

A NEW NATO ROADMAP TOWARDS RISING CHINESE HEGEMONY

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With more than 70 years of experience protecting democracy and ensuring the safeguard of its shared values in the interest of peacekeeping, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) must now define new strategies to tackle future challenges that have emerged over the last two decades. In its current role, not limited to the defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, the Alliance must overcome the current standoff among its members and carefully define its new priorities.

The illusion of the “end of history”, defined by Francis Fukuyama in the nineties, has been upended by the events of 9/11. From that day, hope for a Western and American unipolarism has crashed with the “clash of civilizations” formula, envisaged by Samuel Huntington. After the stillness of the Cold War era, dominated by a rigid bipolar logic, the everlasting “Stately Quadrille” has resumed its natural path, though discovering new alternatives to the traditional alliances. Indeed, the new role played by emerging powers in the global arena cannot be neglected. Quoting Fareed Zakaria, the secular “Rise of the West” has given way to the “Rise of the Rest”.

A major challenge and concern for the future is a risk of confrontation with China as a new emerging superpower over three separate but deeply interconnected regions, namely Africa, the Pacific, and the Arctic. The African continent with its massive natural and human resources should be a main focal point for the Alliance. African Countries have become a potential new battlefield for future years and their security should be a top priority for NATO members, since the stability of Europe’s southern flank affects the whole Alliance and not just the most geographically exposed member States.

Beijing’s interests in Africa are increasing at a fast pace. Given the high risk of mishandling the rising instability of African States alongside China’s run for hegemony, the Alliance must carefully weigh its options in the region. At first glance, it looks like NATO could address the aforementioned issues in two main ways. First, it could continue to assume an active role in current partnerships with African Countries through counter-terrorism activities, intelligence sharing agreements, military operations and missions and training of armed forces. This would encourage stable and effective governments, congruent with the interests and values of NATO countries, and serve as a base for the expansion of democracy through the creation of democratic societies. Second, as the Alliance cannot compete with Chinese investment in Africa, cultivating a partnership with China in Africa while containing the rise of its political influence could be the best alternative

to Beijing holding a proverbial *carte blanche* in the region. In this theoretical partnership, NATO could assume responsibility for the defence and security of African countries, making them stable and more supportive of transatlantic values, while at the same time offering China a secure ground on which to grow its business.

Although Chinese influence over Africa is alarming, NATO allies must not fail to prioritize cooperation with their partners on the Indian Ocean and South China Sea as well. To quote Julian Lindley-French, a member of the Strategic Advisory Group of the Atlantic Council, many forget that NATO is not just an organisation for the American-led defence of Europe. Indeed, by including the United States and Canada, it also has a clear Pacific vocation. Therefore, the Alliance cannot interpret literally articles 5 and 6 of the Atlantic Charter by concentrating its attention over the territory of its member States, but must also conceive of “non-article 5” missions, taking a cue from the findings of the Rome Summit in 1991.

In the coming years, the Pacific and its neighbouring seas will be the arena of a major competition between Beijing and Washington. In a context in which each side would like to be the winner of a zero-sum game, the strengthening of connections among old and new partners becomes crucial. Most notably, the Indian friendship could guarantee NATO naval presence straddling the East and West. This could help to stem Chinese plans over Pakistan. Indeed, President Xi Jinping's aim is to avoid a possible Western block on the strait of Malacca. For this purpose, China is investing in Pakistan and especially the Port of Gwadar, which is fundamental for the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC). The Pakistan government is thus slowly entering the Chinese zone of influence. In this frame, cooperation with India becomes critical for NATO countries. As the United States has understood, cooperation with the State with the second largest population on Earth is something we cannot ignore. To quote the new US Ambassador to India, Ken Juster, «a strategic view of our economic relationship could eventually lead to a roadmap for a US-India Free Trade Agreement». Looking towards the future, NATO naval fleets could develop a better cooperation with the Indian Navy, thereby empowering interoperability among them in naval operations. Eventually, this strategy could lead to a solid Western presence in a strategic area amidst Africa and China.

Last, but not least, is the role played by the new sea route through the Arctic territories. The effects of global warming are shocking and bring with them a sombre reality: the Poles are melting. The Arctic, with its natural resources, has already been claimed by its neighbouring Countries, the “Arctic Five”. The northernmost inhabited place on Earth, the Svalbard Islands, currently belongs to Norway, a NATO member who has focused a great part of its foreign policy in this area, fueling some friction with Russia.

Yet, the “Arctic Five” are not the only ones interested in the new Arctic corridor. China, defining itself a “near-Arctic State”, has already announced in the White Paper *China’s Arctic Policies* (2018) its intention to create a “polar silk road” that would allow Chinese ships to save many days of navigation reaching Europe and, most importantly, circumvent a hypothetical naval block through the strait of Malacca. NATO must therefore carve out a domain for itself in the Arctic region out of necessity to control the security of the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). In order to achieve this result, a dialogue with Russia becomes fundamental, as Russia owns 6000 km of Arctic coast and is therefore the main player in the region.

In conclusion, the future priorities of NATO must place a careful focus on preserving the present geographic balance of power while continuing to cultivate development in line with the interests and values of its members. Member Countries of NATO must make a conscientious decision to move beyond the current standoff in light of the potential destabilizing influence of China’s rising status. Moreover, rather than conceiving of China and, to a different extent, Russia, as opposition, a more prudent course of action may involve cooperation in order to keep “friends close and enemies closer” as a way to maintain these global superpowers in check.