

China-NATO Relations: History and Reality



YI SHAOXUAN *

Master's Student
Shanghai University

YANG CHEN **

Assoc. Prof.
Shanghai University

**Yi Shaoxuan is a master's candidate majoring in Political Science at the College of Liberal Arts and a research assistant at the Center for Turkish Studies at Shanghai University. Her research fields include China-Türkiye Relations and Turkish Election Politics.*

***Yang Chen is an Associate Professor in the Department of History of Shanghai University's College of Liberal Arts and Executive Director of the Centre for Turkish Studies at Shanghai University. He has published two books about Türkiye and several papers in journals such as Critical Sociology, Sociology of Islam, Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly, and Arab World Research. His main research areas are political Islamic movements in Türkiye, party politics in Türkiye, Türkiye's foreign policy, and China-Türkiye relations.*

E-mail: ycwf2008@163.com

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4840-6427>

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 70 years, the relationship between China and NATO has undergone the following stages: isolation and hostility (1949-1972), strategic collaboration (1972-1989), political opponents (from 1989 to early 21st century), and engagement and dialogue (2002-2020). After the Cold War, NATO continued to develop towards globalization. Its policies and actions gradually extended from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Middle East, Central Asia, and Asia Pacific, intervening in Asian affairs. With the United States' strategic contraction from the Middle East and withdrawal from Afghanistan, the "Asian version of NATO" has become a tool created by the United States to curb China's rise. However, EU countries, India, ASEAN, Japan, and others may not necessarily remain united with the United States. China will continue to develop itself, but at the same time, it will also maintain cautious contact, dialogue, and cooperation with NATO.

Keywords: China, great power competition, NATO, United States, Asia version of NATO

Introduction

AFTER THE COLD WAR, DUE TO THE disintegration of the Soviet Union as its biggest rival, NATO faced a crisis of legitimacy. To this end, NATO began to shape new legitimacy through transformation. In this process, NATO began to attach importance to member expansion and non-traditional security challenges, hoping to transform from a security community to a political community in the new international environment. In addition to military cooperation, it also provides a platform for political exchanges and consultation between the two sides of the Atlantic, with the intention of seeking new sources of legitimacy for itself.

In 2014, the relationship between NATO and Russia became tense, and in this context, China's

rise also sparked tension between the United States and its allies. The rupture of NATO-Russia relations and the intensification of Sino-US frictions have sparked debates about a "new Cold War". Within this context, the United States hopes that NATO can be a powerful tool to resist China's rise, especially to create an "Asian version of NATO" to contain China. Following this, the relationship between China and NATO has become a question worth exploring.

Under this background, this article includes the following parts: firstly, the four stages of the development of China-NATO relations; secondly, NATO's intervention in Asian affairs; thirdly, the creation of the "Asian version of NATO"; and fourthly, the impossibility of the "Asian version of NATO".

Historical Evolution of the Relationship between China and NATO

Of the five permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations, China has the most distant relationship with NATO since they have been hostile to each other since their birth in 1949. What's more, since they are geographically distant from each other, China and NATO have long lacked direct interaction and contact. But as two important international players, China and NATO have also influenced each other explicitly or implicitly. Over the past 70 years, the two sides have had their share of hostility, collaboration, fierce clashes and communications (Ze & Wei, 2020). Yet, currently, the two face a more serious confrontation. The history of the relationship between the two sides can be broadly divided into the following phases:

Phase One: Isolation and Hostility (1949-1972)

NATO was established in April 1949 with the aim of “keeping the Germans down”, “keeping the Russians out”, and “keeping the Americans in” (Wei, 2013). But the primary aim of the US in forming NATO was to unite the Western European countries and contain the growth of the communist movement in Europe, represented by the Soviet Union. Similarly, NATO also regarded the newly established China as a proxy for the Soviet Union in East Asia, especially since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Then, the US declared China a ‘hostile country’ and imposed a total ban on all US exports to China, forbidding US ships from docking at Chinese ports and restricting Chinese exports to the US.

At the same time, the NATO-controlled Coordinating Committee for Export to Communist Countries formed the “China Committee” in 1952, which imposed an

embargo on China that was twice as strong as the one imposed on the Soviet Union, which was only lifted in 1957. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, its foreign policy was “one-sided” and allied with the Soviet Union. Hence, its view on NATO was entirely negative, considering it an “aggressive North Atlantic bloc” and condemning its actions.

Phase Two: Strategic Collaboration (1972-1989)

The international situation changed significantly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Firstly, the US and the Soviet Union had reached a terrifying balance of military power. Secondly, China and the Soviet Union parted ways due to ideological differences, and there was even a possibility of war between the two sides. Thirdly, the United States was stuck in the mire of the Vietnam War and forced to implement a strategic contraction. Against this background, the visit of President Richard Nixon to China in 1972 opened the door to Sino-American contacts and brought about a major change in Sino-American-Russian relations.

At this time, China even considered that the Soviet Union had replaced the US as the greatest security threat, and its diplomatic strategy changed from “Fight with two fists” (namely, fighting the US and the Soviet Union simultaneously) to “One Battle Line, One Large Area”. One Battle Line refers to the United States, Japan, China, Pakistan, Iran, Türkiye and Europe. At the same time, one large area refers to the United States, Japan and all the countries that can be united against Soviet Union's expansionist momentum.

In 1974, Chairman Mao Zedong proposed the Three-World Theory, arguing that Europe and NATO member countries such as Canada belong to the Second World, with which China could unite.

The common need to confront the Soviet Union led China and NATO to form a de facto strategic collaboration during this period. At this time, NATO members became China's main suppliers of foreign weapons, although there was no formal correspondence between the two sides.

Phase Three: Political Opponent (1989-2002)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the common ground for cooperation between China and NATO was disappearing, while a huge gap in the ideological sphere came to the fore. Sino-American and Sino-European relations cooled sharply. The US began to ban arms exports and military technology transfers to China. In particular, the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia on 8 May 1999, in which three Chinese journalists died, was the first frontal conflict between China and NATO. This incident provoked strong protests among the Chinese people and caused China's relations with NATO to fall (Xiong, 2000). In addition, low-level official contacts that had been maintained until then were broken. Russia also changed its Soviet-era hostility to the West and began to seek membership in NATO. Eventually, a 'cold peace' between Russia and the West emerged as NATO expanded eastwards. Russia, as a result, gradually shifted from being entirely pro-Western to an East-West 'double-headed eagle' policy. Against this backdrop, it became a consensus between Russia and China to work together strategically to safeguard their interests.

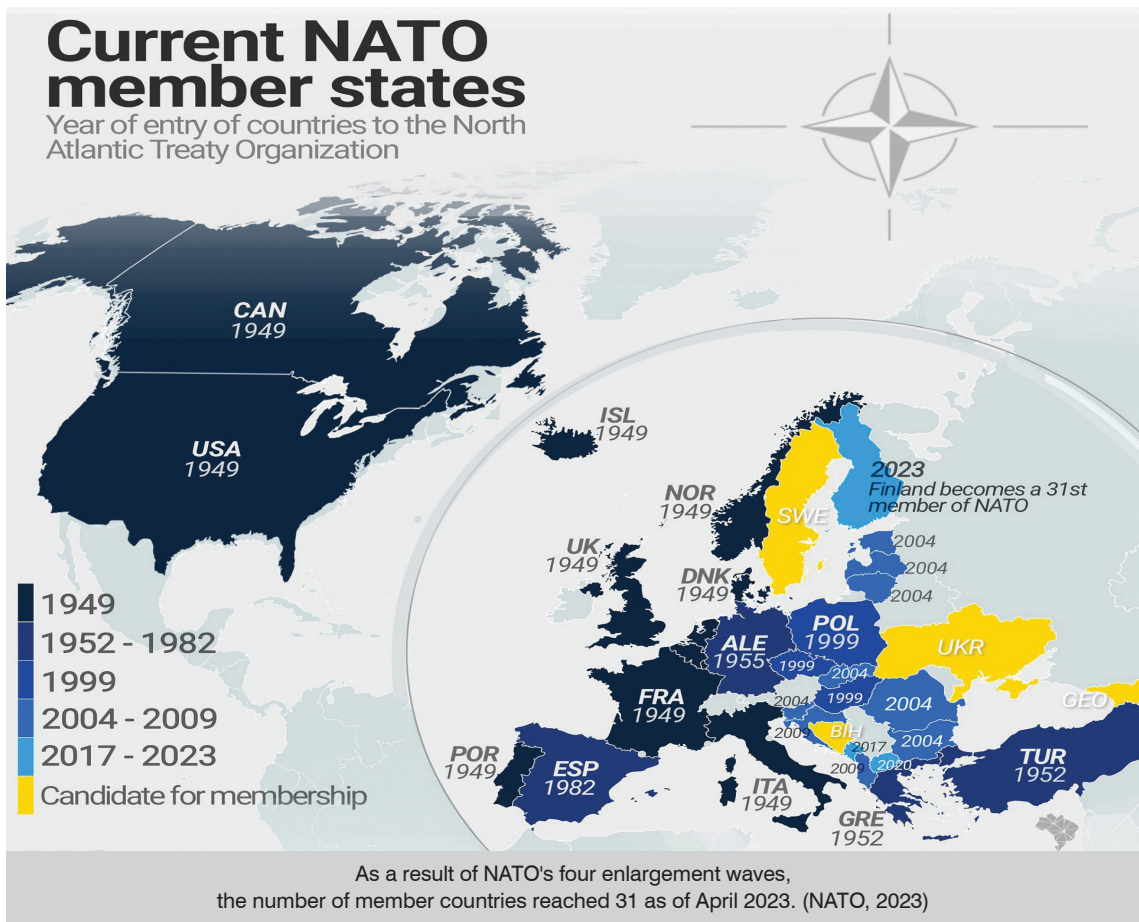
Phase Four: Engagement and Dialogue (2002-2020)

After 9/11, the United States changed its perception of security threats, with terrorism and the proliferation

of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) ranked as the number one security threat to the United States. As a key tool of the US, NATO's strategy has also undergone significant adjustments. In particular, the Prague Summit of NATO in November 2002, known as the "Reform Summit", identified three main directions for reform. The first was to define a new mission, varying from a defensive military organization to a military alliance targeted against terrorist organizations. The second was to continue NATO's eastward expansion by admitting new members, including Lithuania, Bulgaria and seven other Central and Eastern European countries, into NATO in 2004. The third was to explore new capabilities and improve NATO's deployment capacity and flexible response capability. Since then, the Europeanizing, globalizing and loosening characteristics of NATO have become increasingly evident.

Using the US's anti-terrorism goals, Russia expressed goodwill to the US and improved its relations with NATO. Russia and NATO signed the Rome Declaration on 28 May 2002. The two established the NATO-Russia Council, with NATO offices in Moscow and Russian officials working in the NATO headquarters. After 9/11, the US changed the terms of its positioning of China as a strategic competitor and instead considered China a key partner in the fight against terrorism (Xue, 2021). The US-led NATO has repeatedly expressed its willingness to engage in security dialogue with China.

Given that diplomacy with the US is of top priority, China and NATO have begun to engage and communicate. This is conducive to boosting trust between China and the US, preferable to China's security and stability to its west, and beneficial to China for playing a greater role through multilateral diplomacy. As of 2020, the two sides have held their ninth China-NATO political consultation meeting. Of course, China's association with NATO in this period is still in its infancy.



The Transformation of NATO and NATO's Involvement in Asian Affairs

After the end of the Cold War, NATO faced a crisis of legitimacy with the disappearance of the Soviet Union. To maintain NATO as a tool of US supremacy, adding new defense functions and geographical defense areas was necessary to eliminate the legitimacy crisis brought about by the decline of traditional threats (the Soviet Union or Russia). In the aftermath of 9/11, non-traditional security issues such as terrorism and drug-related crime occurred frequently. Such incidents are not only concentrated in Europe and the United States,

thus providing an opportunity for NATO operations to move beyond the traditional NATO defense areas and to realize the concept of “globalization”. This manifested in two ways. Firstly, NATO member states or partnership countries gradually extended beyond Europe to the neighboring non-European countries. Secondly, NATO’s extra-territorial operations changed from “Europe’s homeland defense” to “dealing with global crises”.

NATO is a transatlantic alliance; hence its Asian policy is not aimed at creating or reshaping Asia’s political and security architecture. Rather, it is aimed at responding to various problems arising in Asia and forming certain rules and mechanisms. Those are essentially complementary to the Euro-

Atlantic political and security framework. Therefore, based on NATO's security strategy and the level of significance of different parts of Asia to NATO's security interests, NATO's Asian policy is mainly focused on three sectors: the Middle East, Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

NATO's Central Asia policy is more out of geopolitical consideration than a real threat.

NATO's involvement in Asia is mainly reflected in two major areas: On the one hand, to participate in peacekeeping, counter-terrorism and reconstruction missions in Afghanistan under the mandate of the United Nations. On the other hand, to establish and strengthen security cooperation with its Asian partners through multiple mechanisms, for instance, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council mechanism, the Mediterranean Dialogue mechanism, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative mechanism and the Global Partnership Mechanism (Dong, 2020).

For the Greater Middle East, NATO has proposed the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. It was because the Middle East has historically been the greatest source of instability along the Mediterranean coast, the Arabian Peninsula and the Eurasian continental plate. It is also the region with the highest number of conflicts globally. Particularly since the Arab Spring, the Middle East has been plagued by refugee problems, illegal immigration, terrorist attacks and international criminality. The above problems directly affect peace and stability in the Middle East and indirectly constrain NATO's efforts to build a Euro-Atlantic regional security order. Therefore, NATO needs to contain the contradictions and

conflicts in the Middle East region and control and reduce the security threats that fundamentally challenge NATO.

To this end, NATO's policy for the Middle East region mainly includes the following elements. First, continue solidifying the security alliance between NATO and Middle East allies, partner countries and dialogue countries, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other countries, utilizing economic and military assistance to maintain an effective political and military presence. Second, to minimize or weaken the heterogeneous forces in the Middle East, including Syria, Iran and other countries, various terrorist organizations and extremist religious organizations. So that in that case, they cannot directly or indirectly threaten NATO and interfere with certain major strategic decisions of NATO in the Middle East. Third, it will continue to combat traditional and non-traditional security threats in the Middle East and eradicate the breeding ground for terrorism, refugee problems, illegal immigration and piracy from the source. In other words, to eliminate the various conflicts in the Middle East.

For the greater Central Asian region, NATO's policy can be concluded as such: to actively combat various terrorist forces in Central Asia, to form a strategic hold on Russia, to form a deterrent to Iran, and to form a strategic constraint on the western region of China. Therefore, NATO's Central Asia policy is more out of geopolitical consideration than a real threat and focuses on two aspects. On the one hand, it has started a war against terrorism in Afghanistan and cooperated with Central Asian countries to combat various extremist and terrorist forces. On the other hand, it has used the war in Afghanistan to establish military bases in many Central Asian countries and maintain a long-term military presence in Central Asia.



Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea were invited to the NATO Summit held in Madrid in June 2022. (China Daily, 2022)

For the Asia-Pacific region, as it is far away from NATO and NATO's core security interests, its previous policy towards the Asia-Pacific region is more cautious and restrained. Rather preventive security policies are formulated due to this reason. For one thing, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand were included in the "Partnership for Peace" program, making them NATO partner countries. These countries have also interacted frequently with NATO and have gradually become the driving force behind the implementation of NATO's Asia-Pacific security strategy. Their actions have made a difference in the strategic shape of the Asia-Pacific region. On the other hand, NATO has also established close cooperation with China's neighboring countries, such as supporting Mongolia to become a NATO partner country and holding military exercises with Mongolia, with the obvious intention of exercising strategic restraint against China and Russia.

It is clear from the above that NATO's Asian policy is still fragmented and does not form a complete and mature system but only a complement to the Euro-Atlantic regional security policy. Nonetheless, although NATO's Asian policy ostensibly advocates political and security cooperation, it has always emphasized competition and confrontation. The policy and its practice have had a certain impact on Asia's political and security landscape and, to a large extent, have contributed to the continued local adjustment of the Asian strategic landscape.

"China as Primary Rival" and the Creation of an Asian Version of NATO

Since 2010, Sino-US relations have been characterized by ups and downs, with more competition than cooperation. The Obama administration launched a series of strategies to contain China, including the "Return to

Asia-Pacific” and “Asia-Pacific Rebalance”. It had given the cold shoulder to China’s proposal for a “new type of major power relationship between China and the US”. A major debate took place in the US about the threat of China and how to contain its rise, and an anti-China strategic consensus gradually emerged in the US. After taking office, Donald Trump launched a new wave of accusations and attacks on China, launching a trade war and introducing documents and bills that explicitly refer to China as the main threat to the US. It has been trying to position China as a “revisionist state” and treating the US-China relationship as a strategic rivalry (US Department of Defense, 2019). Under the new Biden administration, the US launched a concerted campaign of repression against China, with a four-pronged approach: human rights, security, economy, science and technology, further continuing the competitive dynamic between the US and China (Feng & Hua, 2022).

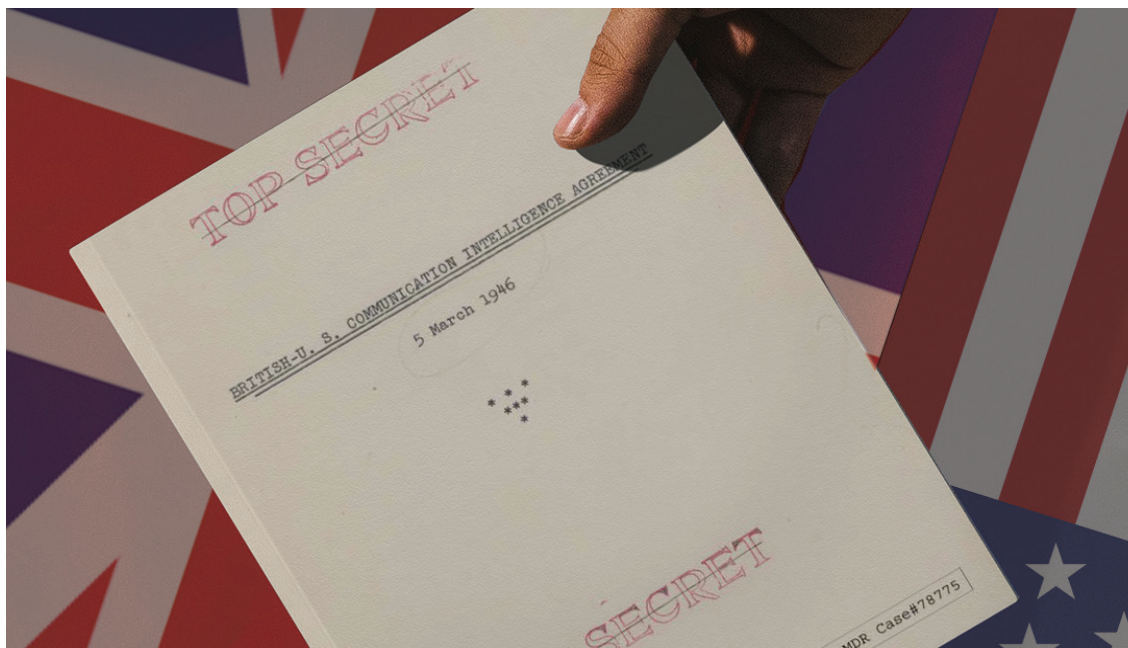
With a strategic retreat from the Middle East and a hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the US is focusing on creating an Asian version of NATO to contain China.

The deterioration of US-China relations as a tool for the US pursuit of world hegemony has also led NATO to increase its hostility towards China. In June 2021, NATO members listed China as a security threat for the first time in a communiqué, saying its “overt ambitions and overconfident behavior as a systemic

challenge to the rules-based international order and security-related areas of the alliance”. In an interview, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated that countries, including China, are challenging NATO interests, security, and values. He also stated that Beijing uses economic leverage, coercion, and mixed means to advance its regional interests (Wei, 2022). On 11 April 2023, Jens Stoltenberg also said that China refused to condemn Russia, responding to Russian “propaganda” and helping Russia boost its economy. This is a tendentious political discourse that attempts to equate China with Russia and ties it to Russia, NATO’s “main rival for the decade”.

With a strategic retreat from the Middle East and a hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the US is focusing on creating an Asian version of NATO to contain China. In contrast to the previously fragmented nature of NATO’s involvement in Asian affairs, the current process of NATO’s Asianization has entered a phase of organization building.

Since 2020, the four-nation security dialogue organized by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has been escalating. Interactions at the level of foreign and defense ministers were established and gradually extended to bilateral and multilateral coordinated military exercises in the security field. The aim is to highlight the military presence and deterrence and gain more geopolitical benefits by bringing the Philippines and Vietnam into the South China Sea and establishing the “QUAD+” mechanism. In non-traditional security, especially in science and technology security and bio-pharmaceuticals, they are trying to establish supply chains and industrial chains that exclude China (Xing, 2022).



On March 5, 1946, the United States and the United Kingdom signed the UKUSA, known as the Five Eyes Agreement, which includes electronic intelligence cooperation between the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023)

The Australia-UK-US “Trilateral Security Partnership” (AUKUS) program claims that the US, UK and Australia will strengthen cooperation in nuclear submarines and promote information and technology sharing in high-end military areas. This regards areas such as hypersonic weapons, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technology and other undersea technology cooperation (The Chinese Embassy in the UK, 2023). The US, UK and Australia’s submarine program clearly intends to provide an underwater blockade of China’s maritime power against China’s increased influence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This is a breach not only of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) but also of maritime peace in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is no coincidence that the Five Eyes Alliance has a clear anti-China bias in information security. For example, the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have all banned Huawei and ZTE from

their 5G communications networks and pressured other countries to make similar decisions. At one point, there was talk of the intelligence-sharing group forming a “three-eyed alliance” between the US, Japan and South Korea in East Asia (Beijing Daily, 2023). It was reported that the president of South Korea and the United States will sign a document in Washington on April 2023 to strengthen cyber security cooperation between the two countries, build a U.S.-Korea intelligence alliance, and discuss the inclusion of Japan in the future. This means a “three-eyed alliance” between South Korea, the United States, and Japan is on the agenda, according to South Korean media. If the US succeeds in mobilizing the intelligence agencies of Japan and South Korea to serve the US strategy and form an alliance with them, the first thing they will investigate is the confidential information of the neighboring Asian countries, and the implications for China are self-evident.

The essence of the United States trying to establish the “Asian version of NATO”, or “NATO Asia”, is to require the relevant countries and regions to serve its own strategic planning. Furthermore, it allows the United States to intervene in their internal affairs and interfere with their sovereign independence. The most common means of achieving this are exploiting Japan’s fear of the Chinese threat, Taiwan’s desire for independence, the hostile dynamics between North and South Korea, and establishing military cooperation agreements to tie more Asian countries to the US chariot.

For example, the “factual list of U.S.-Taiwan relations” on the US State Department website has been substantially updated to remove phrases such as “Taiwan is part of China” (Lei, 2022). It also promotes the deepening of relations between Japan and Taiwan. In addition, it has used the Sino-Indian border dispute to draw India into confrontation with China and renamed its Asian strategy the “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, highlighting the importance of India. In the end, South Korea and Singapore are seen as potential allies and a “new NATO” in Asia is established with the US allies as the core.

Will the “Asian Version of NATO” be Successful?

At the Madrid summit in June 2022, NATO leaders formally adopted a new Strategic Concept, which is second in importance only to the North Atlantic Treaty. The document states that the core assumptions underlying the 1991, 1999 and 2010 NATO Strategic Concepts have been broken down. In particular, the view that the Euro-Atlantic region is at peace, that there is no global power competition and that the international security order is predictable and cooperative no longer fits the current security environment (Cai, 2022).

The main factors posing a shock to NATO’s security are the following: First, the rise of China is driving the shift of global power from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Indo-Pacific region. Second, accelerating scientific and technological innovation will affect NATO’s collective defense capabilities. Third, climate change, food security and other non-traditional security challenges impact NATO’s crisis management. Fourth, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to various complex challenges facing NATO. For this reason, NATO has the drive and demand to globalize, especially in Asian affairs, and has formed many small groups, such as QUAD and AUKUS. However, following this, the question becomes, will the US be able to do what it wants with an “Asian version of NATO”? There are several factors to consider when answering this question.

First, European countries lack a unified view of dealing with the situation in the Asia-Pacific region, especially on issues related to China (Ming & Zheng, 2020). Unlike the strategic rivalry between China and the US, China and Europe cooperate more closely and share many common interests. China is an important market and major trading partner for Europe, and the two economies are highly complementary. In the context of its sluggish economic growth, the ongoing crisis and the UK’s exit from the EU, closer economic cooperation with China is important for Europe. In addition, China and Europe have common interests in maintaining stability in the Middle East, nuclear non-proliferation, cyberspace and other international security issues, as well as in upholding multilateralism, combating climate change and providing international public goods. More importantly, Europe also advocates strategic autonomy from NATO and US control, which is crucial for Europe to become a strategic force in the international landscape.

Secondly, changing the US “Asia-Pacific Strategy” to the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” signals that relying on previous allies alone will not achieve the goal of containing China and that India must be brought into the picture. However, India is precisely the shortest part of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, and Russian-Indian relations constitute an important constraint if it is to truly pursue the goal of “Breakaway from Asia and stand with the US” (Juan, 2022).

Japan, India, and Australia, whose number one trading partner is China, have no real fears of a military invasion by China.

Besides, India’s views and interests do not coincide with those of the United States, Japan, Australia and other countries on many issues. India is not deeply involved in issues such as the South China Sea and Taiwan. Regarding climate change, India and China, both developing countries, have very similar positions. On high-end technologies, while India is reluctant to adopt Huawei’s 5G technology, it is also unwilling to see US technology dominate the Indian market. More importantly, India still has a tradition of non-aligned diplomacy. Although the US has brought India into the “four-nation mechanism”, there are conflicts between the US and India around economic and arms deals, which will also impact the US in building alliances.

Thirdly, China’s growing economic and trade cooperation with neighboring countries means the US will face greater resistance to the so-called “Asian version of NATO” in this region. ASEAN, which has overtaken the EU as China’s largest trading partner, is no longer the ASEAN of the 1998 financial crisis and has achieved rapid economic

development in a peaceful and stable environment. It will not willingly agree to US attempts to target China, increase regional tensions and thus weaken ASEAN’s central position (Han, 2021).

Furthermore, Japan, India and Australia, whose number one trading partner is also China, have no real fears of military invasion by China. Japan and India have historical territorial disputes with China, and it is more in their national interest to manage their differences than to confront China (Global Times, 2021). From China’s perspective, it will also strengthen its full cooperation with ASEAN, Japan, India and other Asian countries, contrasting with the US pressure on Asian countries.

Fourth, the multiple sub-groups the US uses to contain China, such as the Five Eyes Alliance, AUKUS and QUAD, may link up and create a mutually offsetting effect (Xiang & He, 2023). The NATO alliance system is hierarchical, of which the Anglo-Saxon states, namely the UK and the US, are the core. The UK and the US can help Australia develop nuclear submarines, but not India, Japan and South Korea, reminding them that they are not the core force but merely helpers or fighters. For India, Japan and Australia, the fundamental reason for their participation in the US-led “Asian version of NATO” is also to contain China, whose rise has substantially changed the distribution of power in the region. In time, if China’s strength far exceeds the overall strength of these countries, it may be time for the four-nation mechanism to end.

Conclusion

The international environment facing China is not ideal, especially as the competition between China and the United States is intensifying. This is fundamentally due to the “zero-sum game” mentality of the US in dealing with relations

with the rising powers. In the face of Western repression, China cannot retreat and must “dare to fight and fight well”. Therefore, China’s attitude towards NATO is clear: it considers NATO to be a product and remnant of the Cold War, a military and political bloc under US hegemony, and one of the cornerstones of the US-dominated world order.

China opposes NATO’s eastward expansion and its constant squeezing of Russia’s security space, which it sees as the root cause of the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. China is concerned that NATO wants to include Mongolia as an alliance partner, which would increase the possibility of Western countries conducting military training close to China’s borders. China has expressed misgivings about NATO’s military presence in the Middle East and Central Asia, which threatens the security of China’s western borders. China is wary of and strongly opposes the “Asian version of NATO”, a trap for peace and stability in Asia. At the same time, however, China and NATO have maintained cautious engagement, dialogue and cooperation. While conflicts are more pronounced in traditional security areas, there is also considerable scope for cooperation in jointly addressing various non-traditional security threats.

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