It is no coincidence that China has framed its own recently announced Global Security Initiative in anti-thetical terms, stressing "common" security, the supremacy of state sovereignty, and support for regime stability regardless of its characteristics (Abb 2023). However, post-2022 discourse reflects the far more concrete and urgent concerns that NATO is becoming a strategic threat to China's own security, is undermining China's relations with member states in Europe, and increasing the likelihood of a military confrontation around one of Asia's many hot spots.

One of the reasons for the prevalence of negative perceptions towards NATO is China's highly restrictive political environment, where expert discourse needs to closely toe the official

line that has been markedly critical of NATO's forays into the Indo-Pacific and its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war (Reuters 2024). Yet, it also reflects genuine and widespread worries in China's IR community that NATO is shifting its mission to one of anti-Chinese containment and driving the deterioration of China-Europe relations. While some authors cautiously illustrate shared security interests and areas for a potential cooperation or trust-building measures between China and NATO, the dominant expectation is that of an increasingly adversarial relationship. If left unchecked, this dynamic risks locking both sides into a classic security dilemma.

The summary below is based on a survey of Chinese academic writing and op-eds on NATO published since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, as well as a number of background interviews with some of these authors and other Chinese experts conducted in Beijing and Shanghai in January 2025.¹ It aims to identify the broad contours of Chinese discourse on NATO, the extent to which a debate is taking place between diverging viewpoints, and the factors most likely to influence China's future relationship with NATO.

The Mainstream View: Bringing the Cold War to the Asia Pacific

The most immediate cause of Chinese criticism towards NATO is its recent interest in the Indo-Pacific, a region where the rise of China has led to intensifying military competition along a number of geopolitical hotspots. The US had already shifted its focus to the region during the Obama-era "pivot to Asia", and NATO's European arm has recently followed suit with the formulation of Indo-Pacific strategies and military deployments by countries such as France, the Netherlands and Germany (Mohan 2020). Since 2022, NATO summits have featured top-level representation from four Indo-Pacific partner countries (Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand). The joint declaration issued by both members and partners at the 2023 summit in Vilnius referred to the Indo-Pacific as an area of interest for NATO and explicitly singled out China, accusing it of "challeng[ing] our interests, security and values" (NATO 2023). NATO's growing interest in the region was also underlined by its attempt to open a liaison office in Tokyo in 2023, which, however, failed due to French opposition.

Chinese analysts have dubbed this shift NATO's "pivot to Asia" or "Asia-Pacificization", and it is the main trigger for their increased focus on the topic. They unanimously describe this development as being directed against their own country, and see it as part of an overarching US strategy to "unite allies to engage in all-round strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific and globally by exaggerating the "China threat" and actively promoting NATO's Indo-

¹ Texts were identified by searching for the keyword "NATO" (北约) on two platforms (China Academic Journals (CAJ) for scholarly publications, and Aisixiang for op-eds), restricting the date range to February 2022 to November 2024. For CAJ, the search was additionally restricted only to the corpus of high-quality Beida Core Journals, and then selecting the most highly cited entries in the covered period. Interviews were conducted on background, without assigning statements to specific respondents.

Pacific shift” (Wei and Tang 2024, also see e.g. Liu 2022, Sun 2023, Jin 2024, Zheng 2024). The move is seen as a direct challenge, “complicating the security situation in China’s environment and increasing strategic pressure on China” (Sun 2023) and worsening its diplomatic relations with other NATO members by “increasing their suspicion of China and encouraging them to interfere in China’s internal affairs” (Xu H. 2022). Concerns include the potential of a joint NATO intervention in the event of an escalation in the Taiwan strait (Ling and Wu 2024, Sun 2023), participation of NATO forces in local freedom-of-navigation-operations around the region’s other hotspots (Liu 2022), and the securitization of China’s economic ties with European members (Fang and Cao 2023, Xu H. 2022). Having said that, a number of Chinese analysts observe a substantial gap between NATO rhetoric and action: specifically, they point out the divergence of interests between the US and European members, pointing to the “complex policy problem to invest strategic resources in both Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, while meeting the needs of national interests, domestic public opinion and transatlantic alliance unity” (Xu R. 2022); or more bluntly, “most European countries do not want NATO to move from Europe towards the Asia-Pacific” (Liu 2022). They also note the latter’s inability to commit significant resources to this as well as limited mutual trust between NATO members and its new partners (Sun 2022, Sun 2023).

While the small-scale European Indo-Pacific presence does not constitute a serious military threat to China, it is perceived as a direct extension of traditional US security agency in the region. A potential confrontation with NATO in China’s backyard is clearly the most serious concern; yet the outbreak of war in Europe has also pitted the two sides against each other elsewhere. While NATO has provided Ukraine with substantial military aid and subjected Russia to a tight sanctions regime, these efforts have been counter-balanced (and partially thwarted) by China’s expansion of its strategic partnership and economic ties with Moscow. Apart from pursuing different strategic aims, NATO and China are also divided by different perceptions of the war and its causes. The dissemination of NATO-critical perspectives about the origins of the war in Ukraine is one area in which the growing ties between Moscow and Beijing have shaped perceptions of NATO. Chinese experts writing and interviewed on this topic tend to assign most of the blame to NATO expansion, describing it as “the result of a security dilemma caused by the continued eastward expansion of NATO led by the United States” (Fang and Cao 2023, see also Jin 2024, Zheng 2024) and motivated by US hegemonic designs.

This position is partially rooted in an imperative to defend China’s association with the aggressor, but also reflects a worldview that has become dominant in the age of great power competition with the US: developments in world politics are primarily assessed according to their relative benefit to either Washington or Beijing; with those that adversely impact China or its relations with other countries often being attributed to US agency. The Russian argument that NATO was encroaching on its security perimeter also strikes

a chord in China because it reflects China’s own perception of being targeted by the expansion of US-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific, as discussed above. Chinese op-eds, which mainly serve to expound on the government’s stance, are particularly pointed in this criticism: “The current European security dilemma can indeed provide a living example for Asia-Pacific countries...exclusive and confrontational collective security will only create more disputes and fears in the Asia-Pacific” (Cui 2022, see also Feng 2022, Jin 2024). However, academic articles (e.g. Zhao 2024) present more impartial approaches – one going so far as to debunk the argument that the US had made promises not to expand NATO during the end phase of the Cold War, and arguing that sovereignty to choose one’s alliances outweighs the Russian principle of “indivisible security” (Han 2022).

Chinese analysts broadly agree that the war and the ensuing “Zeitenwende” in Europe has benefited the US and allowed it to bolster NATO in line with its own strategic interests. Previously criticized as “braindead”, the need to respond to Russian aggression has imbued the alliance with a renewed sense of purpose; underlined the need for transatlantic cooperation in European security; led to rapid progress on the controversial issue of defense spending; and bolstered its ranks with new members. More problematically for China, the war has also galvanized Western governments against a perceived threat by other autocracies, with China becoming a focus of acute concern. Chinese analysts reject this view as an ideological throwback to Cold War era thinking, but recognize its potential to seriously undermine China’s relations with European NATO members: “after the crisis broke out, the United States forcibly “bound” China and Russia (...) thereby creating camp confrontation, exaggerating the challenge of China and Russia to the West, and finding an excuse for NATO to increase its investment in the Asia-Pacific region.” (Sun 2022) Against this background, developments that establish a direct link between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security are also seen as adverse for China. Chinese experts strongly reject the view that there is a geopolitical block formed by Russia, China and North Korea (e.g. Zheng 2024) and have voiced their unease about the deepening Russia-North Korea partnership while maintaining that Beijing’s own security cooperation with them is limited, bilateral and defensive in nature (Wei and Tang 2024, Sun 2022).

Views on NATO’s Internal Politics: What Role for Europe?

One of the more pronounced divisions among Chinese scholars writing on NATO is how much space they devote to its internal politics. As a multilateral alliance with 32 members and counting, an internal divergence of interests – including on China policy – is a regular feature of NATO and has been covered in an earlier edition of this report (Dembinski and Fehl 2021). The degree to which Chinese experts focus on this strongly depends on their professional background; they can be assigned to two broad camps:

experts focusing on strategic studies, security policy, or US-China relations tend to view NATO as a monolithic vehicle for US interests, and portray its policies e.g. on Indo-Pacific engagement as closely aligned with those made in Washington (e.g. Sun 2022, Zheng 2024). The second camp is formed by experts from the European Studies community, whose specialization leads them to focus more on transatlantic interest divergences and the positions of individual European member states (e.g. Liu 2023, Zhao 2024). Of course, this also impacts on how they view the future of NATO and its relations with China. In articles and personal conversations, they often argue that a stronger European pillar within the alliance would be in China's interests, as Europeans were more likely to prioritize territorial defense as opposed to overseas deployments and to be a moderating influence on NATO's China policy (Zhao 2024).

Chinese experts from both camps have not failed to notice the sharp turn in US foreign policy under Donald Trump's second administration, which indicates a serious rupture in the transatlantic partnership (Chen 2025). All interviewees for this study expected NATO to endure in some form, but were divided between two different future scenarios: in the first, the US unilaterally disengages from European security, leaves European members to shoulder the burden of containing Russia, and focuses its resources exclusively on the great power confrontation with China. In the second, the US maintains its alliance commitments but demands a quid-pro-quo in the form of even closer European alignment against China and an expanding NATO presence in the Indo-Pacific. Both of these scenarios imply that China would be the main target of Trump's foreign policy, yet the first would have the obvious advantage of not having to face a unified front of US allies.

Chinese experts' awareness of interest divisions within NATO also influences the policy recommendations they make for their own government. One widespread suggestion that is clearly already informing Chinese foreign policy is the encouragement of European strategic autonomy (FM-PRC 2023). This would decrease its security dependence on the US and make it less likely that NATO as a whole would execute a US-inspired pivot to the Indo-Pacific. Several experts also made the suggestion that China should act on this with a more conciliatory policy towards European member states, adopting a softer approach both rhetorically and on controversial non-security issues like trade (Sun 2023, Li 2022, Xu R. 2022). For China, the "Trump shock" that is currently disrupting the transatlantic partnership may turn out to be a strategic blessing that accelerates the development of a multipolar world order.

Conclusion: a "Bad" US-Centric NATO or a "Good" Europeanized One?

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and evolving stance on China have attracted major attention among Chinese experts. They almost unanimously agree that this development is

negative for China, adversely affecting its own security in an intensifying rivalry with the US. There is still an ongoing debate about the extent of a future NATO presence in the Indo-Pacific and the potential to salvage relations with European member states despite a rise in tensions. However, the dominant Chinese narratives on NATO now portray it as an instrument of American hegemony that is enabling the US to draft its European allies into an anti-Chinese containment coalition. This leads to an increasingly pessimistic outlook on China's security environment and, in turn, drives policy reactions such as a closer alignment with Russia, which further contributes to China's alienation from NATO. The result is a classic security dilemma, with alarming parallels to the previous deterioration in NATO-Russia relations.

While recent Chinese views of NATO are strongly shaped by increasing US pressure on China – a trend that is unlikely to change – they will also depend on the future policy choices of European member states. If they follow a trajectory of aligning their own China and Indo-Pacific policies more closely with those of the US, e.g. through widening export restrictions, military deployments in Asia and rhetorically designating China as an adversary, this would reinforce the predominant view of NATO as a tool for the perpetuation of American hegemony. Conversely, Chinese experts welcome the strengthening of NATO's European pillar – in terms of developing its own capabilities that would reduce its dependence on the US, and more importantly, as a sign of European "strategic autonomy" that would also allow it to develop a less confrontational China policy. Accordingly, the more attractive future from a Chinese perspective is a NATO in which European members assume greater responsibility, focus on defending their core territory, and are able to moderate the alliance's stance on China.

During personal conversations, Chinese experts also outlined a few options for future cooperation and trust-building that might at least contribute towards mitigating tensions. A unanimous opinion is that divisions between NATO and China all stem from the field of international security, while there is still potential for dialogue and even joint action on non-traditional security challenges, including environmental security, anti-terrorism and anti-piracy operations; cybersecurity; small arms control; and non-proliferation (see Meier and Staack (2025) for specific suggestions on the latter point). Emerging technology issues, primarily the use of AI and autonomous systems in warfare, are already part of bilateral US-China talks that could be extended to NATO, too. Such talks should first begin at the track II level, where exchange between Chinese think tanks and the NATO defense college used to take place until the 2010s and could be revived. A more official, institutionalized NATO-China strategic dialogue is harder to establish, but could be the target of a second step. Recalling the failed attempt to open a NATO liaison office in Tokyo, one expert suggested that such an office should be opened in Beijing first in order to facilitate exchange. Several experts also noted that while the Russia-Ukraine war has weighed heavily on relations between NATO and China, both sides could cooperate on

its resolution. This could start by involving China as a mediator for potential peace talks, continuing with Chinese involvement in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, and perhaps even its participation in an envisaged multinational peacekeeping force (assuming UNSC authorization and no Russian veto).

It is currently difficult to imagine China playing such a direct role in the future European security order. Yet given that this order is very much in flux, European NATO members should not rule out new partnerships in rebuilding it. A shrinking American commitment to Europe also affords an opportunity to re-evaluate relations with China based on a sober assessment of what best serves European security interests.

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The Future of NATO – Country Report China

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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