



**INTRO: WHAT CHINA'S CHALLENGE
TO NATO IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T**

BY ROB YORK

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For more from this author, please see his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).

The following has been adapted from the introduction to the recent *Issues & Insights* [volume](#), "Toward a Unified NATO Response to the People's Republic of China."

Following the Cold War's end there were those who questioned NATO's continued relevance. Such views may have found little currency among scholars of foreign policy and security, but among the general public it was not unheard of to wonder why, with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 its rival organization did not also become defunct, especially given the Russian Federation's friendlier tilt in the decade that followed. On the part of the United States, by the 2010's a fatigue had settled in among much of the populace over US foreign commitments, especially regarding partner countries not perceived as pulling their own weight. By the middle of that decade, that fatigue had begun to manifest itself in US election results.

Vladimir Putin's Russia, and its brazen invasion of Ukraine last year may not have succeeded in bringing Ukraine to heel or establishing Moscow as a great military power again, but it did accomplish two other things. For one, it demonstrated for the world what the countries separated by the Atlantic could achieve—even indirectly—by helping partners (even non-NATO members) acquire the means to defend themselves. For another, and for all Putin's claims to

the contrary, it showed that nations near Russia's western border have a very good reason for wanting NATO membership. Putin, more so than any mainstream American or continental European security scholar, has demonstrated the alliance's continued relevance in providing for the security of countries that desire self-determination and alignment with the liberal, rules-based international order.

As it approaches its one-year anniversary the outcome of the Ukraine war is still far from clear, as is precisely how the alliance will respond to the challenge that looms beyond it: the People's Republic of China, with its growing military might, and its economic influence. And there is broad agreement on the appropriateness of the term "challenge"—the US Department of Defense, which calls Russia an "acute threat," [uses](#) the noun "pacing challenge" to describe Beijing. Meanwhile NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept used the verb form, [declaring](#) the PRC's "stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values." The forcefulness of these words should not have come as a surprise: US partners in the European Union have been every bit as [outspoken](#) about human rights in China as Washington has, as well as against its "[malicious cyber activities](#)." Differences in priority remain, informed by economics, history, and geography (especially considering how much more imminent a threat Russia represents to Europe than the United States), but opinions on both sides of the Atlantic have shifted regarding the PRC, and for many of the same reasons.

That shift, and what policies should follow, is the subject of Pacific Forum's edited volume "Toward a Unified NATO Response to the People's Republic of China" and its accompanying [webinar](#). With a grant from the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, Pacific Forum brought together three distinguished scholars—one to discuss the evolution of views toward the PRC in the United States over the past decade, one to chart the same change in Europe, and a third to discuss how the two sides should best work together in meeting this shared challenge.

Describing the US position, Bradley Jensen Murg argues that increasing American skepticism of Beijing's intentions is not, as is frequently argued, a

unipolar action driven by the insecurity of one great power being replaced by another. Instead, he argues that it is a multifaceted evolution driven by generational change, increased awareness of the PRC's human rights record, and the failure of international institutions (such as the World Trade Organization) to contribute to PRC liberalization. He further notes that the United States' views on Beijing are no international outlier but are broadly shared, especially in Europe.

Regarding the European perspective, David Camroux notes that the thinking shifted in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09. Once a destination for European investment the PRC, thanks to its rapid recovery from the crisis and growing domestic capacity, increased its own financial presence on the European continent, arousing increasing concerns. Subsequent revelations about Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and the suppression of Hong Kong's protest movement further alienated Europe. He stresses, though, that Europe's views will likely remain distinct from Washington's to an extent—Europe does not consider Beijing a “hard security challenge” nor does it possess the hard security capabilities to meet them. Instead, it will continue minilateral engagement with regional powers such as Tokyo, Seoul, Delhi, and Canberra, to reduce dependency on the PRC in a non-confrontational way and avoid direct alignment with Washington in the emerging Great Power Competition.

Concluding the edited volume, Kelly Grieco notes the increasing comity in US and EU positions regarding the PRC, but states that, as the “North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” NATO faces practical limitations in terms of projecting power in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than working to confront Beijing militarily, European countries' most beneficial contribution to NATO would be to increase their security commitments *in Europe*—thus reducing the burden faced by the United States there—and to use their “diplomatic clout and economic, financial, and technological resources to form an effective coalition to balance against [PRC] power and influence.”

Pacific Forum hopes that these scholarly insights will find a wide audience in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, and that NATO will remain an effective partnership—not to defend Euro-American hegemony and primacy, but the values that underpin the rules-based order and its promise of a fairer, more prosperous global community. Pacific Forum also hopes that, amid their shared defense of rules and values, NATO and its partners will find avenues for some cooperation with China—at the governmental and people-to-people level—and that people from China continue to feel welcome to work, study, and live in the United States and Europe.

No one—American, European, Asian, or otherwise—should mistake our disputes with specific PRC policies and actions for antipathy toward the people of China.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.