

NATO's Asian turn

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The recent NATO summit confirmed the alliance's increasing interest in Asian affairs.



Picture credit: Global Times

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) celebrated its 75th anniversary at the Washington Summit, 9-11 July 2024. The celebration of alliance's record of creating peace and stability for its today 32 member states took place in the shadow of Russia's continuing war on Ukraine and against the backdrop of a US presidential election in which one of the candidate's, Donald Trump, has been ambiguous, to say the least, in his views on the alliance's future. Even so, there was ample grounds for celebration.

An interesting aspect, though, is how NATO, even as it has rediscovered its original *raison d'être* – territorial defence in Europe – in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, is showing greater attention to developments in Asia too. In fact, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea all attended the summit too. In the [final communique](#), several paragraphs addressed China and its global behaviour. Why is a North Atlantic organization interested in Asia?

NATO and Asia in an interconnected world

Already in the 1990s, NATO went 'out of area' through its peacemaking interventions in the former Yugoslavia. During the War on Terror, NATO also came to play a big role in Afghanistan through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Of the current NATO members, only Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg and Slovenia did not participate in any combat capacity. NATO also played a major role in the 2011 Libyan intervention.

The current Asia focus goes beyond military threats, taking in economic security too as well as cyber and other hybrid threats. Critical infrastructure and economic supply chains, things which few paid attention to ten years ago, we increasingly treat as real security concerns. The understanding underpinning this development is that in a globalized world, geography, although still important, does not necessarily separate different threats and domains the way it used to. This has been some time coming in NATO.

The [2022 NATO Strategic Concept](#), adopted at the Madrid Summit, labelled China "malicious" and "confrontational", a "systemic challenge" to NATO and its members' interests. More specifically, the Strategic Concept argued, "[China] seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains". It furthermore challenged China for striving "to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains", thus implicitly calling out China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea. This rhetoric was strengthened at the Washington Summit, the final declaration listing Chinese cyber activities as cause for concern, as well as other hybrid threat like disinformation campaigns.

The crucial development in NATO's official line is in the linkage between security developments in Europe and those in the Indo-Pacific, and China's role in both. As has long

been clear, Russian could not have sustained its war effort in Ukraine without significant Chinese economic support. While China has refrained from supplying weaponry, it has [supplied many dual-use products](#). Naturally, this runs counter to NATO interests, which the Washington Declaration pointedly notes: “[China] cannot enable the largest war in Europe in recent history without this negatively impacting its interests and reputation.”

China for its part has long viewed NATO as an aggressive alliance, seeing its engagement as part of US encroachment. The cartoon at the top of this commentary came from a 2023 editorial in *Global Times*, a newspaper owned by the Chinese Communist Party. Under the headline “[Asia should avoid security plight set by NATO expansion](#)”, it fretted that NATO would expand with Japan and South Korea too. While that is highly unlikely, relations between NATO and the Western-minded states of the Indo-Pacific have grown stronger. As the Washington Declaration puts it: “The Indo-Pacific is important for NATO, given that developments in that region directly affect Euro-Atlantic security. We welcome the continued contributions of our Asia-Pacific partners to Euro-Atlantic security”.

The changing stakes for Europe

Of the 36 countries who are members of either NATO or the European Union, 23 are members of both, and thus one cannot really speak of one without the other. The EU has been on a journey of its own, where relations with China are concerned. Having once championed Chinese accession to the World Trade Organization, and taken a benign view of industrial production offshoring to China, the EU has increasingly come to [share the US view](#) on China. Already in the [2016 EU Global Strategy](#), the EU spoke of engaging China “...based on respect for rule of law, both domestically and internationally”. The first common [EU Indo-Pacific strategy, from 2021](#), strengthened the language even further, particularly in relation to the South China Sea.

The European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, made waves in 2023, when [giving a speech](#) calling for ‘de-risking’ from China. Specifically, the Commission President was concerned that in another economic shock – whether a pandemic or a war – Europe would be overly dependent on China, whose goodwill cannot be taken for granted. The recent EU imposition of punitive tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles must be seen in the

context of the EU feeling itself faced with a systemic rival. Even Emmanuel Macron of France's statement that [Europe had to avoid being a vassal of the US in Asia](#), has to be read as part of the French president's constant quest for 'strategic autonomy', essentially a hedging strategy against future US unpredictability. In fact, Germany's Olaf Scholz and Hungary's Viktor Orban are some of the last men standing when it comes to treating China as an unproblematic business partner.

Conclusion

Among those who understand and care about European security the consensus view is increasingly that the primary and immediate threat, Russia, will not be checked until its main supporter, China, and its aggressive behaviour, is checked too. Both NATO and the EU have been on a journey to get to this realization, but the direction of travel is clear, and there is not much separating the allies. What we are seeing is essentially [another brick in the wall](#) that is fast emerging between those favouring the rules-based international order and those seeking to undermine it.

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