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*The European Union and NATO in the
face of China's rise to power in Africa and
the Mediterranean Basin: analysis in the
light of NATO's Strategic Concept 2022*

Abstract

China's rising power in the world is fuelling the reluctance of Western powers, especially the United States. In this sense, the Mediterranean and Africa have experienced in recent years a steady increase in China's *soft and hard power*; an expansion that is mainly economic and commercial, but also strategic and political in nature. If China's growing presence in these perimeters accentuates the West's misgivings, as China gradually rebuilds the international order in its favour, for the countries of Africa and the Mediterranean in general, China is a major economic and strategic opportunity. This dynamic could further upset power balances in various regions of the world, thus fuelling existing conflicts and ruptures in the international order. In order to examine these hypotheses, the first section of this paper looks at China's overall foreign policy objectives. Second, we look at China's growing presence in the Mediterranean and Africa, how China is transforming its collaboration with its partners, from the economic and commercial to the strategic and political. In the third section of this paper we look at US and European perceptions vis-à-vis China's rise to power in the world, its influence on the international order, and the fracture this is creating for the Atlantic Alliance. And finally, we look at NATO's Strategic Concept 2022, and see how the Atlantic Alliance reversed

and refrained from describing China as a major threat as was envisaged before the Ukrainian war stand-off. In terms of methodology, this paper is mostly based on analysing official strategy documents and official statements of the parties involved¹.

Keywords

China, United States, EU, NATO, Africa, Mediterranean.

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¹ It should be noted that this paper is part of the result of a project carried out by the author during his research period at the NATO College in the framework of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue Fellow 2021 programme.

Introduction: China's Grand Strategy: ambitions of supremacy

Current and future geopolitical and geostrategic realities cannot be understood without taking into account China's rise to power⁴. China's Grand Strategy—or the 'Chinese Dream'—as Chinese policy-makers call it², ultimately aims to respond to three interconnected and complementary objectives or sets of objectives. 'Inviolability' comes first; a concept that is closely related to the sovereignty and survival of the political regime, its legitimacy, and the territorial integrity that comes with the recovery of 'Greater China' territories³. The second set of objectives is associated with 'global social stability'; based on sustainable economic and social development. In this sense, China is aware that it needs the world to survive, because without the resources of the entire planet, a country that is home to one sixth of the world's population would not be able to sustain itself. And thirdly, there is the quest for a 'rightful place under the sky'⁴; which can be interpreted as the quest to become a global superpower.

To achieve these goals, China's Grand Strategy relies on a number of instruments, including military capability, the economy, communication, and technological innovation. At the same time, China opts for multilateralism, a key instrument for achieving global hegemony, with the intention of exporting its model⁵. They are therefore defensive, expansive and hegemonic instruments, making up a strategy that can be classified as a grey zone.

However, China cannot achieve these goals in a friendly manner. Beijing's ambitions clash with the interests of other international actors, hence the search for a balance of power with its rivals and competitors is indispensable. This is primarily a matter of possessing military capabilities that will allow it, firstly, to repel the United States—its main rival and competitor—from its strategic perimeter and influence, which is the 'first Pacific island chain', and, in the long term, to restrict its access beyond the 'second island chain'⁶. Secondly, its potential hegemony depends on possessing a navy

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China. China's Arab Policy Paper. (2016). [Accessed on 22/5/2020]. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml

3 Morga, F. (2015). 'China's Military Strategy 2015'. *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*. N.°15/15, 2015.

4 Dellios, R. (1999). *Modern Chinese Defence Strategy*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 93- 94.

5 In October 2017, during the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress, Xi Jinping was re-elected for a second five-year term as General Secretary of the Communist Party. In his speech, he stated that "China's model for a better social governance system offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence. It offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind".

See the full text of 'Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress'. (2017). *China Daily*. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm

6 Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress. (2017). *China Daily*.

capable of defending China's growing economic, commercial and political interests on a global scale.

This vision does not seek confrontation, but rather a low-profile 'continuous competition' that ensures peaceful coexistence with other international powers. It is a strategy inspired by the Chinese philosophy that '*if you want peace, you must prepare for war*' and '*if you want security, then you must become powerful*'⁷.

These postulates are in line with the strategy revealed in China's 2015 White Paper⁸, as well as with President Xi Jinping's statement at the 19th Communist Party Congress in October 2017 that the goal of the People's Liberation Navy is to become a world-class global navy by 2049. This is why China is seeking to close the gap in its military backlog vis-à-vis the US, especially in naval forces. In this regard, China's new military doctrine seeks to build up an international contingent and establish overseas military bases. Priority objectives are the defence of maritime lines of communication to the Persian Gulf and Africa, the fight against low-intensity threats, UN peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid missions, and the affirmation of China's global status and image as a major world power.

China also continues its policy of increasing its strategic power by strengthening military cooperation relations with several countries, especially in the African Union⁹. That China will seek to build —like the US— a network of military allies in the future has not been ruled out.

To enhance its capabilities and knowledge, China opts for cooperation with Russia. Although Beijing does not recognise its strategic alliance with Moscow, the two countries continue to strengthen their ties at various levels¹⁰. This reinforced cooperation is based in particular on the strategic arms trade, technological cooperation and holding military exercises in regions considered strategic for both powers, such as the Baltic and the Mediterranean¹¹. All this without forgetting political cooperation, which has its origins in the defence of similar positions within the United Nations Security Council.

7 See Tzu, S. (2017). *L'art de la Guerre*. Paris, Flammarion.

8 *Ibid*, Morgan, F. See also Monteiro, D. S. and Charbon, P. (2019). *Le livre blanc sur la défense chinois 2019 : un effort de communication lacunaire*. Institut de recherche stratégique de l'école militaire.

9 See in this regard the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on September 9. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/xwfw/lxjzdh/202209/t20220911_10765048.html

Edgar, J. G. (2021). *Una globalización armada de China*. Opinion Paper, 5 April 2021. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies.

10 Russia had supplied China with advanced systems to strengthen its air defence against ships and submarines.

11 Ekman, A. (2018). La Chine en Méditerranée : une présence émergente. Note de l'IFRI, Institut Français de Relations Internationales.

China's growing presence in the Mediterranean and Africa: from the economic and commercial to the strategic and political

The Mediterranean and Africa have seen a rise in China's *soft and hard power* in recent years. These regions offer significant economic and trade opportunities as they are considered emerging markets and important sources of natural resources. Moreover, the political and business environment in these regions is suitable for China to increase its presence and influence in the world, allowing Chinese diplomats and industry leaders to build personal relationships and conduct transactions without going through official institutions.

China's presence in these regions has taken a turn with the launch in 2013 of the New Silk Road project¹², which almost all African countries have joined. Since then, China has become the largest trading partner in Africa, and the largest holder of African foreign debt¹³.

Eight China-Africa Cooperation Forums have been organised since 2000, the last one taking place in November 2021 in the Senegalese capital Dakar. Thanks to this framework, according to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on its official website, Chinese companies have built more than 10,000 kilometres of railways, almost 100,000 kilometres of roads, around 1,000 bridges and almost 100 ports, as well as more than 80 large-scale electrical installations in Africa. They have also helped build more than 130 medical facilities, 45 stadiums and over 170 schools. Looking ahead, China is determined to further strengthen this cooperation to build what it has called a community of common destiny between China and Africa¹⁴.

This dynamic cooperation goes hand in hand with the consolidation of its *soft power* influence. In this regard, Beijing established 61 *Confucius* Institutes in more than 46 countries. This is a partnership between the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and various local administrations with influence in education.

China's growing presence in Africa and the Mediterranean is part of its strategy of projecting influence into distant geopolitical spaces. This expansion allows Beijing to achieve economic and commercial, but also strategic and political objectives. China's main objective with this forward presence is to circumvent the containment policy that the United States, along with its East Asian allies, is pursuing against it. Simultaneously, Beijing seeks to increase competition with Western powers in regions considered to be the classic perimeters of the West.

12 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China. (2016). China's Arab Policy Paper. [Accessed on 22/8/2022]. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml.

13 What China is really up to in Africa. Forbes. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2019/10/03/what-china-is-really-up-to-in-africa/?sh=5e53c16e5930>

14 Wang Yi: FOCAC Will Set a New Milestone. (2021). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 29 November 2021. Available at: [_https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/gjhdq/fz/3074/3076/202111/t20211130_10458977.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/gjhdq/fz/3074/3076/202111/t20211130_10458977.html)

China's rapid rise to power in Africa and the Mediterranean basin is due to several factors. First, the US shift of interest from the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean to the Indo-Pacific has been key, leaving a vacuum that Beijing has spared no effort to fill. On the other hand, China has been able to exploit political instability, poverty and economic crises in some developing countries to its advantage. China's lending to several African countries reflects this trend¹⁵. Moreover, the hostile and interventionist positions of Western states in the internal affairs of these countries have aggravated the antagonism of regimes and societies towards the West. China's effective instrumentalisation of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis must be added to these factors, which has allowed it to increase its influence and further legitimise its presence. Beijing has been ultimately more reactive and supportive than the US and Europe¹⁶.

In order to maintain good relations with all partners—and contrary to the policy of Western countries— China chooses not to condition its relations, not to intervene in internal affairs, and to maintain neutrality in contentious issues. This focus allows China to establish relations even with rival countries in a region, or 'voyoous' (rogue) countries.

Aware that economics is the key to any rapprochement, China prioritises increasing trade and economic relations with its partners. It opts for the attractive 'win-win' equation, which aims to help partners build growing and sustainable development models. The implementation of this vision is based on several lines of action, such as increasing the production capacity of partner countries, transferring know-how, building low-cost infrastructure, and rapid industrialisation.

China's rise to power in Africa and the Mediterranean is also explained by another key factor: its adaptation to the needs and priorities of its partners, without imposing a pre-established agenda on them. This policy allows China to create and foster its partners' dependence on it. Indeed, Beijing has managed to convince its partners and societies that it is a non-colonial power and that it is the better alternative to the West¹⁷. In fact, for many countries, China is a good role model¹⁸. Its attraction lies in

15 In 2020 Africa owed \$153 billion to China, which has provided more than 1,143 loans to governments on the continent over the past 22 years. For more information, see *La inversión de China en África*. EOM. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/prestamos-de-china-a-africa/>

16 *China's Role in COVID-19 in Africa: Tuánjié (Solidarity) or Zhànluè (Strategy)?* (2021). ACCORD. Available at: <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/chinas-role-in-covid-19-in-africa-tuanjie-solidarity-or-zhanlue-strategy/>

17 These are the findings of the Arab Barometer survey, conducted in 17 countries. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/ar/media-news>.

18 *يلودلا ماظنلا لىلع اهر يثأتو ةين يصل اقسايسلا يف ةيميقل داعبالا زيزعلا دب عدم ح م*. 2021 *يبرعلا يطارقميدلا زكرملا*

18 Abdelaziz, M. (2021). Valuable dimensions of Chinese politics and its impact on the international system. Democratic Arab Centre, 2021. Berlin. (Translation by author). In this article written in Arabic, the author argues the reasons behind some Arab governments' and peoples' consideration of China as a role model.

enhancing economic development while safeguarding the sovereignty and political independence of the partners.

Cooperation with China allows developing countries to accelerate economic progress that will enable them to remedy the problems of unemployment and poverty; factors responsible for the political and social stability of these countries.

For the latter, China is also a political and strategic opportunity. Cooperation with China enables political regimes to strengthen their legitimacy and ensure the survival of their governance systems in the face of foreign intervention in their internal affairs; it also facilitates the balance of power in their regions and puts strategic pressure on Western powers.

For all of the above reasons, making China a political and strategic partner for developing countries could be a long-term strategic option.

China's engagement in these regions is both substantial and prudent. Aware that the interests of the countries in the region are different, China does not opt for a one-size-fits-all policy, but adapts to the interests of each partner. Its approach to these countries can range from economic relations to enhanced political and military relations and, in many cases, evolves from economic and commercial to political and military. The cases of Djibouti, Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Zambia and Burkina-Faso stand out, with which China maintains close relations in terms of arms sales, military training and manoeuvres, including the construction and use of military bases (in the case of Djibouti)¹⁹.

China's military presence in Africa and the Mediterranean has increased considerably, especially after the launch of the Silk Road project in 2013. China has thus become the second-largest arms seller in Africa²⁰. In fact, Beijing builds and manages several ports in Africa, such as those in Namibia, the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Djibouti. The latter is the cornerstone in the construction of China's future military and intelligence projection complex. The Djibouti base is currently the hub of China's anti-piracy and humanitarian operations in the Gulf of Aden area. With the construction of this port, Beijing has

See also in this regard: AD489: Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations. Afro Barometer, 15 Nov 2021. Available at: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad489-africans-welcome-chinas-influence-maintain-democratic-aspirations/>

19 China instala base militar en Africa. *EL PAIS*, 02 December 2015. Available at: https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/12/02/africa_no_es_un_pais/1449039600_144903.html

'More Chinese Military Bases in Africa: A Question of When, Not If', *Foreign Policy*, 17 August 2022. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/16/china-military-bases-africa-navy-geo-politics-strategy/>

20 In total, China sells to 23 countries in Africa, diversifies its products. In addition to light weapons, it sells heavy weapons at attractive prices: battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers, patrol boats, aircraft, missiles, drones and artillery. It exports its K-8 training aircraft and its tactical drones and mini-drones, and does not refrain from selling to embargoed countries.

achieved a permanent presence and military projection in Africa and the Middle East²¹. In recent years, Beijing has redoubled its efforts to increase its military expansion in Africa. Around 2,000 Chinese troops are already permanently stationed at the base.

After Djibouti, other possible bases could see the light of day. China has several strategic partners on whose lands Beijing is building and managing ports, which regularly host the Chinese navy; mainly Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Angola, Namibia, Kenya, Seychelles and Tanzania. These countries participate in joint military exercises, and are China's main arms procurement partners²².

In 2014, an article by the Chinese Naval Research Institute mentioned China's interest in building seven ports internationally, including Djibouti, Seychelles, Tanzania, Kenya and Namibia. These ports are the subject of intense speculation in the Chinese media, but the government denies this²³.

In 2011, Beijing began to show its military might in Africa when, in the midst of the Libyan crisis, China sent a warship and military aircraft to evacuate more than 35,000 Chinese in the North African country. In March 2015, it evacuated about 600 Chinese nationals in Yemen. In these manoeuvres China used frigates with the latest guided missiles built by the country: the Xuzhou in Libya, the Linyi and the Weifang in Yemen.

These activities go hand in hand with China's increased Peacekeeping Operations in Africa. Beijing has become the second-largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa²⁴. China is currently the second-largest financial contributor to the UN. And it has contributed the most peacekeepers. The vast majority of Beijing-supported peacemaking have taken place in Africa²⁵.

Since 2008, China has deployed more than 40 naval operational forces in Africa, and escorted 7,000 ships abroad. All these activities are part of the strategy to gain more experience on this continent.

On this issue, China's 2015 Defence White Paper for the first time identified the protection of 'external interests' as a 'strategic mission' of the Chinese military. Subsequently, in 2019, this document acknowledged that China was developing

21 According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). 'Northern African countries were the primary destination of Chinese weapons, constituting 42 percent of Chinese exports to the continent'. How dominant is China in the global arms trade? (2018). Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 April 2018. <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-global-arms-trade/>

22 Nnqdege, R. L'Afrique dans la stratégie chinoise. *Revue Défense Nationale*. N.º 846, pp. 98-103.

23 Nantukya, P. (2022). Consideration relatives a une nouvelle base navale chinoise en Afriaque. Centre D Etudes Strategiaue de l Afrique, 27 mai 2022.

24 See the UN website. China is currently the second largest financial contributor to the UN. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/es/china>

25 Duggan, N. (2018). The Expanding Role of Chinese Peacekeeping in Africa. *Oxford Research Group*, [Accessed on: 2 December 2022]. Available at: <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/the-expanding-role-of-chinesepeacekeeping-in-africa>

'overseas logistics facilities to strengthen overseas support in emergencies, including assessments'²⁶. It is worth noting that Africa is home to more than 10,000 Chinese companies, one million Chinese and around 260,000 workers, most of whom are engaged in the framework of the Silk Road project.

China's military strategy also includes military exercises in several areas. In 2017, the naval group consisting of the destroyer *Ghangsha 173*, the frigate *Yincheng 571* and the logistics support ship *Lomahou* conducted target practice in the Mediterranean Sea, while conducting military exercises with Russia in the Baltic²⁷.

Beijing also relies on its intelligence apparatus in this projection policy, which is present in several African countries. The most active service in Africa is known as *Guoanbu*²⁸, which belongs to the Chinese Ministry of State Security. It has five regional coordination centres on the continent, with headquarters in Egypt, South Sudan, Nigeria, Angola, and South Africa. China also owns chains in Kenya and Mozambique.

This increase in military power is accompanied by political and diplomatic actions. Thanks to the pressure it exerted, China has managed and/or forced several African countries to break off diplomatic relations with Taiwan²⁹.

In order to protect its global trade and investment, China may decide in the future to develop its military intervention capabilities. Its growing interests in the region may also prompt it to intervene in conflicts in the region. Moreover, given its growing weight in the region, China would be in a position to ask its partners for political quid pro quos, at the expense of the interests of other actors. Beijing may also choose to support one partner or actor against others, which would foment latent conflicts.

Europe and NATO in the face of China's rise to power: challenges and opportunities

China's rising power in the world is fuelling Western powers' misgivings about Beijing's ability to rebuild the international economic, financial and strategic order in its favour³⁰.

26 China's Military Strategy. (2015). The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China%E2%80%99s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf>

27 Las maniobras ruso-china 2017 en el mar Báltico. Available at: <https://Articulo30.org/politica-defensa/maniobras-ruso-china-2017-baltico/?print=print>

28 *Ibid*, Abdelaziz, M.

29 Taiwan has now become an almost forgotten casualty of China's big drive into Africa. (2018). Institute for Security Studies. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/taiwan-has-lost-all-its-friends-in-africa-except-eswatini>

30 NATO. (2021). Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, 14 June 2021.

The West's reluctance stems mainly from China's exceptional financial and human capacity, which surpasses that of any other state. These capabilities allow Beijing to project its influence around the world, and to have a long-term vision that exceeds the forecasts and calculations of other states. Several indicators can justify this, including a GDP in permanent evolution (8.1% growth in 2021). In trade terms and according to the World Trade Organisation, China's share has increased from 5.9% to 15.2% between 2003 and 2020, overtaking the United States, which has fallen from 9.8% to 8.4%. Not to mention its rapidly growing military capability, making it second only to the United States in military spending³¹.

The rise of military and technological power is the main source of the West's misgivings. In this sense, arms sales to third countries, as well as the transfer of innovative defensive technology, Sino-Russian cooperation, technological competition, and hybrid threats, can upset the balance of power in various world regions, at the expense of Western international powers, which want to maintain the current international order built after the Cold War.

At political level, Western countries also see China's authoritarian regime as a threat. China's constant violations of human rights and international law, along with Beijing's opposition to economic liberalism, its coercive economic approach and diplomatic intimidation, and the disinformation it 'practices', are threats no less important than the achievements of democracy and the liberal system.

China's rise to power presents the EU and NATO with a major geopolitical challenge, forcing them to adjust their strategic calculations. Its growing presence in the Western powers' perimeter of strategic interest reinforces the latter's misgivings about China's intentions. At the same time, however, for many European countries China is an important trading partner and investor.

The United States in the face of China's rise to power: the first strategic concern

Under the Obama administration, and even more so in the Trump era and now under Biden, US-China rivalry has continued to grow³². In the face of China's

³¹ World Bank, see data at <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>

³² Joe Biden warns US faces 'decisive decade' in rivalry with China. (2022). *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/c9011130-a119-40d5-beb9-a09e7faff2e1>

DoD. (2020). Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community 2021. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 9 April 2021.

exponential ambitions in the world, the United States seeks to strengthen its presence and alliances to protect its interests, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, the most dynamic economic and trade region in the world.

Unlike NATO and the EU, the language used in the US to describe what China means for US interests is very clear and blunt. Official strategic concepts and reports from US institutions, as well as studies by prestigious research centres, rank China as an existential threat to the United States, on par with the threats posed by Russia, Iran and North Korea. In particular, China's militarisation to re-establish its pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific region fuels Washington's misgivings³³.

According to the current US naval strategy *Advantage at Sea*³⁴, China's continued modernisation of its naval forces, militarisation of islands in the China Sea, substantial build-up of its maritime police and militia apparatus, establishment of military agreements with several countries to project its interests around the world, cyber-attacks and the proliferation of strategic or related technologies³⁵, constitute complex and exponential threats that undermine US alliances and disrupt the current world order. For these reasons, the new US strategy envisages evolving into a future force capable of controlling the seas, projecting power and dominating the oceans³⁶.

Regarding China's economic expansion policy, US experts believe that Beijing seeks to secure access to critical resources and create a polarised 'economic network' in its favour³⁷. For Washington, the threat is that Beijing could exploit the economic dependence of these countries to obtain political quid pro quos³⁸.

In the face of these alarming forecasts, Washington continues its international efforts to contain Beijing's expansion. NATO could be a useful instrument and, consequently, the Alliance's new strategic objective incorporates the implicit goal of containing China's rise to power. In this sense, the United States is trying to pressure its European allies to realise their material commitment to contain China³⁹, as

33 "The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy". (2021). *Atlantic Council Strategy Papers*. The Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/The-Longer-Telegram-Toward-A-New-American-China-Strategy.pdf>

34 *Advantage at Sea, Prevailing All Domain Naval Power*. (December 2020). Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/16/2002553074/-1/-1/0/TRISERVICESTRATEGY.PDF>

35 This technology is also used in the military industry and intelligence services. We refer here mainly to 5G, Artificial Intelligence, and some companies such as Huawei,

36 DoD. (2020). Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

37 Annual Threat Assessment Of the Intelligence Community 2021. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 9 April 2021.

38 *Op. cit.*

39 Henrik, L. (2020), *China's rise can unite Nato*. Vol8/13, December 2020. Zurich, CSS.

Washington considers it illogical that an Alliance in which it invests massively is of no use in mitigating the risk posed by its primary strategic concern.

So far, the US has tried various policies to enlist the contribution of Europeans to its strategy. Following Trump's policy of pressure and rupture, Biden has opted to reconcile the two visions in order to reach an agreement on the distribution of roles. Washington is looking to European allies to compensate for US withdrawal and force reductions in certain regions of the world, such as the Middle East and the Mediterranean, where China is strengthening its presence. This support will allow the US to focus its efforts in the Asia-Pacific to rival China's growing presence and influence. This is why Washington —through the so-called Quad alliance— is strengthening strategic and economic ties with the main players in this region, namely Australia, Japan, South Korea and India⁴⁰.

The European Union between defending its Atlantic link and China's attractive opportunities

US-China rivalry is deeply divisive within NATO. The position of the Europeans is controversial. In the words of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrel, "China is a strategic partner with whom the EU shares partly convergent objectives" but, at the same time, "it is a systematic adversary"⁴¹.

EU member states are reticent about the US strategy of containment of China, and also about the Europeans' strategy of compensating for US withdrawal in some parts of the world. Europe, however, wants the United States to remain —in the NATO framework— committed to Europe's security.

The EU believes that the US perception of the threat posed by China is exaggerated. This position is indirectly reflected in statements by European leaders, especially France, whose President Emmanuel Macron declared in his address to the 75th UN General Assembly that "The world today cannot be reduced to the rivalry between China and the United States, irrespective of the global weight of these great powers". He thus called for multilateralism, rather than the policy of containment that Washington calls for⁴². European experts believe that deeper knowledge about China is needed so as not to be dependent on the US view. Experts also consider that Europe's vision should not

⁴⁰ Mario, E. (coord.). (2021). España ante la rivalidad estratégica entre China y Estados Unidos. ELCANO. GROUP RAND.

⁴¹ Statements by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrel. (2021). Service Diplomatique de l'Union Européenne, 8 September 2021. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/chine-le-haut-repr%C3%A9sentantvice-pr%C3%A9sident-josep-borrell-et-le-conseiller-d%C3%A9tatministre-des_fr

⁴² Watch the speech in the video available at: <https://www.europe1.fr/international/macron-a-lon-le-monde-ne-peut-pas-se-resumer-a-la-rivalite-entre-la-chine-et-les-etats-unis-3993634>

seek to please Washington as its supreme goal, but rather its own security and interests in its immediate perimeter⁴³.

Europe's pragmatic position is rooted in the economic and commercial interests that bind it to China; China is the EU's largest trading partner. As its economy is heavily dependent on trade (44% of GDP)⁴⁴, Europe sees China as a vital partner, especially in terms of technology, hydrogen production and artificial intelligence.

China is also a major investor in the old continent. The European Union is China's second most important investment destination. Recent years have seen a setback due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however as of the end of 2021 Chinese investments in Europe increased by 33%⁴⁵, a figure four times lower compared to 2016, but a rapid recovery is expected in the future. The top five countries receiving investment from the Asian giant are the UK, Germany and France, followed by Portugal and Italy⁴⁶.

Chinese investments in infrastructure in the Mediterranean and Africa are also in line with the interest of the European market. These infrastructures make it possible to reduce maritime transport times and costs, and thus to keep imports from China competitive on the European market.

Based on the above, Europe cannot do without a major partner to align itself with Washington's antagonistic policy. On the other hand, despite the economic and commercial interest, investments in submarine cables⁴⁷ and port construction and management fuel European misgivings about the nature of these activities. A recent report by the think tank C4ADS⁴⁸ underlined that under a new law in China, all commercial ports are obliged to provide logistical support to their country's armed forces, if requested. The implementation of these projects by Chinese state-owned enterprises further reinforces European reticence⁴⁹.

43 Several works have been published defending this view, including Ekman, A. (2018). *La Chine en Méditerranée : une présence émergente*. Note de l'Ifri, February 2018.

Edgar J. G. and Roald, H. L. (2018). *The new sea people: China in the Mediterranean*. Instituto Affari Internazionali, *IAIPapere* 18/14 July 2018, p. 12.

44 See Eurostat. *Archive le commerce international de bien*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Archive:Le_commerce_international_de_biens#Forte_progression_du_commerce_de_biens_avec_la_Chine_entre_2009_et_2019

45 Chinese FDI in Europe: 2021 Update, Mercator Institute for China Studies. April 2022. Available at: <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2021-update#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20Chinese%20VC%20investment,%2C%20gaming%2C%20AI%20and%20robotics.>

46 Roald, H. L. *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

47 Referring to the Huawei cables; Hannabal linking Tunisia to Italy, and another cable linking Libya to Greece.

48 Thorne, D. and Spevak, B. (2017). *Harbored Ambitions. How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific*. Washington, C4ADS. <https://c4ads.org/s/HarboredAmbitions.pdf>.

49 *Op. cit.*, Devin, T. and Ben Spevack, H.

The other major suspicion relates to China's joint military exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean. The US regional pivot to the Asia-Pacific has reduced Washington's availability to contribute to security in Europe. This means that Europeans must rely more on their capabilities to ensure their security vis-à-vis Russia.

Europe is arguably under direct pressure from the United States and indirect pressure from China. Such pressures will become more acute in the future if the confrontation between Washington and Beijing escalates. In a worst-case scenario, the United States could invoke Article 5 of the NATO Treaty to force European Allies to engage militarily against China⁵⁰.

NATO's China strategy: Analysis of NATO's Strategic Concept 2022

The divide between US and European perceptions or approaches to China has been made clear in official NATO documents as well as in statements by NATO representatives. The starting point is the 2020 report by the Reflection Group set up by the Secretary of the Alliance at the request of Allied leaders following the 2019 London Summit to reflect on how to strengthen the Atlantic Alliance⁵¹.

In a 67-page document, the report mentioned China more than seventy times and in various threat contexts, describing China as a systemic threat. The document links China to threats of terrorism, transnational threats, the ideological threat, the threat of the New Silk Road project itself, the threat of climate change, the threat of China's influence in the Middle East and its strategic agreement with Iran, the threat it poses to extra-atmospheric space, among others. It often mentions China along with Russia, although the phrase is to a *lesser extent* if frequently used when comparing China to Russia to avoid equating what the latter means to NATO with what China means. Overall, the paper concluded that China represents challenges but at the same time opportunities for NATO. It adds that China poses a very different challenge from Russia.

The paper reveals that China does not pose a direct military threat to the Atlantic Alliance; however, its global strategic agenda, along with its global economic and military weight, are sources of concern for the West. According to this report, Beijing's readiness to use force on its strategic perimeter, its policy of economic coercion and diplomatic intimidation, the modernisation of its military power and its projection into the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Arctic—especially the of its naval forces—, its nuclear weapons and missiles, and its strengthened defence ties with Russia, represent potential threats to the Alliance's strategic stability and its collective resilience to protect its interests⁵².

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, Mario, E. (coord.).

⁵¹ NATO 2030. (2020). *United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General*. Pp.17-18, 25 November 2020.

⁵² *Ibid.*

To meet these challenges, the report recommended that Allies coordinate more closely, develop capabilities to anticipate and react to China's hostile actions towards the Alliance, devote more resources and time to understanding what China is doing, and bring Allies and other institutions and partners together to exchange information and share experiences. And, above all, to keep the path of dialogue with China open.

The prominence given to China in the Reflection Group paper, as well as in official US documents, policy debates, official statements and Western think-tank work foreshadowed that NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept will be more forceful and clearer in its reference to China, going so far as to describing China as the main threat, equating it with the threat posed by Russia to the Alliance. However, it seems that the outbreak of war in Ukraine has forced NATO to backtrack, recalculate, and reaffirm the goal of the Alliance's creation, which was to contain Russia.

In a 14-page document, the 2022 Strategic Concept⁵³ devoted only two paragraphs to describing what China means for NATO: points 13 and 14, as well as mentioning China only seven times and in fewer threat contexts compared to the 2020 Reflection Group paper.

As anticipated, the Concept incorporated the conclusions of the Reflection Group's report; confirming that China represents a systemic challenge to Euro-Atlantic security. Allies see China's stated ambitions and coercive policies as challenging NATO's interests, security and values. The Strategic Concept described the reasons for China's perceived threat and argues that China employs a wide range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global presence and project power, while its strategy, intentions and military development remain opaque. The paper also notes that China's hybrid and cyber operations, described as malicious, and its confrontational and disinformation rhetoric, target Allies and undermine Alliance security.

The Strategic Concept also sees China seeking to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure and strategic materials and supply chains. It underlined the rapid development of nuclear capabilities and delivery vehicles, the lack of goodwill and willingness to strengthen transparency, and the partnership with the international arms control system.

The Allies see China as using its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies. The Concept deems that China is subverting the international order, especially in the cyber and maritime fields. In addition, the Concept echoed the Alliance's misgivings about the increasingly close strategic partnership between China and Russia, which it argued undermines the international order, values and interests of the Allies.

In point 14, the Concept reveals that the Allies remain open to constructive engagement with China, including to generate reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance's security interests. At the same time, it demonstrates Allies'

⁵³ NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>

willingness to work together to address the systemic challenges China poses to Euro-Atlantic security, ensure NATO's ability to defend and secure Allies, improve resilience against China's coercive tactics and efforts to divide the Alliance, and defend shared values and the international rules-based order, including freedom of navigation.

Conclusion

We are facing a complex dynamic of clash and competition. On the one hand, China seeks to become an international economic and military power, which sees US actions as an obstacle to its development and a threat to its political system. Meanwhile, the United States sees China's rise in power and influence in the world as a challenge to the international order and its leadership position. The EU shares US reticence, but cannot forgo the economic and trade opportunities offered by China. African countries view cooperation with China as an opportunity for their economic development, increased strategic influence, competition vis-à-vis the West and balance of power in the international order.

Rivalry between Washington and Beijing is intensifying. Disputes over trade, technology, the South China Sea, Taiwan's legal and international plight and Hong Kong's loss of rights are recent examples of deteriorating relations with global implications. The United States is determined to counter China's power in the Pacific through its sustained political, economic and military presence. While Beijing is aware that the US is firm in its policy of containment, it wants Washington to renounce its policy, but at the same time continues to pursue its strategy of strengthening military capabilities and increasing offensive geo-economic capabilities, reinforcing its strategic position in global supply chains and expanding its influence in international maritime trade routes.

Both Washington and Beijing are working to avoid a rise in tensions that seems difficult. While for China confrontation with the US —albeit limited— is counterproductive, for Washington, military response could be the ultimate solution to contain China and its growing interests in the world. Détente is difficult because the more powerful and influential China becomes, the more the United States hardens its responses.

Finally, the fact that NATO's Strategic Concept 2022 refrains from describing China as the main threat and does not propose containment action, means the Alliance accepts that the current dynamics of rivalry and competition will continue. On the other hand, at a time when NATO was expected to take a clearer stance on China, describing it as a direct threat to the Alliance, like Russia, the outbreak of war in Ukraine has forced NATO to backtrack and reinforce the objective of the Alliance's creation, which was to contain Russia.

Western powers are increasingly aware that China's strength lies both in its evolving domestic capabilities and in cooperation with developing countries. These two elements of power remain unchanged and are not threatened by the possible use of

force, so China is likely to continue to increase its power. The question of whether China can match the US as a superpower or even achieve global hegemony therefore depends primarily on China itself and not on opposition from the US and its allies.

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