

China and the Indo-Pacific in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept

Paul van Hooft

NATO's long-awaited new Strategic Concept was published at the June 2022 NATO Summit, mere months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It articulates how the member states are coming to terms with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, its subversive activities across Europe, and its unprecedented threats to use nuclear weapons; Russia has unequivocally reemerged as a revisionist threat in Eastern Europe. The emphasis on collective defense in the European theater thus marks a return to familiar terrain for the Alliance.

Yet, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept includes China, underlining that its “stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge [the Alliance’s] interests, security and values”.¹ The Concept makes references to maritime security, specifically the People’s Republic of China’s challenge to freedom of navigation in the maritime commons in the Indo-Pacific.

China’s inclusion in the Concept may seem a departure for NATO, given that no references were made to China in the previous iteration of the NATO Strategic Concept from 2010.² In fact, it seems in tension with the near-total redirection of NATO towards European security in the wake of Russia’s escalation towards and invasion of Ukraine. What motivates China’s inclusion in the 2022 Concept, what does it imply for long-term NATO objectives in the Indo-Pacific, and what are the policy implications for NATO Europe?

2022 NATO STRATEGIC CONCEPT’S RETURN TO NATO’S CORE MISSION BUT...

The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept is a statement on NATO’s expected future for the coming decade, but it also represents a return to its past. No longer is there the post-Cold War search for a purpose for the Alliance; the 2022 concept again foregrounds collective defense and deterrence within Europe as NATO’s central tasks. Unlike in the previ-

ous iterations, counterterrorism and crisis management receive fairly short shrift. Terrorism is still characterized as the “most direct *asymmetric* [emphasis author’s] threat” to the Alliance,³ but discussion pertaining to the topic is brief. This is remarkable because, until the abrupt withdrawal in 2021, the Alliance had just spent almost two decades fighting in Afghanistan. In fact, it was the longest-running operation of the Alliance so far, but it is mentioned only once in the 2022 concept, under the rubric of lessons learned. Yet, the previous 2010 Concept modeled the core tasks of conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-crisis reconstruction on the example of Afghanistan and the expectation that future NATO missions would closely approximate the experience there. Instability surrounding Europe—rather than a conventional attack—was seen as the more likely threat.⁴

That clearly is no longer the case. In a drastic swing of the pendulum, in the 2022 Concept, Russia is again “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area”, which “seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation”.⁵

The return to a focus on collective defense and the Russian threat is not surprising, given the events of the past



The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept makes references to maritime security, specifically the People's Republic of China's challenge to freedom of navigation in the maritime commons in the Indo-Pacific. Pictured is the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy corvette "Zhuzhou" (photo: Igor Grochev / Shutterstock.com)

eight years, and particularly the all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. If a threat can be understood as a combination of perceived intentions, offensive capabilities, and proximity,⁶ then Russia, through its behavior and the potential impact of its policies, established itself as the most clear and present danger to European states. In fact, the 2022 concept represents the Western European members catching up to what the Eastern European member states have argued for over a decade.

... WHY INCLUDE CHINA?

But if Russia is the clear and present danger to NATO Europe, why include China at all? There are two arguments for its inclusion.

First, China can be categorized as the other revisionist threat to the so-called rules-based order besides Russia. After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this argument has resonance in Europe. Even if Europeans are understandably preoccupied with events in Europe, both Russia and China

seem symptoms of a systemic trend. The Concept indeed notes that "authoritarian actors challenge our interests, values and democratic way of life".⁷ In that sense, the Concept fits with a series of European policy statements from France, Germany, and the Netherlands, as well as the EU itself, that directly, if cautiously, reference China and the importance of keeping the Indo-Pacific free and open. Or, with the EU Commission's statement that China is a "systemic rival", as well as an economic "competitor", and "partner".⁸ China's and Russia's "deepening strategic partnership" and their "mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests".⁹ In short, in this line of thinking, NATO members cannot afford to separate the revisionist challenge in Eastern Europe from the one in East Asia, even if the latter is far out of reach for European capabilities.

Second, alternatively, the inclusion of China can be understood as a way for Europeans to signal support for the US. For the US, China has become the "pacing threat".¹⁰ Conse-



When they support the US in the Indo-Pacific, Europeans are “showing the flag” in the hopes of keeping the US engaged in Europe. Pictured are the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) and the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Gridley (DDG 101) as they transit the Philippine Sea (photo: Flickr / U.S. Pacific Fleet / CC BY-NC 2.0)

quently, when they support the US in the Indo-Pacific, Europeans are “showing the flag” in the hopes of keeping the US engaged in Europe. This is not stated as explicitly or openly by European allies, though informally it often is, but it can be inferred from policy statements. For example, the section in the UK’s 2021 Integrated Review that discusses the importance of the relationship with the US explicitly references the British Carrier Group as an important contribution to that relationship.¹¹ The US has also looked to regional and European allies to contribute to the Freedom of Navigations Operations.

The notion that Europeans would commit resources to an objective that accorded with US preferences is not new – nor that NATO would be the framework through which to do so. In the post-Cold War debates on whether NATO continued to have relevance after the collapse of its original rival, the choice was presented starkly as between “out of area or out of business”; either NATO would use its military capabilities to expand stability outside of the Treaty area or it would have no justification to exist. In other words, NATO became more of a collective security organization after the end of the Cold War, intended to keep the peace among the members. While many Central and Eastern European states joined NATO to



insure themselves against the reemergence of the Russian threat, from the American and Western European perspective the intention was as much to consolidate the peace in Europe. Though such a dual shift in purpose was supported by some European members, it unsettled others. Moreover, the accompanying defense transformations of European armed forces towards lighter and more expeditionary tasks, and the concurrent enlargement of the organization, ended up as significant stressors on military effectiveness.¹²

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

If China is included in the 2022 Concept both to underline the revisionist threat it and Russia represent, as well as to bring NATO policy in line with US interests, what can we then say about the feasibility and desirability of giving NATO

a role in the Indo-Pacific? Three issues present themselves and all three require realistic expectations to be set as soon as possible: (1) the impact on European military credibility; (2) the creation of tensions with regional partners and allies; and (3) the overselling and oversimplifying the nature of Chinese and Russian challenges by lumping them together.

First, despite their increased naval presence in the region, ranging from port visits to freedom of navigation operations, European states cannot credibly contribute to deterrence in the Pacific – a much more ambitious task. As noted previously,¹³ European navies have drastically shrunk and most states cannot deploy more than a handful of vessels to the region per year. In terms of European contributions to security in the Pacific, the options are drastically limited. Moreover, the confrontation with Russia in Europe is likely to require more naval assets to maintain security in the maritime approaches towards Europe. Splitting those limited assets between two far-flung theaters without being able to contribute much to the second is a recipe for failure. Arguably, such a half-cocked European NATO shift to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific would mirror the diffusion of limited European military potential that took place in the “out of area” recalibration of the 1990s and 2000s and which left Europe unprepared for the current disintegration of the European security architecture. Nor is it clear that the US is even looking for Europeans to play this role; Defense Secretary Austin has certainly expressed his reservations about an overt military role, despite welcoming greater European interest in the region.¹⁴ Moreover, the Eastern European member states most exposed to the threat of Russia are unlikely to welcome another out-of-region distraction from what they see as – and what is – the central threat to European security.

Second, an increased European role in the Indo-Pacific could contribute to stability in the region, but placing it under a NATO flag is likelier to have a counterproductive effect. It suggests a worldwide political-military balancing coalition against China. While it is unclear whether that would do more towards deterring China, it would push regional states into uncomfortable choices. This includes not only states in Southeast Asia that are rightfully apprehensive about further militarization of their region, but also other states that are needed for the broader effort in the region. India comes to mind, a key regional player in any effort to confront China’s military rise, but one that, for historical and political reasons, is simultaneously close to Russia.¹⁵ Forcing a hard choice on India could be counterproductive towards closing the net on Russian sanctions and containing Chinese expansion into the Indian Ocean. South Korea has pursued non-confrontational policies towards China and only recently has it begun a cautious embrace of the Indo-Pacific con-

cept and increased its engagement with the US and Europe. European contributions through the European Union rather than NATO are likelier to avoid these difficulties with multiple regional states.

Third, while it may help to build political support and build a shared strategic focus on both sides of the Atlantic to frame the dangers of revisionist states like Russia and China to both Europe and Asia as a systemic trend, it also simplifies regionally specific complex problems. Given the limits on European capabilities, and the differences within South, Southeast, and East Asia, a more total approach risks undermining solutions tailored to very specific strategic problems. For one, Russia is a declining state, while China is a rising one. China is deeply integrated with global markets, while Russia is not. Even the specific military challenge varies per region.¹⁶ Lumping these together risks obfuscating more than it clarifies.

REALISTIC OUTLOOK

For Europe the inclusion of China in NATO's new Strategic Concept might mean little in practice; in the coming years, regardless of how or when Russia's war in Ukraine ends, Europe's focus will clearly be dominated by the threat Russia presents to stability and security of NATO members, as well as to partners and in the broader periphery. Yet, we should consider two concrete European contributions when it comes to the Chinese challenge to the broader order and specifically to the maritime commons.

First, Europe represents a major market for Chinese exports. As China pursues divide-and-conquer tactics towards European states, in turn Europeans can threaten to close their markets, further slowing down Chinese economic growth. Similarly, restraining Chinese direct investment in sensitive technological sectors with dual-use applications, as well as restricting access to research and development through universities remain powerful measures to curb Chinese military-technological development. These measures could act as a check on overly assertive Chinese behavior. Yet, it is the European Union, and not NATO, that is the more effective and credible institution to handle economic and technology policies.

Second, Europeans should do more to guard the maritime commons around Europe, including the Mediterranean and Black Sea, stretching into the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and the Western Indian Ocean. By a concerted European effort in a more restricted geographical area together with local partners, Europeans can backfill for the US. By relieving pressure on increasingly strained US naval capabilities, Europeans can do more to ensure that the US has more maneuver space in the Western Pacific – and in doing so do more to strengthen overall deterrence there than through

their own contribution. If Europe is indeed undergoing a geopolitical awakening, it must also set clear priorities among threats, objectives, and regions. Given the uncertainty about the ability of the US to maintain all its global commitments, in addition to its domestic political polarization and instability, ensuring that the European member states can provide security in Europe would seem the most reasonable course of action.

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