



NATO's Border with China

by Bates Gill and Matthew Oresman

WASHINGTON - Last month, in an extraordinary first for NATO, China formally requested a regularized bilateral dialogue to discuss strategic perceptions, shared security threats, and NATO activities in countries at or near China's border in Central Asia. All the more remarkable, this comes from a Beijing that only three short years ago excoriated "U.S.-led NATO" for its war against Yugoslavia (including the unfortunate and inadvertent bombing of the Chinese Embassy during the Belgrade campaign). Chinese officialdom has never been particularly supportive of American alliances around the world, viewing them as relics of the Cold War at best and threats to Chinese interests at worst.

What is going on, and what might it mean for the strategic future of Eurasia? To begin, it is not surprising that China has come around to a more realistic and balanced interest in NATO. Since the advent of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" program in 1994 (which has come to include such Chinese neighbors as Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and with the newly inaugurated special relationship between NATO and Moscow, the alliance now reaches out and "shares" a border with China's northern and western frontiers. China too has been busy in the region solidifying "partnerships," formally establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 (members: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and signing the Sino-Russian Friendship Treaty in the same year.

Moreover, the ramped-up presence of the United States and its allies in Central Asia as part of the war on terror - not to mention Moscow's concomitant "lean to the West" and special treatment by NATO - provides additional reasons for Beijing to seek a more cooperative and constructive relationship with NATO. Beijing may expect an even greater role for NATO in China's "backyard" in the future, and wisely chooses to engage now to avoid isolation later.

Overall, Beijing's outreach to NATO appears to be part of a much larger effort, evident over the past 12 to 18 months, to establish a more constructive and less critical international presence. A more positive assessment would attribute this change in tone to a more "confident" and "mature" foreign policy in Beijing. A more cautious view acknowledges these potentially constructive adjustments in Beijing's outlook, but recognizes they may be motivated by more tentative and short-term Chinese interests. Either way, an interesting convergence is underway between China and Western interests in Central Asia, particularly after Sept. 11, 2001.

NATO should take this opportunity to further test Chinese intentions and expand areas of common interest in Central Asia. To start, there is much to learn about Beijing's successful multilateral diplomacy in Central Asia as China emerges as a far

more influential actor in this critical region. By working together to bring stability as well as political and economic development to Central Asia, China, Western nations, and their partners in the region can counter problems of terrorism and other political instability in the area. Cooperating to help establish a more secure and prosperous Central Asian region will redound in long-term strategic and economic benefits for all involved, with energy extraction at the top of the list of development priorities.

U.S.-China relations in East Asia could also benefit from gaining greater Chinese acceptance of the positive role that alliances can play in the post-Cold War world - a point over which Washington and Beijing have had longstanding differences, especially with regard to the role and intentions of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Also important, past experience demonstrates that engaging China as a partner on matters of regional and global import often results in more responsible policy from Beijing, consistent with the broad interests of the international community.

These are worthy goals to be sure, but NATO's dialogue with China should proceed with due care and realistic expectations at this early stage. Beijing probably sees NATO, at least in part, as a potential instrument for slowing potential U.S. "hegemonic" aspirations, and some in Europe would find common cause with Beijing on this score. However, NATO leaders should not let Chinese expectations and concerns form the basis for new tensions within the alliance. Additionally, NATO must avoid legitimizing Chinese practices, cloaked in the counter-terror mantle, which unjustly target and repress reasonable and peaceful political expression by the country's Uyghur minority in China's northwest region of Xinjiang.

Moreover, the traditional fear of strategic encirclement continues to weigh heavily on the minds of Chinese strategists, especially with the recently expanded U.S. force presence in countries bordering China. This problem will ultimately limit just how open Beijing will be toward political-military cooperation with the U.S. and its NATO partners in Central Asia. China will not be "co-opted" to give up its meticulously developed strategy to extend and gain from its political and economic influence in the region: China is there to stay, both literally and figuratively.

Still, with such limitations pragmatically in mind, it is well worth some initial engagement with China on its request for NATO dialogue. The direction and outcome of those discussions will tell us much about China's intentions in the new Great Game in Central Asia.

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