
NATO-CHINA RELATIONS CHARTING THE WAY FORWARD

Presented by
**Center for Strategic Decision Research and
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last year, the Center for Strategic Decision Research (CSDR) in Menlo Park, California and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS) in Beijing convened a series of frank and unusually open virtual discussions between NATO experts and CISS global security scholars. The NATO experts included former Assistant (or Deputy Assistant) Secretaries General and a recent member of the North Atlantic Council. The CISS experts include its Vice Chairman and former senior military officers, as well as renowned defense and international security scholars.

These discussions included the profound implications of the COVID-19 pandemic; observations about the Biden administration's impact on relations between China and the West; NATO and Chinese views regarding the Asia-Pacific region as well as social values including human rights; and the implications of the G7, NATO, and EU–U.S. Summit meetings on international dynamics.

While the main focus of our virtual discussions has been on the future of NATO–China relations, the CSDR–CISS group of experts agreed that misperceptions and miscalculations about each other's strategic intentions and capabilities can be a dangerous source of escalation and conflict. Consequently, a principal goal of this project has been to address these concerns and to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding between NATO and China experts that might lay the groundwork for promoting dialogues at different levels, including regular high-level official exchanges and track II dialogues.

The group also identified and discussed five topical areas in which a sustained dialogue between NATO and China could make sense in discovering mutually aligning interests: maritime security, climate change, regional security, military transparency, and risk reduction and counterterrorism.

In the interests of transparency and in order to inspire the policy debates among the NATO allies and in China about their future relationship, the CSDR–CISS group of experts decided to share the main findings of their discussions, together with a set of recommendations about areas of potentially converging interests. The experts propose the development of a roadmap between NATO and China, supported by a dedicated Track II process, as a meaningful way forward.

The CSDR and CISS have agreed to continue their regular and constructive exchanges on regional and international security issues. Talking to each other is always better than talking about each other.

I. AN EVOLVING STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE

In his remarks at the 2021 virtual Munich Security Conference, U.S. President Joe Biden set a clear priority for his country's allies, saying, *"We must prepare together for a long-term strategic competition with China."* His statement did not come as a big surprise. Since the Biden administration's arrival at the White House, it has used every political stage to advocate a common transatlantic approach towards China. The guiding thought behind this is the strong, bipartisan belief that China poses a formidable challenge to the United States and a stable international system. Hence, the West's future strategic relationship with China has become a top agenda item in numerous multilateral and bilateral meetings.

A collective NATO response to China is still in the making. The allies do not regard it as posing a classical military threat, unlike Russia. But at their June 2021 meeting in Brussels, Alliance leaders agreed that *"China's stated ambitions and assertive behavior present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to alliance security,"* underscoring their commitment to work on a common multi-faceted and assertive response to China's rise. Reacting to this strong language, the Chinese government vigorously denied that it posed a "systemic challenge to others," saying it would not sit back if others pose "systemic challenges" to it.

Yet after the Biden administration's first ten months of carefully choreographed diplomacy on China, transatlantic discussions on both sides of the Atlantic about how to respond to the challenges posed by a rising China remain difficult and complex. EU member countries display a spectrum of attitudes depending on geography, economic ties, and historical relations, which is reflected in

the consensus to regard China at the same time as a systemic rival, a competitor, and a partner. Over the last couple of years, however, the center of gravity in the EU has started to shift towards seeing China less as a benign trading partner than as a security challenge and technological rival, in view of its growing technological and military might, as well as its domestic and foreign policies.

Chinese investments in critical European infrastructure, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 17+1 cooperation with the countries of central and eastern Europe have caused mounting suspicion in the EU. An EU investment screening mechanism has been operational since October 2020. In March 2021 the EU adopted the first sanctions on China in 30 years, by imposing restrictive measures on four Chinese individuals and one entity that are considered responsible for serious human rights violations. China, in response, introduced sanctions against members of the EU Political and Security Committee, the European Parliament and national parliaments, as well as some European NGOs. Beijing's reaction was strongly condemned by EU member states and the European Parliament, leading to the decision to freeze the ratification of the EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

China and the Indo-Pacific region (a term introduced by the U.S. and accepted by NATO, but objected to by China which still uses Asia-Pacific region instead) have also become an important theme in the EU's dialogue with its closest partners. The item was on the agenda when EU leaders met with President Biden on 15 June 2021 for the first EU–U.S. Summit since 2014. The two sides committed to *"coordinating our shared concerns, including ongoing human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet; the erosion of autonomy and democratic processes in Hong Kong; economic coercion; disinformation campaigns and regional*

issues.” They also expressed “concerns about the situation in the East and South China Seas and strongly opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo and increase tensions.” Similar statements were issued after the EU Summits with India and Japan.

The COVID-19 pandemic is interacting with global changes unseen in a century and exerting major impacts on international politics, world economy, the geostrategic landscape, and global governance. However, China believes that the trend of peace, development, cooperation, and win-win is irreversible. China stated repeatedly that it adheres to the path of peaceful development and pursues a mutually beneficial strategy of opening up. China’s development will constitute no threat to any other country, but will rather continue to provide new opportunities for the world.

Whatever course of action the EU–China relationship takes in the future, it will continue to be informed by a variety of perceptions and misperceptions of each side’s strategic intentions. The risks of misunderstanding need to be countered by continuing dialogue.

II. PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS IN RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST

“Perception is reality” is a well-known maxim of international diplomacy. Once relationships become more complex and even hostile, misperceptions fueled in this modern age by the power of the social media and the populist press go viral increasingly quickly. These misperceptions take root and are subsequently difficult to dislodge. Bridge-building and dialogue must therefore begin

with an honest attempt by each side to identify key mutual (mis)perceptions. By seeing which particular actions or political narratives have the most mobilizing impact on the other’s behavior and might even lead us into a spiral of confrontation, we can better identify those actions and narratives that can avoid this outcome.

It should not be surprising that at this first CSDR–CIISS expert dialogue, participants identified a number of misperceptions in the NATO–China relationship and divergences in various key policy areas. Although NATO has had a number of civilian and military contacts with Beijing on an ad hoc basis in the past, China has come on to the Alliance’s formal agenda only recently. NATO’s analyses of China have tended to involve only specialists from the West. Thus the Western Alliance clearly has more work to do to develop a full understanding of the complex factors driving Beijing’s foreign and security policies. China also needs to enhance exchanges and understanding with NATO.

Moreover, NATO today is a much more complex and multifaceted organization than it was during the Cold War. Its strategies, policies, and priorities evolve constantly to adjust to today’s fast-changing security landscape. It has embarked on the elaboration of a new Strategic Concept, and one can anticipate more adaptations to its agenda as a result of this exercise.

The CSDR–CIISS group of experts devoted significant time to mapping the key reciprocal perceptions. It also sought to identify the most important areas of divergence and disagreement over security and defense issues, as well as potential areas of convergence and cooperation. Addressing perceptions and misperceptions in a frank but constructive manner was seen as a critical prerequisite for putting the NATO–China relationship on a productive track.

III. NATO PERCEPTIONS ON CHINA

Undoubtedly, there are many nuances among individual NATO allies' perceptions of China, given their different levels of engagement with Beijing as well as different economic or even strategic interests. Nevertheless, the fact that all 30 NATO allies were able to agree on language on China in their Brussels Summit communiqué of 14 June 2021 underscores their general consensus as to the security challenges posed by a rising China. These can be summarized as follows:

- China is an authoritarian state that does not share NATO's values. It is a one-party state that does not respect the human rights of its citizens, especially minority groups such as the Uighurs or the Tibetans.
- China does not respect international law and treaty commitments where these go against its national interests. It has a selective approach to observing international norms. The situation in Hong Kong and rulings of the International Court of Justice and the World Trade Organization support this perception.
- China is increasingly pushing its model of state authoritarianism on the global stage as superior to the western countries. It is actively promoting this narrative in the developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America but also in Europe. Chinese aid and investment come at a heavy political price and result in poorly executed projects and severe indebtedness.
- China has a long-term strategy to dominate global supply chains and future core technologies. It seeks to gain control of innovative companies through its direct foreign investments, but it also resorts to cyber espionage and massive theft of commercial data and intellectual property through state-sponsored or state-condoned computer network hacking. It has a particular interest in controlling transportation links abroad in order to fuel its export-driven economy. Its civilian technologies are a potential threat to western security because the Chinese state exerts back-door control.
- China is rapidly building up its military capabilities. Its military spending, doctrines, procurement system, and dual-use approach remain opaque. NATO allies are also concerned by the deteriorating situation across the Taiwan strait and the increase in Chinese military exercises. China is also using its military power more assertively to demonstrate its control of the airspace and sea space around its borders. Its growing maritime and air presence in the Indo-Pacific region is a threat to freedom of navigation in recognized international waters. Its development of anti-satellite tests and of space weapons add to these concerns. In addition to the rapid expansion of China's blue-water navy, the NATO allies are disturbed by the increase in its intermediate and long-range missiles and acquisition of hypersonic capabilities.
- NATO allies are also alarmed by the close military cooperation between China and Russia. Joint Russia–China drills in Europe's close vicinity have become more frequent. China's investments in Europe, and its deepening relations with some European states, have also led to an increasing awareness among the NATO allies of China's growing and multi-faceted presence in and around Europe. The overall impression is that all the various strands of Chinese statecraft—military, economic, technological, and diplomatic—are giving Beijing much greater geopolitical leverage over European affairs than European capitals have over Chinese affairs.

- China did not play a positive role during the pandemic. It delayed informing the World Health Organization of the Coronavirus outbreak. Beijing’s “vaccine diplomacy” has been primarily geared towards avoiding critical questions about the origin of COVID-19. The NATO allies have also been disturbed by the virulence of the Chinese government’s public attacks on the western countries.
- Most importantly, there is a mounting perception that China is a serious systemic competitor. It is not seen as a military threat at present but hopes that it would evolve internally in a more democratic direction or would become committed to the rules-based liberal order through the forces of globalization and economic interdependence have been largely abandoned. Over the long run, China is viewed as a much more significant rival to the western countries than Russia because of its greater capacity for innovation and technological development, its military power projection capabilities and its much larger role in global trade and investment.

IV. CHINESE PERCEPTIONS OF NATO

The CSDR–CIISS experts dialogue produced many valuable insights into Chinese perceptions of NATO. These can help the Alliance in its encounters with Chinese policymakers to better grasp the reality of today’s NATO, and to focus a future dialogue on real policy disagreements as well as areas where interests are aligned, rather than on erroneous inherited impressions. Overall, Chinese perceptions of NATO can be summarized as follows:

- NATO is still a Cold War organization. It needs a threat to survive or legitimize its existence, and China is a convenient scapegoat to provide that threat. China is being used to drive Washington’s concept of an “Alliance of Democracies” and to cover up the weaknesses of these democracies, such as political polarization, economic stagnation, poor secondary education and skills, and inadequate investment in public infrastructure. Moreover, China’s military modernization gives some western countries an additional pretext to push for higher military spending among its own members.
- The U.S. dominates NATO strategically, militarily, and politically. Europeans in NATO are politically divided and militarily uneven. The U.S. wants to turn NATO from an alliance essentially focused on Russia to one that increasingly prioritizes China as the key challenge and glue for cementing the future transatlantic security partnership. NATO is therefore likely to move from being a regional to a global alliance. Sooner or later it will inevitably increase its military profile and presence in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Western initiatives are nothing but attempts to prevent China from achieving strategic parity with some western countries, let alone overtake them in the long run. For instance, the U.S. has been pushing for Beijing to join the strategic nuclear arms talks between Washington and Moscow, even though China possesses only a fraction of the nuclear warheads in the U.S. and Russian arsenals. The U.S. has been criticizing China for its development of new hypersonic missiles, intermediate missiles, stealth aircraft, battlefield robotics, and cyber and space weapons; but Washington and its allies are developing the same capabilities. To criticize China points to double standards.
- The West’s opposition to the “penetration” of Chinese civilian technologies is hypocritical. False claims of security vulnerabilities and

Chinese state interference are invoked for protectionist reasons and to give western companies an unfair market advantage. The treatment of Huawei and TikTok, the denial of Google apps to Chinese manufacturers, as well as restrictions on Chinese banks and energy companies, are clear examples of the misuse of security arguments to penalize Chinese goods and services. Washington and its allies seem to favor a “grand decoupling” from China which risks splitting technology into separate spheres with different standards and shrinking interoperability.

- The international system is based on the principle of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. The United States and its allies are increasingly violating these principles by condemning China and imposing sanctions on it for its internal behavior, notably with regard to Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The U.S. administration is also undermining the One China policy by increasing its official engagement and defense relations with Taiwan. Western countries ask for understanding when they take measures in the name of their own security; but they do not show China the same understanding when it needs to act against terrorism, extremism and separatism within its own borders.
- With regard to the China–U.S. relations, although the U.S. labels China a long-time “strategic competitor,” China sticks to the policy of maintaining dialogue, managing differences, and avoiding confrontation. China and the U.S. both stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation. The two sides need to respect each other’s core interests and major concerns, and respect each other’s right to development. With regard to the China–EU relations, China advocates an objective and

rational view that cooperation between China and the EU is far greater than competition, and consensus is far greater than differences. China and the EU are partners, rather than rivals.

- China’s rise, along with the emergence of other major powers, shows that the western-dominated multilateral system has outlived its purpose. Yet the western countries are unwilling to accept a new multilateral order in which their own power would be reduced. By trying to revitalize the G7 and adding India, Australia, South Africa, and South Korea (ROK) to it, the West seeks to contain China’s legitimate rise. The same logic holds true for the revival of the Quad and the establishment of AUKUS in the Asia-Pacific and Washington’s efforts to boost the global outreach of NATO. The new narrative of an “Alliance of Democracies” seeks to preserve the West’s dominance and destabilizes global politics.
- Some NATO members have sent ships and planes to the vicinity of China in recent years. The Asia-Pacific region does not need to establish military blocs and should no longer cause confrontation between major powers, let alone forming small cliques aimed at instigating a new Cold War. NATO should adhere to its original geographical positioning and play a constructive role in securing peaceful and stable regional development.

V. CONSEQUENCES AND RISKS

The CSDR–CIISS group of experts identified a number of potential consequences and risks arising from these and related perceptions.

- China and the western countries led by the U.S. could enter a syndrome of confrontation because

of different perceptions and misjudgments that could undermine the ability of both sides to deal with common challenges. The scope for dialogue, cooperation, and accommodation would progressively dwindle.

- As the military forces of both China and the West come into closer contact, there is the risk of incidents and clashes that could escalate. This suggests the urgent need for the establishment of regular and crisis military communication channels and mechanisms and risk reduction measures.
- Economic and technological decoupling could lead to major trade losses and enormous economic damage, especially at a time when the world needs to recover from the impact of the pandemic and pare down financial deficits and out-of-control public spending.
- Antagonism between China and the West could undermine the ability to deal with common challenges where their cooperation is needed, such as regional hot spot issues, over North Korea (DPRK), the Iran nuclear file, maritime piracy, organized crime, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change is now the most glaring example.
- The lack of clear rules and doctrine regarding potential cyber attacks against critical infrastructure or military systems could lead to rapid escalation and excessive retaliatory measures, possibly driving China and the West into open conflict.
- A lack of effective dialogues between the military establishments of China and the West could lead both sides to increasingly base their planning and force postures on worst-case scenarios and automatic responses and escalation ladders,

similar to the U.S.–Soviet “Dead Hand” of the Cold War. In such an environment it would become harder to achieve arms control and disarmament steps as they would be seen as constraining the freedom of action of both sides.

- Growing military suspicion or even antagonism between China and the West carries the risk that regional crises and conflicts could be seen through the prism of a new Cold War. Rightly or wrongly, each side would see the influence of the other at play and intervene to block it, thereby risking escalation.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS: EXPLORING AND STRENGTHENING AREAS OF CONVERGENCE

The CSDR–CIISS group of experts discussed a wide spectrum of topics for potential dialogue and cooperation between the Alliance and China, ultimately identifying five topical domains. While respective strategic goals, perceptions and viewpoints on these five individual issues may differ and are bound to evolve further, the group agreed that there should be sufficient space for the two sides to talk to each other directly. This is all the more important as the “strategic competition”—a term accepted by NATO but rejected by China—between the United States and China is likely to increase considerably; it is no longer an implausible worst-case scenario that this could escalate into military conflict.

Were NATO and China to decide to engage in a more regular and structured dialogue, the two sides would not need to build their relationship from scratch. Instead, they could draw on two important building blocks: first, past and existing NATO–

China engagement that represents a valuable departure point; and second, a number of issues that both sides have identified in the course of their earlier interaction as worthy themes for discussion and collaboration.

The most promising areas of mutually aligning interests appear to be the following:

1. Maritime security

Given the successful record of NATO–China maritime collaboration in the Gulf of Aden, a renewed effort to explore whether there is sufficient common ground in the area of anti-piracy and maritime security seems worthwhile.

For China, ensuring the safety of international waterways against piracy is likely to remain an important national security objective since the country’s trade and economic interests abroad depend to a large extent on safe maritime transport routes. The Gulf of Aden, for example, belongs to those international waters to which China attaches particular significance since the Maritime Silk Road—the naval component of China’s BRI—passes through this waterway. The Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea are other crucial maritime regions whose security matters to China for the same reasons.

For the Alliance, the maritime domain has always been of key strategic importance. NATO’s naval forces constitute an integral part of its defense and deterrence posture. They contribute in many ways to safeguard NATO territories and populations and to project stability far beyond allied borders.

A NATO–China dialogue about current and future challenges to maritime security in general, and in the Mediterranean, Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean in particular, could therefore be a useful starting point to exchange views on this important

subject. Such conversations could also contribute to mutual military confidence-building and transparency.

2. Climate change

Given, on the one hand, NATO’s successful track record of assistance in natural disasters and weather-related crises in allied and partner countries, based on well-established planning, decision-making, and deployment patterns, and, on the other hand, China’s experience in managing natural disasters and humanitarian relief, climate change appears to be another topic of convergence in NATO–China relations.

At the Brussels Summit in June 2021, NATO leaders described climate change as “*one of the most defining challenges of our time.*” Subsequently, they adopted a concrete Climate Change and Security Action Plan to counter the effects of greater temperature extremes, sea-level rise, and the increasing number of extreme weather events. NATO regards climate change as a “threat multiplier” that can affect resilience and civil preparedness, operational planning, the protection of military installations, and critical infrastructure. The allies seek to incorporate climate change considerations into NATO’s full spectrum of work in the future, including defense planning, capability development, and civil preparedness and exercises.

The Chinese government, for its part, has long acknowledged the impact of climate change-related risks on the country’s stability and economic growth. China has been increasingly affected by more serious floods, more extreme droughts, diminished fishery productivity, and other ecological changes. Its armed forces have been closely integrated with civilian authorities for flood and drought response and, as a result, have developed sophisticated disaster response capabilities and experience.

Exchanging views on the security implications of climate change and the role of the military in helping with challenging weather events will most likely prove a fruitful topic for regular conversations and perhaps even practical cooperation between NATO and China.

3. Regional security

Comparing assumptions about current and future regional security developments appears to be another meaningful topic for a NATO–China dialogue, particularly with regard to the Korean Peninsula.

From a NATO perspective, the DPRK’s nuclear and ballistic missile programme remains a “*global threat that requires a global response*” (NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Munich 2018), not only because of the various nuclear tests Pyongyang has conducted in clear defiance of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). In addition to its nuclear capabilities, the DPRK has made significant advances in terms of its conventional weapons, both chemical and biological, as well as its cyber capabilities. The volatile security position in Northeast Asia has direct security ramifications for the NATO allies, which now face a credible threat from the DPRK’s missiles.

China clearly has a significant interest in the stability of the Korean Peninsula. China’s position on the issue has been committed to achieving the denuclearization of the peninsula, to solving the issue through dialogue and to maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. China has been working for these goals for decades, and its role has been irreplaceable.

Whereas the NATO allies would be likely to wish to hear China’s assessment on the situation in the Asia-Pacific region, China might be equally eager to hear about the Alliance’s intent to pay more

strategic attention to the Asia-Pacific region and strengthen its partnerships with Australia, Japan, the ROK, and New Zealand. While NATO has repeatedly stated that it does not intend to play a military role in this region, individual NATO allies have already conducted naval operations in China’s close vicinity, including in the South China Sea, and will continue to do so. Clarifying NATO’s strategic intent in the region and exchanging information about current and planned naval activities conducted by individual allies would be necessary.

4. Transparency in sensitive areas and military risk reduction

There are a number of plausible reasons why strategic competition between the United States and China might become even more pronounced in the future, which, in turn, could increase the risk of military conflict. As both sides are modernizing their military posture and developing new sophisticated weapons and technologies, mutual distrust and suspicion about strategic intentions, motives, doctrines, and capabilities have grown considerably. At the same time no effective mechanism exists between the two nuclear-armed countries to settle their disagreements peacefully, let alone to help avoid misunderstandings that could lead to dangerous military escalation.

A similar situation exists in the NATO–China relationship. Diplomatic encounters and military-to-military contacts between the two parties are essentially non-binding and only occur occasionally. Their current level of interaction is certainly not sufficient to help avoid incidents when their respective forces are in close proximity, or to promote crisis communication and deconfliction. At minimum, NATO and China should have a genuine interest in establishing basic communication procedures, aimed at avoiding unintended military collision and misunderstandings.

In order to set the NATO–China relationship on a path of transparency and risk avoidance, their level of ambition should go beyond the creation of communication mechanisms. Instead, the two sides should seek to establish comprehensive norms of behavior and transparency measures. Regular dialogues about nuclear and conventional doctrines, military strategies and the future of warfare could lead, in the long run, to a better mutual understanding of strategic intentions and threat perceptions, and address both NATO and Chinese concerns and interests.

NATO and China should also seek to include the use of emerging and disruptive technologies and developments in space and cyberspace in future discussions, ideally with the aim of working towards internationally agreed norms and rules. The implications of artificial intelligence, for instance, in future military operations is one of the many areas that still await discussion and regulation. The same holds true for two other important military domains: space and cyberspace. A prudent and gradual exchange of views on these sensitive national security topics will be critically important if NATO allies and China do not want to widen the current gulf of suspicion and distrust between them.

5. Counterterrorism

In the foreseeable future, terrorism is likely to remain one of the critical security challenges for international stability.

After the withdrawal of western forces and the Taliban’s victory, Afghanistan might again become a hub for terrorist groups. While al-Qaeda and the IS affiliate in Khorasan (ISIS-K) have managed to survive years of western and Afghan counterterrorism efforts in the country, the terrorist threat could become more prominent in the future and bring Afghanistan once more to the verge of civil war.

A growing terrorist threat in and from Afghanistan jeopardizes China’s foreign and economic objectives, as any form of instability could threaten the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and the BRI. In particular, the security of China’s western region could be at risk, especially Xinjiang, which borders over 76 km the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor separating Tajikistan and Pakistan.

In the past few years, China’s efforts to work directly with the former government in Kabul have included joint law enforcement operations, counterterrorism combat training and activities to prevent drug and arms trafficking. While it is still too early to assess the future course of the Taliban regime in Kabul, including its relationship to other militant groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS-K, Chinese interests should continue to focus on keeping any form of terrorist threat in Afghanistan and in China’s vicinity at bay.

In light of the Alliance’s track record in counterterrorism training and activities, and its involvement in the Global Coalition against Daesh, there may be merit in NATO and China exploring if and how they could eventually reach common ground in this area.

VII. AN AGREED ROADMAP TO TAKE NATO–CHINA RELATIONS FORWARD

Establishing a sustained and more regular dialogue between NATO and China requires sufficient political willingness by all parties. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi appeared to reach a constructive level of understanding at their virtual meeting on 26 September 2021. In their respective public statements, each welcomed the opportunity for an expanded dialogue and noted

the potential for further exchanges on issues of common interest.

The CSDR–CIISS group of experts agreed that notwithstanding future work on NATO’s new Strategic Concept, the EU Strategic Compass and other important strategy documents that the U.S. administration can be expected to finalize (for example, a new National Security Strategy), as well as evolving security considerations in China, representatives from both sides should meet more regularly in the future. They may wish to consider developing a **Joint Roadmap** for their future interaction. This can spell out precise themes for discussions, expected deliverables, and a concrete meeting calendar for diplomatic and military representatives.

CSDR–CIISS experts also concurred that a **regular Track II discussion process**, involving non-official NATO and Chinese experts, is a meaningful tool to inspire and support work on a NATO–China Joint Roadmap. To this end, CSDR and CIISS experts decided to continue meeting virtually in the future in order to foster mutual understanding and to exchange views on a range of security and defense issues. In particular, the further dialogue should develop ideas on how those areas for NATO–China cooperation that this report has identified can be carried forward.”

VIII. OUTLOOK

Looking ahead, the CSDR–CIISS group of experts believes that the international community is likely to continue to face several grave strategic challenges. Governments around the globe can be expected to pay particular attention to the recovery of their economies from the COVID-19 pandemic and to develop sustained efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change.

In Europe, several countries will focus on national elections and the formation of new governments. It still remains to be seen how the new German government and next French President will position themselves towards China. For sure, the government in Berlin will face important decisions in its first months, including on Huawei’s role in Germany’s 5G network and the renewal of the EU’s Xinjiang sanctions in March. European policymakers can also be expected to remain deeply concerned about escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Further departures from the (now) 16+1 grouping with China could also be possible early next year, following Lithuania’s recent withdrawal.

The situation has become even more complicated since the signing of the AUKUS deal by Washington, Canberra, and London in late September 2021. Whether the new security arrangement between the three parties has really sent a shockwave through Europe remains to be seen. But any effort to form a collective transatlantic response to China will not become easier in the future.

Overall, however, U.S.–China relations will continue to shape international dynamics to a large extent, for two main reasons. First, the two countries carry disproportionate weight in the international system, in terms of their national economic, military, and technological power. Other major players such as the EU, Russia, India or Japan possess some of these capacities but only the U.S. and China have them all. And second, amid their growing competition the two powers will likely remain closely dependent on each other, notably through trade, their interconnected economies and technological globalization. How to balance strategic competition and deepen cooperation will be a profound challenge for all political leaders concerned, and a fruitful subject of discussion for the CSDR–CIISS group of experts in the months ahead.

MILESTONES IN NATO–CHINA RELATIONS

YEAR	2002	Then NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson welcomed the Chinese Ambassador for the first time at NATO headquarters.
	2007	A Director General of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs paid a visit to NATO and highlighted Beijing’s interest in more regular staff-to-staff contacts.
	2008	NATO and Chinese navies started to support each other’s anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, participating in the multinational Shared Awareness and Deconfliction Forum for maritime security (SHADE). Practical cooperation between the two navies also included shared access to the MERCURY maritime information tool and participation in various SHADE meetings.
	2009	NATO Deputy Secretary General Claudio Bisogniero and other senior NATO diplomats travelled to China. Bisogniero held talks with high-ranking Chinese officials including then Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun
	2011	The Commander of NATO’s counterpiracy maritime forces hosted the Commander of the Chinese Counterpiracy Task Force on the NATO flagship in the Gulf of Aden.
	2012	Director of NATO’s International Military Staff, Lieutenant General Jürgen Bornemann, met in China with Major General Qian Lihua, Chief of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense, and General Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the PLA. The NATO team also visited the 3rd Guard Division of the Beijing Military Division and met with the Commander of the Shan’xi Provincial Military Region. The two sides agreed to deepen their cooperation in the counterpiracy, training and education domain, and to establish annual military staff talks between NATO’s International Military Staff and its Chinese counterparts.
	2010–2014	Chinese diplomats and military representatives participated in some of NATO’s annual conferences on WMD Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation as well as in courses organized by the NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany.
	2011–2014	Chinese journalists, academics and officials paid visits to NATO headquarters and published articles in the <i>NATO Review</i> .
	2015	Director of NATO’s International Military Staff, Air Marshal Christopher Harper, met in China with General Yi Xiaoguang, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the PLA. The fourth defense and security policy dialogue between China and NATO was held in Beijing.
	2018	NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, then NATO Deputy Secretary Rose Gottemoeller and the current NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană had several meetings with the Head of Chinese Mission to the EU, Ambassador Zhang Ming. Gottemoeller also travelled to Beijing in late October to participate in the 8th Xiangshan Forum, co-hosted by the China Association for Military Science and the CISS. Military-to-military talks were convened the same year with the fifth iteration of staff talks being held on 5 June 2018 in the new NATO headquarters.
	2021	NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met virtually with Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on 26 September.

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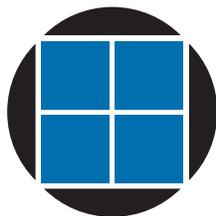
Senior Colonel Mu Changlin

Dr. Chen Wei

With the contributions of

Dr. Zhu Jie

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