

EBBS AND TIDES IN NATO-CHINA RELATIONS

Ambassador (R) Fatih CEYLAN, Former Deputy Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Permanent Representative of Turkey to NATO

Ambassador (R) Tacan ILDEM, Chairman of EDAM, NATO former Assistant Secretary General and former Permanent Representative of Turkey to NATO

EBBS AND TIDES IN NATO-CHINA RELATIONS

Ambassador (R) Fatih CEYLAN, Former Deputy Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Permanent Representative of Turkey to NATO

Ambassador (R) Tacan ILDEM, Chairman of EDAM, NATO former Assistant Secretary General and former Permanent Representative of Turkey to NATO

The rising Chinese power with its global reach is expanding gradually to the European continent, and NATO territory itself. It is widely perceived that with its ever-strengthening authoritarian tendencies and strategic ideological goals China poses serious challenges to Western democratic societies in different domains, including security. China aspires to become the world leader in artificial intelligence by 2030 and the world's superpower with its economic heft and military might by 2049. On the other hand, China is investing on advanced technological assets and acquiring key infrastructures through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Europe, also with the aim of promoting its political influence. Therefore, China can no longer be treated as a rising economic power located in a distant geography with its purely regional security role. Its presence is felt more and more not only in the European continent, including in areas like the Arctic and the Mediterranean Sea, but in a gradually increased fashion also in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with potential consequences for NATO's southern neighbourhood as well.

Given the increasing systemic geopolitical competition among the U.S., Russia, and China, it may sound anathematic to many to focus on untapped potentials inherent in the evolution of NATO-China relations. But this should be seen as essential at a time when the going gets rough.

NATO-China encounter ushered in with a tragic event on 7th May 1999 resulting in the bombardment of the Chinese Embassy compound in Belgrade during the Kosovo campaign.¹

In the eyes of the Chinese, that was a deliberate act committed by the U.S. which American authorities denied. The thorough investigation done after the incident demonstrated that it happened by accident, and therefore a big mistake. That mistake and the trauma it caused left an indelible print in the minds of Chinese authorities in their approach to NATO. The ebb thus created still surfaces on different occasions when dealing with China to address NATO-China relations.

1 Daniel Williams, "Missiles hit Chinese Embassy," Washington Post Foreign Service, May 8, 1999. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/belgrade050899.htm>

The downturn of that sad episode was that it occurred when NATO was developing a web of partnerships initially in its immediate vicinity and even beyond and it was readying itself for enlargement.

9/11 and NATO intervention changed the international security landscape and on the heels of the Afghanistan crisis the scene was set for the first contact between NATO and China in 2002 when NATO Secretary General of the time, Lord Robertson, welcomed the Chinese Ambassador at NATO HQ.

Since then, that is, in two decades, there have been eleven high level contacts between NATO and China, the latest being the virtual meeting between Stoltenberg of NATO and the Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on 26th September 2021.

Despite the increasing level of strategic rivalry now taking the centerstage the average of contacts with China has almost been on a biannual basis and sporadic in nature. And this haphazard practice does not befit the current state of affairs dominating the international scene.

The odyssey of China from a developing country with a vast capacity to becoming a global power and the implications of that process for the security domain is worth elaborating. The rise of China and its “place under the sun” started to appear in earnest in the U.S. national security, defence and military strategies during the Trump administration.² Those strategies guided the U.S. official thinking and echoed in the academic world as well as strategic communities and think tank activities.

This topic was also addressed in informal NATO consultations, albeit very infrequently, on the basis of strategy papers and rare analyses/commentaries³ produced within the Alliance much before the 2019 NATO London Summit. Consequently, the subject matter did not come out of the blue. The strong remarks made by U.S. Foreign Secretary Pompeo in April 2019 during the NATO Foreign Ministerial Meeting at Washington D.C. was a manifestation of the U.S. approach to China on the heels of the London Summit in December of

the same year.⁴

A closer look at the U.S. strategy documents made public in 2017-2018 clearly demonstrates the U.S.’ shift of focus to the Asia(Indo)-Pacific region addressing China as the primary competitor. The order of priority in those strategic documents starts with China followed by Russia, and other asymmetrical threats like terrorism.

The letter and spirit of the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance issued by the Biden administration in March 2021 do not disclaim what was adopted by the previous U.S. administration. On the contrary, it reinforces the basic premises of the preceding set of strategic thinking.⁵

The Interim Guidance describes China as an ‘assertive and competitive’ power preceding Russia and depicts Russia as ‘playing a disruptive role on the world stage.’ Such descriptions may be seen as appealing. But the prima donna in that Guidance is China in comparative terms, a fact to be reckoned with.

When China started to appear in the U.S. strategic documents many security experts detected a potential for a division between the U.S. and the European Allies. They were basing their predictions on the assumption that the U.S. would be more and more exposed to the security challenges that China could pose in the Asia-Pacific region while the European Allies would be entertaining critical economic ties with China, thus leading to a differentiated perception of China among Allies. Indeed, the BRI was perceived by Europeans as more of an economic project than a geopolitical challenge. At the same time the activities of technologically advanced Chinese companies were meant to build a digital sphere of influence by non-military means like the 5G network which would constitute the backbone of the communications and control needed for water supplies, power grids, transport and infrastructures. A friction was sensed between the U.S. and those European Allies who were striving to acquire 5G network through cooperation with the Chinese hi-tech companies. In any case it would be safe to say that NATO, being a regional organisation, will not engage militarily in the Asia-Pacific region and Wash-

2 National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Available at <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf>

3 Fatih Ceylan, “Brain dead? No, but NATO needs a new Strategic Concept”, European Leadership Network. Available at <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/brain-dead-no-but-nato-needs-a-new-strategic-concept/>

4 Lesley Wroughton, David Brunnstrom, “Pompeo calls on NATO to adapt to new threats from Russia, China”, Reuters. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-idUSKCN1RG1JZ>

5 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2>.

ington is not asking NATO to give such support to the U.S.⁶. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of these existing and potential differences with respect to the way they approach the China question the U.S. was trying to convince its Allies to speak with one voice against Chinese policies that it believed threaten the interests of the Alliance. That said, the way in which China is addressed at the London Summit of 2019 for the first time in NATO's history carries an important nuance compared to the U.S. strategy vis-à-vis China: 'We recognise that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance.'⁷ Not only the successful conduct of consultations among Allies throughout years but also China's international behaviour made it possible to agree on a language to reflect NATO's unified position vis-à-vis China. This behaviour, indeed, included China's use of economic coercion towards other countries, particularly those in Europe; the troublesome dependencies on China requiring new thinking on supply chains, export controls and technology; its assertive actions in the South China Sea; its growing nuclear weapons capability and ambitious military modernisation programme; its military cooperation with Russia, especially in the fields of defence technology and military training (although some may qualify this as a "marriage of convenience" at this stage); and domestically its repression of the ethnic Uighur population in Xinjiang.

In the London Summit Declaration, there is mention of both challenges and opportunities. The 'opportunities' part of the equation is what is lacking in the U.S. strategic documents. The Independent Experts Group established after the London Summit, within which one author of this article took place, prepared a key document entitled 'NATO 2030: United for a New Era'⁸ leading the way to NATO's Strategic Concept to be updated and adopted at the upcoming NATO Summit in June 2022.

The gist of the London Summit Declaration was reaffirmed in the NATO 2030 Report on the part devoted to China. In that report China was described as a strategic rival, but not as presenting an 'immediate military threat to the Euro-Atlantic

area on the scale of Russia', and not as an adversary to NATO.

The Report points to the need to explore channels of dialogue with China to mutually benefit from opportunities it would offer the Alliance and spells out a number of recommendations to that effect by stating that "NATO should keep open the prospect of political dialogue with China on shared interests and differences, for example in arms control. It should maintain contacts with China on issues of mutual interest; and proactively engage China's representatives when doing so is in NATO's interests. It should be open to engagement with China at different levels and to opportunities for cooperation, including considering establishing a deconfliction mechanism at the military level, should China's role in the Euro-Atlantic area warrant. In all of its actions toward China, NATO should continue to show that it has no quarrel with the Chinese people and that any actions it undertakes are defensive in nature and in response to the stated intentions or actions of the current Chinese Government".

Although recognised as a 'systemic challenger' to Alliance security in broader terms both at the G7 and the NATO Brussels Summit of June 2021, and despite the uproar caused by the two Summits' declarations on the part of China, there has been no serious attempt to address at length at least officially to concentrate on and elaborate the potential implications of engaging China in a periodic and focused dialogue by the Alliance to avoid misperceptions owned by certain NATO members and China itself.

It is worth noting that out of 79 paragraphs only two paragraphs appearing towards the end of the text were devoted to China in the 2021 NATO Brussels communique in a very nuanced manner compared to Russia.

The misstep of both sides could be to be driven to a mode of a Cold War mentality, which in practical terms, has been denied by the Alliance leaders on various occasions⁹.

The quest to launch a dialogue with China on a number of areas had not been disclaimed by NATO Secretary Gen-

6 Judy Dempsey, "Judy Asks: Is NATO Ready for China?", Carnegie Europe. Available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/84798>

7 NATO, "London Declaration. Available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm

8 NATO, "NATO 2030: United for a New Era, 25 November 2020. Available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

9 David M. Hers AND RYM MOMTAZ, "NATO leaders see rising threats from China, but not eye to eye with each other", Politico, June 14, 2021. Available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-leaders-see-rising-threats-from-china-but-not-eye-to-eye-with-each-other/>

eral Jens Stoltenberg.¹⁰ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi did not remain indifferent to Stoltenberg's call to initiate a dialogue between NATO and China so long as the dialogue 'continues on the basis of equality and mutual respect to promote the sound and steady development of relationship.'

That narrative to avoid a 'Cold War' and start a dialogue is in the right direction, there is a clear need for fleshing it out. For the Alliance the main sources of threat lie in the East (i.e. Russia) and the South (primarily terrorism) in its area of responsibility in a 360 degrees approach. These two strategic directions constitute the main axes of Alliance concerns and interests. China could be seen in a broader sense within the Alliance's area of interest presenting both challenges and opportunities given the increasing level of relations with the global partners lying in the Pacific rim, namely, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

In the humble opinion of the authors of this article, the NATO members do not have the luxury of suffering from the 'Bismarck syndrome of fighting in two separate fronts. At a time when a tendency to further the dialogue with China seems to flourish both on Track 1 and 2 activities at least at the conceptual level, it is worth proposing a number of policy recommendations on how to carry forward that dialogue between NATO and China in the following terms:

-It is undeniable there are a series of misperceptions coupled with lack of trust to deal with on both sides. NATO is now grappling with the challenge from the East owing to the Ukrainian crisis impacting on the Euro-Atlantic region. This will remain on the NATO agenda in the foreseeable future, probably in the medium-to-long term. Therefore, the Alliance and its members will have to factor in Russia in their calculus across the board. China, on the other hand, will have to weigh in its increased partnership with Russia in its dealings with the Alliance. The Russia-China joint statement issued during the recent visit of Putin to Beijing called on NATO to "abandon its ideologized Cold War approaches" and halt further enlargement of the Alliance. To what extent that will influence NATO-China dialogue remains to be seen. The question on whether such a complex situation lends itself to opportunities or restricts the room for flexibility is a fundamental issue to be analysed by both sides. To that effect, this topic could be addressed in a dialogue with China on

the grounds of transparency and risk mitigation.

-The areas of dialogue identified by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg such as China's nuclear arsenal, its military doctrine, reciprocal transparency, and arms control may seem ambitious in the initial instance. His suggestion to not attach any preconditions to the dialogue, however, is worth noting and in the right direction. Whether China would adopt such an agenda for dialogue is yet to be seen.

-There exists a past *acquis*, albeit modest, in NATO-China dialogue over the last twenty years. That 'accumulated knowledge' could provide a better frame to identify a less ambitious agenda to start with. The topics to include in a mutually determined "road-map" could be maritime security, counterterrorism, transparency/risk reduction measures, climate change, best practises in fighting pandemics, sharing of perceptions on regional challenges faced by NATO and China in their respective areas.¹¹ The process of dialogue should be incremental in nature and its rhythm should be ad-justed accordingly. A fast track should be avoided against the backdrop of misperceptions and biases still dominating the scene. It should be preferable to build upon the past *acquis* to carry the process further with a view to enhancing the grounds of situational awareness on a reciprocal basis.

-Leaving the dialogue to run its own course is a non-starter. It should have an institutional frame to reinforce the dialogue. For this purpose, a NATO-China Consultative Group or Joint Working Group could be conceived of in the medium term. Opening liaison offices in Brussels and Beijing, on the other hand, would be a good option, if materialised in the not-too-distant future.

-Track 2 initiatives by time could evolve to Track 1,5 (to include officials) to reinforce and expand the scope of the formal dialogue between NATO and China.

-While NATO devotes more time, political resources and action to the security challenges posed by China including through consultations among allies and with NATO's Asia-Pacific partners and the EU, a dialogue process between NATO and China, in line with the Alliance's ambition to strengthen its political dimension, could offer conducive grounds for triggering a trilateral dialogue among NATO

10 NATO, "NATO Secretary General meets virtually with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi", 27 September 2021. Available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_186940.htm

11 Center for Strategic Decision Research and China Institute for International Strategic Studies, NATO-CHINA Relations: Charting the Way Forward. Available at <http://csdr.org/2022%20Events/NATO-China%20Relations%201032021.pdf>

(that includes the U.S.), China, and the EU. An endeavour to this end would serve the purpose of increased multilateralism for all. China could also benefit from such a dialogue platform as one of the champions of active multilateralism.

-The current security challenges are valid and relevant for NATO members and China. But so are the opportunities of expanding the communications channels on a reciprocal basis. Hence the clear need for striking the right balance between challenges and opportunities to build trust and mitigate the adverse implications of competition. A dual track involving both sides of the coin will remain on the global agenda. The objective under such an equation should be to reach a *modus vivendi* not nurturing confrontational stances

on each and every issue, but to seek common grounds for further dialogue.

In less than two months the EU will adopt its Strategic Compass. In June NATO will adopt its Strategic Concept. In that immediate period ahead, it would be in the interest of both NATO and China to strengthen the grounds of dialogue in a reciprocal and pragmatic manner. Absent dialogue, challenges that exist are destined to prevail in the scene and obscure the opportunities to reap. A 'tidal wave', albeit in a small proportion, is needed for dialogue to ease the ever-increasing mutual distrust and lack of understanding.



Foreign Policy & Security 2022/01/EN

February 2022

Ebbs and Tides in NATO-China Relations

Ambassador (R) Fatih CEYLAN, Former Deputy Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Permanent Representative of Turkey to NATO

Ambassador (R) Tacan ILDEM, Chairman of EDAM, NATO former Assistant Secretary General and former Permanent Representative of Turkey to NATO