

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## “Sewage of the Cold War”: China’s Expanding Narratives on NATO

By Philip Shetler-Jones



Hu Xijin, the long-time editor of the *Global Times*, known for its strong editorial stance on China’s foreign policy, in his Beijing office on June 21, 2019. (Photo by Giulia Marchi/New York Times)

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### Summary

- Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Sino-NATO relations have oscillated between adversary and ally.
- Since 2019, Beijing’s communications on NATO have sharpened in ways that amount to a rhetorical attack on the alliance. This shift has coincided with intensified Sino-US competition, Chinese concerns about multilateral security associations in Asia, and closer Sino-Russia relations.
- China’s recent critiques of NATO contend that the organization is an obsolete artifact of the Cold War and a belligerent force that undermines regional peace and stability. China’s rhetoric also portrays NATO’s partnerships as an illegitimate intrusion into the Asia-Pacific region.
- Although the audience for China’s narrative on NATO may be as much domestic as foreign, if the message is not countered, it could undermine the alliance’s efforts to sustain and develop Indo-Pacific partnerships and erode support for alliances with the United States more generally.
- NATO should, therefore, make proportionate investments to equip itself with mechanisms for monitoring, analyzing, and responding to China’s rhetorical attacks.

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

Drawing on open-source information and communications, this report examines the recent adversarial shift in China's public statements about NATO and builds the case that NATO should invest in efforts to understand, track, and counter China's narratives about the alliance. The report was commissioned by the China program of the United States Institute of Peace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg, left, and President Joe Biden speak before attending a meeting at the NATO summit in Madrid on June 29, 2022. (Photo by Brendan Smialowski/pool via AP)

## Introduction

Relations between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and NATO—the military alliance of 31 European and North American nations initially formed to defend against Soviet aggression—have dropped to their lowest point since the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Simultaneously, the combination of intensified Sino-US competition, increased NATO attention to the PRC, Chinese concerns about multilateral security associations in Asia, and closer Sino-Russia relations have made Chinese attitudes toward NATO more relevant than ever. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the PRC’s communications on NATO have sharpened in ways that amount to a rhetorical attack on the alliance’s legitimacy. And with this rhetoric becoming increasingly hostile, it has the potential to undermine NATO partnerships and relationships not just in the Euro-Atlantic but also in the Indo-Pacific. This suggests a greater need to invest in countering negative narratives to the extent that they can potentially hurt the alliance—with priority given to specific messages and audiences and to relationships with partners in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>1</sup>

The PRC’s ambitions and policies—particularly those viewed as “challenges” to the interests, security, and values of the NATO alliance in its 2022 Strategic Concept—are attracting much attention. But what the PRC says about NATO also deserves thoughtful consideration. Although Sino-NATO relations have fluctuated, alternating between opposition and alignment since early

in the Cold War, Beijing's harsh narratives on NATO have recently become more pronounced. On the eve of the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, an editorial in the *Global Times*, a daily tabloid affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, used vivid language to warn against closer NATO relations with Asia-Pacific partners: "It's an extremely unwise choice for any Asia-Pacific country and is bound to damage that country's strategic trust with China, inevitably leading to consequences. . . . The sewage of the Cold War cannot be allowed to flow into the Pacific Ocean."<sup>2</sup>

NATO should seek to understand, track, and counter such PRC narratives about the alliance for several reasons: first, these narratives can damage perceptions of NATO by its members and its partners, especially Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea (also known informally as the Asia-Pacific Four, or AP4); second, undermining trust in NATO is a proxy for undermining the principles of collective self-defense and collective security that underpin international security more widely; and third, for the United States and its bilateral allies in the Asia-Pacific region, attacks on NATO are an indirect way of attacking any alliance with the United States.

This report examines the PRC's attitudes toward NATO over time, with a focus on the 2020–2021 period following the debut of NATO's official statements on the PRC and the periods following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the release of NATO's Strategic Concept (which articulates a new position on China). The report reviews Chinese perceptions of NATO and identifies the main themes of contemporary Chinese discourse on the alliance. It then considers the intended audiences of PRC hostile narratives before turning to the strengths and vulnerabilities of NATO vis-à-vis these narratives. The report concludes with practical recommendations for the alliance.

## Sino-NATO Relations over Time

Since 1949, Sino-NATO relations have fluctuated "between adversary to ally and back again."<sup>3</sup> Five distinct periods can be identified. After the initial period of early Cold War antipathy, a second period, beginning in 1972, saw China making "an active diplomatic effort to persuade Western European leaders to strengthen NATO" as a way of drawing Soviet strength away from its borders.<sup>4</sup>

However, the third period saw NATO cast in a new and dangerous light when a NATO bomb struck China's embassy in Belgrade during the air campaign of the 1999 Kosovo war, resulting in the deaths of three Chinese nationals. The unfortunate accident had a strong, formative effect on the reputation of NATO in China that persists to this day. Official registration of protest over the bombing was accompanied by state-sanctioned expressions of anger against NATO—involving days of street demonstrations in several major Chinese cities—and the issuance of a rare government statement. On the day of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a PRC foreign ministry spokesperson told reporters that "NATO still owes the Chinese people a debt of blood."<sup>5</sup>

The fourth period, following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and NATO's mission to Afghanistan, was relatively benign despite the PRC's opposition to NATO expansion and the Balkan interventions. The Afghanistan mission brought NATO to China's borders, yet Beijing appeared to view the mission positively, whether out of genuine optimism that it would

address the threat of Islamist terrorism or as a way of casting some legitimacy on its own counter-terrorism policies in its far western regions. In testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission in April 2012, China expert Christina Lin pointed to a series of positive exchanges:

In 2002, the Chinese ambassador in Brussels visited NATO headquarters with then SecGen Lord Robertson and explored ways for engagements, particularly in Afghanistan. . . . Following the visit of the Director General of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to NATO Headquarters in 2007, the political dialogue on [the] senior staff level [took] place on a rather regular basis. In May 2007, NATO Military Committee Chairman General Ray Henault expressed that in addition to political relations, NATO wants to establish direct ‘military-to-military’ relations with Chinese armed forces and shake off the embassy-bombing shadow.<sup>6</sup>

In 2008, the People’s Liberation Army Navy began cooperating with NATO navies on counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>7</sup> And in 2011, the *Global Times*—known for its hawkish views on Chinese foreign policy—published a positive opinion piece about cooperation between NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>8</sup>

The fifth (and current) period of Sino-NATO relations began in 2019. During this period, Beijing’s attitude toward NATO seems to have been formed in considerable part by the deterioration in both US-China and Europe-China relations over the preceding few years. The first time the significance of China’s rise appeared in an official NATO statement was in December 2019; the London Declaration, issued at the NATO Leaders Meeting, stated that Beijing’s “growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges.” Almost a year later, a report entitled “NATO 2030: United for a New Era,” produced by an independent panel of experts appointed by the NATO secretary general, identified China as a “systemic rival” and recommended that NATO “continue efforts to build resilience and counter cyber attacks and disinformation that originate in China.”<sup>9</sup> At their June 2021 summit meeting in Brussels, alliance leaders reiterated and expanded on earlier statements: “China’s growing influence and international policies can present challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance. . . . China’s stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the biggest perceived affront to China has been its treatment in NATO’s Strategic Concept, a long-term strategy and planning document that was revised significantly in 2022 from its previous 2010 version. The document more clearly puts China and NATO in opposing positions: “The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our [NATO’s] interests, security and values.”<sup>11</sup> The PRC is mainly covered in paragraphs 13 and 14. Paragraph 13 defines the problem:

The PRC employs a broad range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power, while remaining opaque about its strategy, intentions and military build-up. The PRC’s malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm Alliance security. The PRC seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains. It uses its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies and enhance

its influence. It strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains. The deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests.

Paragraph 14 lists the actions NATO plans to take:

We remain open to constructive engagement with the PRC, including to build reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance's security interests. We will work together responsibly, as Allies, to address the systemic challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security and ensure NATO's enduring ability to guarantee the defence and security of Allies. We will boost our shared awareness, enhance our resilience and preparedness, and protect against the PRC's coercive tactics and efforts to divide the Alliance. We will stand up for our shared values and the rules-based international order, including freedom of navigation.

All of this said, regardless of the period of relations, Chinese and NATO interests have at times aligned, proving that the relationship is not inherently antagonistic. Nor have China and NATO necessarily paid significant attention to one another over time. Aside from the Belgrade bombing, as Filip Šebok and Richard Q. Turcsányi noted in a paper for the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, NATO hardly featured in the PRC's official communications until recently: "There were only 18 direct mentions of NATO in regular press conferences of [the] Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2002 and 2020—compared to 21 mentions of the Czech Republic, over 200 of Germany, and almost 5,000 of the US."<sup>12</sup>

## China's Perceptions and Discourse

Before analyzing what China has been saying about NATO in the last several years, it is worth exploring some of the perceptions behind Beijing's rhetoric. According to a summary of a 2021 dialogue organized by the US-based Center for Strategic Decision Research and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (closely affiliated with the Chinese People's Liberation Army), Chinese perceptions could be roughly summarized as follows:<sup>13</sup>

- NATO is a Cold War organization that needs a threat to survive, and China is a convenient scapegoat. China's military modernization gives NATO a pretext for higher military spending.
- The United States dominates NATO and seeks to use it to turn Europeans, who are politically divided and militarily uneven, against China and to transition NATO from a regional to a global alliance.
- Western initiatives are nothing but attempts to prevent China's rise in terms of strategic capability. The United States has been criticizing China and applying double standards on its development of new hypersonic missiles, intermediate missiles, stealth aircraft, battlefield robotics, and cyber and space weapons, even as the United States and its allies are developing the same capabilities.

- The West’s claims of security vulnerabilities and Chinese state interference are invoked for protectionist reasons and to give Western companies an unfair market advantage.
- The United States and its allies are violating principles of state sovereignty and non-interference by condemning China and imposing sanctions on it for its internal behavior in, for example, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.
- China’s rise, along with the emergence of other major powers, means that the Western-dominated multilateral system is obsolete and Western power will be reduced. Unwilling to accept this, the West has tried to revitalize the G-7 (an economic and political forum for advanced countries) by adding Australia, India, South Africa, and South Korea; and tries to use the Quad (a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) and NATO global outreach to contain China’s legitimate rise. This effort is destabilizing global politics by dividing the world into new Cold War blocs.

These perceptions both underlie PRC discourse on NATO and reflect the broad thrust of PRC foreign and security policy—which essentially opposes a US-led order that appears bent on containing China and instead seeks a new world order that facilitates acceptance of and respect for China’s leadership status.<sup>14</sup>

## Obsolescence, Belligerence, Illegitimacy

China’s underlying perceptions and declared foreign policy ambitions have coalesced in an overarching narrative that can be roughly summed up as follows: Although China is the future (ergo the West is the past), American primacy is threatened by China’s inevitable rise, and so the United States uses all means at its disposal—including alliances like NATO—to hype a China threat and contain China’s rise. In determining how to respond to this broad narrative, it helps to break down the elements of China’s messaging and discourse on NATO into three main categories: obsolescence, belligerence, and illegitimacy.

### **OBSOLESCENCE: COLD WAR THINKING**

The PRC’s narrative of Western decline serves to support the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and gain external acceptance for China’s overseas power projection. In Beijing’s view, NATO is an emblem of Western decline and is attached to outmoded concepts and institutions, including, for example, so-called Cold War thinking. As Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian put it in April 2022, “NATO was born out of the Cold War and should have long become a past tense.”<sup>15</sup> This interweaving of NATO with established PRC foreign policy narratives became even more evident in the remarks made by China’s permanent representative to the United Nations, Zhang Jun. At a UN Security Council briefing on Ukraine in June 2022, Zhang stated, “The Cold War ended a long time ago, It is necessary for NATO to reconsider its own positioning and its responsibilities, completely abandon the Cold-War mentality that is

based on bloc confrontation, and strive to build a balanced, effective, and sustainable European security framework in line with the principle of indivisible security.”<sup>16</sup>

Beijing views obsolete thinking as afflicting NATO’s whole conceptual mindset, which, in turn, shapes its approach to China. In remarks in June 2022, the spokesperson of the Chinese mission to the European Union stated that “NATO’s so-called Strategic Concept, filled with Cold war thinking and ideological bias, is maliciously attacking and smearing China. We firmly oppose it.”<sup>17</sup>

These examples suggest that China objects to NATO’s perceived embodiment of two institutional and structural aspects of Cold War thinking: bloc formation and confrontation. The theme of illegitimate collective defense alliances and minilaterals (small groups of countries collaborating to achieve shared goals) is connected to the broader Chinese discourse on resisting attempts to contain the PRC. Beijing’s statements on the international order emphasize the centrality of the UN Security Council and imply that multilateral alliances based on the right of collective self-defense somehow lack legitimacy, despite the fact that Article 51 of the UN charter specifically validates the right of collective defense. As noted by the spokesperson of China’s mission to the EU, “NATO claims itself to be a defensive organization that upholds the rules-based international order, but it has bypassed the UN Security Council and waged wars against sovereign states, creating huge casualties and leaving tens of millions displaced.”<sup>18</sup>

Also implying a Western attachment to obsolete thinking, the PRC has talked of a needed evolution of security concepts from “absolute” security to “indivisible” security. In April 2022, General Secretary Xi Jinping highlighted the concept of indivisible security—the idea that no country should strengthen its own security at the expense of others<sup>19</sup>—as a distinguishing feature in his proposed Global Security Initiative: “We should uphold the principle of indivisibility of security, build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the building of national security on the basis of insecurity in other countries.”<sup>20</sup> According to the official concept paper published in February 2023, the initiative “aims to eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance, encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era, and promote durable peace and development in the world.”<sup>21</sup>

Beijing is essentially touting a superior security order that will supersede the current, US-led order. Again, China asserts that, as an institution founded on collective defense, NATO has not been heeding the principle underlying the concept of indivisible security. (The Kremlin, incidentally, has also promoted this principle in the context of earlier European security cooperation agreements.) In remarks made on separate occasions, spokesperson Zhao and UN ambassador Zhang have issued the following warnings:

NATO must immediately . . . renounce its blind faith in military might and misguided practice of seeking absolute security, halt the dangerous attempt to destabilize Europe and the Asia-Pacific, and act in the interest of security and stability in Europe and beyond.<sup>22</sup>

The Ukraine crisis has once again sounded alarm for the world. Security is indivisible. A blind faith in the position of strength, the expansion of military alliance, and the pursuit of one’s own security at the expense of the insecurity of other countries will inevitably lead to security dilemmas.<sup>23</sup>



The flag of Finland is raised at NATO headquarters on the sidelines of a NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels on April 4, 2023. Finland's accession as the 31st member of the alliance occurred just over a year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. (Photo by Geert Vanden Wijngaert/AP)



The wider global economic disruption to energy, food, and fertilizer prices resulting from Russia's war against Ukraine created another opportunity for the PRC to portray "United States-led Western countries" (in other words, NATO members) as irresponsible in pursuing their own security at the expense of others. A June 2022 article in the *China Daily*, owned by the Chinese Communist Party, contended that "United States-led Western countries were more busy sending shipments of lethal weapons to Ukraine and have imposed sanctions on Russia, risking the prolonged continuation of the conflict but leaving the world to foot the bill. Food prices have reached an all-time high, as Russian and Ukrainian grain exports are hindered by port disruptions and Western sanctions."<sup>24</sup>

In response to consolidation of the European security order around NATO membership, Beijing seems intent on undermining alliance solidarity by implying that membership or partnership with NATO is somehow incompatible with good relations with the PRC. In a statement following the announcement of Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership, spokesperson Zhao hinted at the damage NATO membership can cause countries' bilateral relations with the PRC: "Finland's application to NATO will bring new factor to bilateral ties with China."<sup>25</sup>

## **BELLIGERENCE: STIRRING UP TROUBLE**

In the lead-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Sino-Russian rapprochement began to change NATO's attitude toward the PRC; at the same time, Beijing's and Moscow's narratives about NATO began to converge. On February 4, 2022, in a joint statement released when President Vladimir Putin was visiting Beijing, China and Russia signaled their opposition to further NATO expansion.<sup>26</sup> Over the summer of 2022, the PRC's messaging about the war emphasized elements of its critical stance toward NATO; moreover, its messages aligned with the Russian narrative that Washington was "the initiator and main instigator of the Ukrainian crisis."<sup>27</sup>

In late June, inclusion of the AP4 countries in the NATO summit in Madrid prompted the PRC to portray the alliance as a source of danger for Asian security and as evidence of a developing

Asian NATO. At a UN Security Council briefing on June 28, Zhang stated, “We firmly oppose certain elements clamoring for NATO’s involvement in the Asia Pacific, or an Asia Pacific version of NATO on the back of military alliances. The long-outdated Cold War script must never be re-enacted in the Asia Pacific. The kind of turmoil and conflict that are affecting parts of the world must not be allowed to happen in the Asia Pacific.”<sup>28</sup>

In a related statement, the PRC highlighted the long peace the Asia-Pacific region has experienced since the end of the Indo-China conflicts in the late 1970s and implied that Asian problems should be addressed by Asian actors. At a press conference on June 30, Zhao asserted, “The Asia-Pacific is one of the most peaceful and stable regions in the world and a promising land for cooperation and development. Any attempt to undermine its peace and stability and sabotage regional solidarity and cooperation will be unanimously rejected by the people in China and the rest of the Asia-Pacific.”<sup>29</sup>

By contrasting NATO’s supposed inherently aggressive character (and associating that with insecurity in Europe) with the idealized peace of Asia, China was subtly reinforcing its centrality in the region and making the case that NATO’s interest in the Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific represents a threat to regional security. Also in late June, the spokesperson of the Chinese mission to the EU said, “The Strategic Concept claims that other countries pose challenges, but it is NATO that is creating problems around the world. . . . Who’s challenging global security and undermining world peace? Are there any wars or conflicts over the years where NATO is not involved?”<sup>30</sup>

## **ILLEGITIMACY: BLOC FORMATION AND INTRUSION**

China’s main attack on NATO’s legitimacy is based on structural and geographic objections. The structural critique implies that blocs or even collective security alliances are inherently contrary to a just, democratic, and stable international order. The geographic critique implies that NATO is overstepping its bounds and entering a region where it has no right to be. Both lines are sometimes used in combination, as the spokesperson of the Chinese mission to the EU did when saying, “NATO claims that its defense zone will not go beyond the North Atlantic, but it has flexed its muscle in the Asia-Pacific region in recent years and sought to stir up bloc confrontation here, as it has done in Europe.”<sup>31</sup>

NATO’s current interest in the Indo-Pacific makes it a convenient emblem of a trend emerging in the Asian security structure that worries China: defense unilateralism. Until recently, the US-led security order in the region took a hub-and-spoke form, with an array of bilateral alliances connecting the United States to Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. However, these alliances have started to be overlaid with a latticework of new unilateral structures, some linking groups of Asian nations and others linking Asian, European, and North American countries. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to a speech by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in June 2022 with the following statement:

The US administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy is self-contradictory: the US claims to promote the region’s “freedom and openness” as its goal, while in reality co-opting with allies to forge a “five-four-three-two-one” formation made up of the Five Eyes, the Quad, AUKUS, bilateral alliances and IPEF, forming exclusive “small circles” and forcing countries in the region to take sides. AUKUS helps Australia build nuclear-powered submarines and develops hypersonic

weapons, pushing up the risk for a regional arms race. Under the pretext of fighting illegal fishing and keeping supply chains resilient, the Quad has vigorously pursued military cooperation and intelligence sharing. The US has also encouraged NATO's involvement in the Asia-Pacific. These are all attempts to materialize an "Asia-Pacific version of NATO" and promote "integrated deterrence" against China.<sup>32</sup>

The PRC's lumping together of other groupings and NATO seems aimed at delegitimizing not just collective security in the strict sense but any association of defense cooperation or collaboration, in particular those led by or including the United States. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release from February 2023 on the potential of political settlement of the Ukraine crisis asserted that "the security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs."<sup>33</sup> Beijing has even claimed that the United States wants to use NATO for "harming Europe."<sup>34</sup> The implication is that countries that ally with the United States are somehow either vassals or allowing themselves to be brainwashed or both. Perhaps because China perceives a lack of agency among smaller states, Beijing presumes what it sees as its own regional leadership would be an acceptable alternative to so-called US hegemony.

The PRC insinuates geographic illegitimacy by arguing that an organization based on North Atlantic security is an alien intruder in the Asian region. The fact that the PRC held military exercises alongside Russia in the Euro-Atlantic in recent years, in the Mediterranean in 2015, and the Baltic region in 2017 has not prevented Beijing from criticizing NATO for "inserting itself" in Asia-Pacific affairs. As Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Wang Wenbin asserted, "NATO, a military organisation in the North Atlantic, has in recent years come to the Asia-Pacific region to throw its weight around and stir up conflicts. . . . NATO has messed up Europe. Is it now trying to mess up the Asia-Pacific and even the world?"<sup>35</sup>

The warning is not just directed at NATO itself, but also at NATO's partners and others in the region. The *Global Times* editorial published just before NATO leaders met in Madrid in July 2022 made this abundantly clear. In addition to warning that "catering to NATO's Asia-Pacificization is tantamount to inviting wolves into the house," the editorial declared that doing so was "bound to damage [countries'] strategic trust with China."<sup>36</sup>

Beijing's narrative logic—which connects interference by non-Asians in regional security with the deliberate stirring up of tensions and propensity for war—reached its high point in the implication of an Asian NATO: China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted, "The US pushes NATO to insert itself in Asia-Pacific affairs, fan the 'China threat' narrative in the bloc's new strategic concept, and include in its Madrid Summit such US allies in the Asia-Pacific as Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Australia, in a bid to build an 'Asia-Pacific version of NATO,' which would disrupt security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>37</sup> The use of scare quotes around "Asia-Pacific version of NATO" serves not only to cast doubt on the idea itself but also to give a misleading impression as to its origin. Neither NATO nor the United States has expressed an ambition to create an Asian NATO; in fact, they have made many statements to the contrary, clearly indicating that no such move is desired or intended.<sup>38</sup> The idea of an Asian NATO is almost exclusively one that emanates, unconsciously or by design, from Chinese discourse.

# China's Audiences

Estimating the danger that PRC narratives pose to NATO requires some understanding of the target audiences. This section identifies audiences from Beijing's likely perspective, assesses the effects on these audiences from NATO's likely perspective, and weighs the importance of these effects.

## **SPEAKING TO THOSE AT HOME AND ABROAD**

The wider world is not necessarily the PRC's primary audience. Research suggests that the domestic audience is more important for China. As Šebok and Turcsányi stated in their NATO background paper, "Chinese actors try to follow its leaders' instructions and wishes, and the Party overall is motivated by a desire to increase legitimacy vis-à-vis the Chinese domestic audience. These factors are increasingly contributing to the uncompromising posture of Chinese diplomacy abroad."<sup>39</sup> This is consistent with the larger pattern of PRC security policy and resource allocation, which suggests that internal threats to state security and the position of the PRC are higher priorities than foreign threats to the country.<sup>40</sup> The message that outside powers are containing China and ganging up to prevent its rise is becoming more salient as internal questions inevitably arise about how many of China's economic difficulties might be the result of choices by the current Communist Party leadership.

The second audience is likely China's partners, particularly Russia. Despite the negative impact Russia's war has had on PRC interests (including food price inflation and exposing double standards on questions of national sovereignty), Beijing remains reluctant to appear as an unreliable friend. For Russia, there are potential benefits from reciprocal support on issues where their interests align. Writing presciently two decades ago, international security expert Richard Weitz observed that

from Moscow's perspective, periodically joining Beijing to denounce U.S.-Japanese defense cooperation elicits, at minimal cost, Chinese declarations against NATO enlargement and other Western policies the Russian government opposes. The appearance of an embryonic Russian-Chinese united front toward Japan also encourages Tokyo to moderate its claims of sovereignty over the Russian-occupied southern islands of the Kurile chain—Habomai, Shikotan, Etorofu, and Kunashiri, known in Japan as the "Northern Territories."<sup>41</sup>

Considering Japan has been, as Weitz notes, the target of three treaties between Moscow and Beijing (in 1896, 1924, and 1950), it must be discomfiting for Tokyo to observe how "Chinese officials have expressed renewed support for Russia's position on the Kurile issue."<sup>42</sup> Russia and Japan both claim sovereignty over the southern chain of the Kuril Islands. Moscow seized them during World War II, but Tokyo views them as Japan's "Northern Territories." Given Russia's current weakened state due to the war with Ukraine and China's support, Japan may be concerned about Chinese influence over any Moscow-Tokyo negotiations.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, the more Sino-Russian relations align, the clearer it becomes for Asian and Euro-Atlantic partners that they share common security interests.

The remaining international audience is probably next in terms of importance, particularly the broad segment sometimes described as the “Global South” or the “new nonaligned.”<sup>44</sup> China claims moral leadership over this group of countries (albeit a role contested by India) and seeks to cultivate in this group a worldview that supports its strategic preferences on points such as countering American hegemony.<sup>45</sup> Recent analysis suggests that Beijing invests heavily in messaging to African audiences and Arabic- and Spanish-speaking audiences, and the efforts have been relatively successful.<sup>46</sup>

## **WHERE CHINA’S AUDIENCES AND NATO’S INTERESTS INTERSECT**

Although the PRC seems to be giving more attention recently to reaching audiences abroad, when it comes to Euro-Atlantic audiences, its current approach to communications does not appear to be doing much to prevent a general trend of rising suspicion and hostility toward China.<sup>47</sup> From NATO’s perspective, this wider world—particularly those regions where NATO seeks to sustain or develop its global partnerships—is the more important audience. It is when those partnerships happen to be in the Asia-Pacific that PRC narratives seem to come into the most direct conflict with NATO interests. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao has warned, albeit in reference to European enlargement, that “we advise relevant countries to exercise caution when developing relations with NATO.”<sup>48</sup>

This message may be aimed at impacting support for existing frameworks like the AP4, but also at impeding potentially wider NATO partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region. Some commentators suggest that “what China is really addressing is Southeast Asia and the broader region, and ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] in particular.”<sup>49</sup> India’s preference for nonalignment may not be conducive to implementing the recommendation of the NATO 2030 report that “NATO should begin internal discussions about a possible future partnership with India,” but sooner or later, a NATO more oriented to the challenge of China will naturally look to partner in some form with India.<sup>50</sup>

From NATO’s perspective, the international audiences most relevant are likely existing and potential Indo-Pacific partners, especially segments of their public and elite who are sympathetic to the anti-imperialistic, anti-Western, and anti-American elements of PRC narratives. These audiences’ opinions have the potential to limit or reduce the willingness of states in the region to work with NATO and its partners.

The question of how much impact PRC narratives have had to date on regional attitudes toward NATO is hard to judge, not least because it is difficult to find relevant studies or tracking efforts. For NATO policymakers concerned about Asia-Pacific partnerships, this might be a blind spot worth looking into.



German chancellor Olaf Scholz, right, shakes hands with the director of China's Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, Wang Yi, at the Munich Security Conference on February 17, 2023. (Photo by Thomas Kienzle/pool via AP)

## NATO's Vulnerability

An obvious NATO vulnerability with respect to PRC narratives is the diversity of views on China within the alliance. NATO allies were able to agree on language about China in the 2022 Strategic Concept, but as the 2022 US National Security Strategy acknowledges, “Allies and partners may have distinct perspectives on the PRC.”<sup>51</sup> For instance, President Joe Biden has repeatedly voiced the United States’ commitment to defending Taiwan if it is attacked, but no other NATO ally has come close to saying this.<sup>52</sup> Also, while the National Security Strategy stresses the need for supply chains that are less dependent on Chinese industry, German chancellor Olaf Scholz conveyed a different message by visiting China with a group of business leaders in November 2022—the first G-7 leader to visit the country in three years.

Meanwhile, France has long expressed its wish “to champion a third path in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>53</sup> In September 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron said, “We must also assert Europe’s independence in the confrontation between China and the United States. . . . We are not willing to have a strategy of confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific. . . . We do not believe that alliances that have been established to deal with certain opposing interests should extend to the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>54</sup> (Like German chancellor Scholz, President Macron also visited China, in April 2023, with a contingent of business leaders.) The French National Strategic Review 2022

makes it clear that “France is working to strengthen the European pillar of the [NATO] Alliance in a pragmatic approach to its role, which rules out an extension to other geographical areas and in particular the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>55</sup>

In sum, these different viewpoints indicate a lack of cohesion on China policy among NATO members; and this makes it easier for the PRC to argue that the United States is driving allies into opposition with China against the will and interests of policymakers or sections of their societies who would naturally prefer cooperative relations with Beijing.

It is unclear whether NATO gives adequate attention to the power of PRC narratives, despite the recommendation of the NATO 2030 report to “enhance its understanding of China’s capabilities, activities, and intentions that affect Euro-Atlantic security, with a clear-eyed understanding of risk, threat, and opportunity.”<sup>56</sup> If NATO officials monitor Chinese discourse, the outputs are not publicized. Any desire to shape narratives in the region does not appear to be matched by funding or capabilities. NATO communication seems to be mostly aimed at internal audiences, with only limited material designed for and directed at Asian partner audiences, let alone Chinese audiences. Although the inclusion of China in NATO’s Strategic Concept is significant, some observers may have expected a more pointed or operationally focused treatment of the PRC. Indeed, little remains of the practical proposals put forward in the NATO 2030 report. This makes one question whether the alliance has been too slow to act on the recommendation that “NATO must devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China.”<sup>57</sup>

NATO’s communication in response to the PRC’s actions toward existing or potential NATO partners is not always consistent. As the scholar Jeffrey Michaels noted, NATO has expressed support for partners like Japan and South Korea with regard to their troubles with China and North Korea, but NATO “remained silent” when soldiers of China’s People’s Liberation Army killed Indian soldiers on their Himalayan frontier in 2020.<sup>58</sup> A NATO communications policy might consider how such instances offer an opportunity to more proactively counter PRC narratives.

Understandably, at this moment, NATO investment in strategic communications concentrates on Russia. However, it does not appear that the balance of strategic communications resources has been adjusted to make progress on the NATO 2030 report’s recommendations related to the PRC and to respond to the increasing alignment between Moscow and Beijing.

## Limitations of China’s Narratives

PRC narratives about NATO have their limitations and vulnerabilities, too. Despite the suggestion in the *Global Times* editorial that “Washington’s strategic will is increasingly coercing and is kidnapping NATO,” the lengthening list of problems in PRC-Europe relations—the causes for which are independent of the US-PRC relationship—make Beijing’s narrative that NATO is merely a tool of American control over Europe harder to sustain.<sup>59</sup> This is evidenced by the demise of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. After the EU imposed sanctions on China over the human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region in China’s northwest in March 2021, Beijing imposed sanctions on EU bodies, European Parliament members, and even think tank researchers.

The PRC's barely muted backing of Putin's war in Ukraine has only clarified the dangers of Chinese foreign policy for Europeans. Beijing's moves to cement the Sino-Russian bond have a retro look that appears to contradict the taunt that America and NATO are the ones mired in a "Cold War mentality." The more PRC messages attack NATO, the more they remind their audiences that Beijing is aligned with Moscow. Beijing and Moscow's "without limits" friendship and the PRC's consistent parroting of Kremlin talking points throughout the conflict have damaged China's relations with many countries in the EU.<sup>60</sup> And the PRC's refusal to condemn the invasion has surely called into question its commitment to the principles of noninterference, peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for national sovereignty.

As Ukraine succeeded in pushing back against Russia's "special military operation" later in 2022, Beijing's closeness to Moscow exposed some of the flaws in the logic of China's strategic communications on NATO. China's refusal to condemn Russia's flagrant violation of national sovereignty may be a liability in terms of Beijing's attempts to pose as a champion of peace and international law and UN Charter principles.<sup>61</sup> As Putin switched strategy from regime change to forcible annexation, siding with Russia continued to put the PRC in an ever-diminishing minority in the UN General Assembly, as demonstrated by the October 12 vote on Russia's annexation of parts of Ukraine—143 members voted to condemn, 5 voted against, and 35 abstained (including China).<sup>62</sup> If Russia's war runs into further difficulties, Beijing's embarrassment is likely to increase. Meanwhile, if NATO allies continue to appear to be alleviating the causes of worldwide repercussions of the war (price rises and shortages of food, fuel, and fertilizer), China will find it increasingly hard to convince the world that it can offer a superior model of security.

## Thinking Ahead and Recommendations

NATO's Strategic Concept expresses concern about the resilience of its allies against PRC actions that could undermine the coherence and strength of their societies, economies, and democratic institutions. NATO's recent research suggests that the most efficient long-term strategy for dealing with PRC narratives "is to bolster the societal resilience of NATO member states and concentrate on shaping their own strategic narratives, which must transcend mere reactions to Chinese actions and offer alternative positive visions."<sup>63</sup> While the idea of offering alternative positive visions is sound, the alliance should look beyond the resilience of allies and take steps to better understand and, if necessary, neutralize sources of damage to the alliance inflicted via NATO's partners and partnerships. The success of the Chinese narrative that the inherent right of collective self-defense and the organizations that uphold that right are illegitimate would represent not just a defeat for the principles NATO stands for but also a more general danger for global peace and stability.

In addition, NATO should pay close attention to the effects of PRC narratives on the perceptions of Chinese citizens. Failure to do so would be shortsighted. It is not self-evident that the perceptions of the Chinese audience are either accurately represented by the messages of the



Wang Yi (left), then China's foreign minister, listens as UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres speaks during a high-level Security Council meeting on the situation in Ukraine at UN headquarters on September 22, 2022. (Photo by Mary Altaffer/AP)



PRC or beyond the influence of outside actors, including NATO's own strategic communications. Although Sino-NATO relations are at a low today, channels for influence are not entirely foreclosed. On September 22, 2022, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discussed Russia's war against Ukraine during talks

with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York.<sup>64</sup> In February 2023, talks between NATO and PRC counterparts restarted after a pause that seemed to have been caused mainly by COVID-related restrictions.<sup>65</sup> Chinese leadership can and will change eventually. NATO should take a long view and use the channels it still has with Chinese officials—and perhaps in a more limited way with ordinary Chinese people—to prepare for a day when the pendulum swings back in a positive direction.

When it comes to external messages, PRC narratives smear NATO largely as a means of blackening the reputation of the United States and undermining strategically inconvenient norms like the inherent right to collective self-defense, including by China's neighbors but also by countries in the Global South. The following recommendations therefore focus on that wider audience, where NATO has more immediate interests and influence.

1. NATO should commission a mechanism for analysis, with support from Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic specialists, to estimate the level of threat emanating from Russian and PRC strategic communications in order to guide the allocation of resources toward countering narratives that undermine or attack NATO in each case. The mechanism should dynamically track trends in PRC strategic communications related to NATO. The scope of tracking should go beyond covering the objectives and methods of PRC narratives by measuring the impact and results of PRC communications, based on differentiated audience analysis. Cooperation between the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and nascent counterparts in Asian partner nations may be leveraged to support such a mechanism.<sup>66</sup> Collection of relevant information could be facilitated not just by NATO's strategic partners in the region, such as the AP4, but also by other

friends and partners whose populations are also important targets of influence (for example, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore).

2. After gaining a better understanding through the above measures, NATO should develop a strategic communications strategy that covers the Indo-Pacific, in consultation with the AP4 and other regional partners.
3. NATO should explore efforts to influence opinion in China about the alliance.

While proposing a NATO communications policy for Asia is beyond the scope of this report, it is possible to suggest some messages that NATO should consider communicating to China and the region more broadly. Some are predicated on a determination of what the alliance wants to accomplish in the Indo-Pacific. The alliance's objective in the region has not been clearly spelled out. Unlike the European Union and several Euro-Atlantic and Asian nations (for example, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, South Korea, and Japan), NATO has only produced a two-paragraph China policy (in the 2022 Strategic Concept), not an Indo-Pacific strategy.

Notwithstanding the lack of an overarching strategy document, one major theme of a NATO communications strategy for the Indo-Pacific would likely be upholding the inherent right of states to collective self-defense. This right is a particularly important element of protection for smaller states against aggressive hegemony. Notably, this right exists for all states, not just UN members. It is logical that larger or stronger states seeking to intimidate and bully smaller states would try to attack this right or criticize states that are attempting to activate it by forming alliances or looser political or security associations. Steps should be taken to ensure that Russia and China do not succeed in drawing support to the argument that indivisible security effectively delegitimizes moves to put the right into practice.

The PRC's painting of "ganging up" or bloc formation as unnatural and illegitimate aims to discredit a long-standing right under international law that predates the UN Charter. This suggests a hegemonic mindset, which is ironic, considering one of China's lines of attack against NATO is that it is a thinly veiled hegemonic project by the United States. When it comes to the Asian audience, themes of anti-hegemony and the sovereign equality of small states to larger states enjoy popular support, particularly among populations raised on a postcolonial narrative of national liberation.

Finally, it may be possible to flip the PRC's narratives by talking about the alliance more from the experience and perspective of smaller allies—for whom the right of collective self-defense offers the best protection against a large and periodically predatory neighbor. In particular, flipping the narrative about NATO might work best if the message about why the alliance continues to exist and why it seeks common cause with partners around the globe comes from more recent members, such as the Baltic states and central European nations, instead of the larger, longer-term allies.

# Notes

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