

## EMERGING MULTIPOLARITY: A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF NATO-CHINA RELATIONS

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*Abstract:* This paper deals with the research question of how the emerging multipolar world order affects relations between NATO and the People's Republic of China. The authors analyze the changing world order from unipolarity to multipolarity, the rise of China and Russia as global security actors, and internal relations among the NATO members. The tested general hypothesis within this research is as follows: The emerging multipolarity creates very complex circumstances for adopting the appropriate NATO strategy to address the rise of China. Taking the above-mentioned into consideration and using a glimpse at international relations theory and the lessons of history, this paper seeks to find the roots of obstacles to defining an effective NATO strategy to address the rise of China as a global security actor in the contemporary world. The position of the Republic of Serbia as a neutral country in the coming multipolarity order is also examined in light of these findings.

*Keywords:* Multipolarity, NATO, China, US, Russian Federation.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Republic of Serbia authorities.

## INTRODUCTION

The multipolar system is already present at the global level, and the effects of multipolarity have begun to be visible in the European context. Any analysis based on objective military, economic, and political parameters will undoubtedly demonstrate that the United States remains the world's most powerful center. On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly apparent that some other countries have already achieved or are on their way to achieving global power status. China, India, and Russia are the most prominent examples. As a result, while the multipolar system is not yet complete, the poles that will make it up in the future are in the final phase of their maturation and shaping. Considering that it represents a combination of geo-economics, geopolitical, strategic, and military dimensions, as well as interdependence among global political forces in economics, finance, and the development of modern technologies, the emerging global multipolar international order is significantly more complex than the former bipolar system and the rivalry between the East and the West. The globalization of the market, as well as the growing development and influence of multinational corporations, have made it impossible to observe the economies of the United States and China, or any other country deserving of global power, separately in modern circumstances, as was the case during the Cold War between the economies of the United States and the Soviet Union. The aforementioned trend can also be seen in other domains, such as security and defense, particularly in the development and military application of current technologies. The decades-long presence of the unipolar system led by the United States has influenced the development and adaptation of various multilateral formats. This influence has not bypassed NATO, which has undergone significant changes since the end of the Cold War. Whether NATO, after just over 70 years of existence, will continue to be ready to deal with changes in the international order will certainly depend on the way the Western world will position itself in relation to China's growing power and its influence on the global international order. In any case, China's growth and rise can no longer be ignored if NATO wants to remain unsurpassed in securing the collective defense of its members, which, in a broader context, means protecting the values of liberal democracy. China's military capacity is steadily increasing and developing, and according to available estimates, China could catch up with the United States by 2030. However, China still lacks organizational knowledge and operational experience related to expeditionary military operations at great distances from its territory, which,

of course, is not the case with the United States. It can be stated that NATO started with strategic thinking about China in 2019 when the United States asked the European allies to join its attempt to cope with growing Chinese power. However, despite China's growing military power and its ability to project almost to NATO borders, European allies are reluctant to accept their adequate role in curbing China. As Holslag (2019, p. 137) points out, NATO's failure to respond appropriately to China's rise could undermine the alliance's importance in the new world order and increase frustration on both sides of the Atlantic, especially since some future engagement could satisfy Washington on one hand while relieving Beijing on the other. It is critical to remember Heisbourg's assumptions (2020, p. 92 and 95) that if NATO focuses entirely on Russia, it will become less and less useful in tackling future European and American security concerns. In this context, NATO's principal goal should be to maintain member states' security in the face of all difficulties coming from China's ascent, while not undermining NATO's current defense and deterrence policy directed at the Russian Federation. Admittedly, NATO has taken a significant step forward by recognizing China as a security threat to its member states and by realizing that defining its place and role in ensuring an optimal response to China's growing power and influence will be a key topic for future strategic thinking in the Euro-Atlantic community. However, it is still uncertain whether and when the strategic thinking about China, as a growing political-military force on the world stage, will be translated into a coherent policy and applicable NATO strategy. The answer to that question will be partially provided by the upcoming adoption of the new Strategic Concept, expected at the NATO summit in Madrid at the end of June 2022.

### **NATO SECURITY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER**

A report published by NATO in 2020, entitled "*NATO 2030: United for a New Era – Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the Secretary-General*", envisages a future strategic environment as unpredictable and demanding, which, besides the increased level of risks and threats at the international level, will also be characterized by the continued geopolitical rivalry of great powers, increasingly aggressive behavior of the Russian Federation, strengthening China's global agenda supported by its economic and military power, as well as intensifying the role of emerging and disruptive technologies (Yorke, 2020, p. 9). As the Reflection Group appointed by the Secretary-General notes in the report, political differences within NATO are very dangerous due to the fact that

they allow external actors, especially Russia and China, to exploit individual allies in ways that endanger their collective interests and security (*Ibidem*). Given the foregoing, the Alliance must strengthen unity, solidarity, and cohesion as vital components in maintaining its credibility and reputation, no matter how difficult this may be. That would create the conditions for NATO to be not only the protector of its region but also a source of stability for an unstable world. Thus, the hard work of achieving unity, solidarity, and cohesion, which can often seem very demanding and frustrating, is a trifle compared to the benefits that can come from it. In accordance with the recommendations of the above-mentioned Reflection Group, NATO must adapt to the needs of a more demanding strategic environment characterized by the emergence of multipolarity and thus the return of systemic rivalry among global powers. Given the above, NATO's overarching political goal should be to consolidate the Transatlantic Alliance, to ensure that it has the tools, cohesion, and consultative attributes to provide collective defense in an increasingly challenging security environment. Also, the political dimension of NATO must be adjusted to maintain and strengthen its effectiveness as well as to ensure its relevance for all member states (Yorke, 2020, p. 12). Increasingly closer ties between China and the Russian Federation have a significant impact on NATO's security, and they have heightened NATO's concerns about how to respond to this threat in practice. As Nouwens and Legarda note (2020, pp. 8-9), China-Russia relations are built on common interests, considering the United States as their main adversary. Bearing in mind that the Russian Federation is the main strategic focus of NATO, Sino-Russian cooperation has become one of the primary concerns of the Alliance. The above-mentioned became especially topical during the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Evidently, these two countries have common security interests, particularly in Central Asia and the Arctic, as well as partially complementary economies. It would be wrong to view Sino-Russian relations as a rounded alliance, given the fact that there are restrictions on what one side will do for the other one, as shown by many examples from practice, such as the lack of visible and direct Chinese support for the Russian side during the annexation of Crimea and armed conflicts in Ukraine, and the lack of support of the Russian Federation to the Chinese side in resolving disputes in the South China Sea and the border dispute with India. However, when it comes to the stance of the Russian Federation and China towards the United States and NATO, it can be said that there is a broad common basis and a high degree of coordination of potential actions, which, in any case, has negative

implications for NATO security. The above-stated is primarily reflected in the common positions taken during the vote in the United Nations Security Council (Lađevac, 2021, pp. 121-125), in intensive military-economic cooperation, and in the creation of conditions for a greater military presence at the global level. China is becoming an increasingly important global actor in relation to Russia, which may become even more visible in the coming period, depending on the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine. The negative outcome of the conflict for the Russian side will greatly harm its position in the international community. Even though there are concerns in the Russian Federation about the strengthening of Chinese power and influence on a global level, for now, it is unrealistic to expect Moscow to turn against Beijing on the modern stage of international politics. Relations between China and the Russian Federation will continue to be crucial for China's ability to project influence globally (*Ibid.*, p. 61). The current situation imposed by the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine creates conditions for even greater cooperation with China, both in the economic, financial, and energy sectors, and in the field of establishing even stronger military cooperation (*Ibid.*, pp. 103-106). It is becoming nearly impossible to implement John Mearsheimer's advice, as assessed by Heisbourg (2020, pp. 91-92), that the US should make much more effort into drawing Russia out of China's orbit and incorporating it into the order that they lead to greater containment of China. Especially in the current circumstances arising from the Ukrainian crisis, where it is clear that the American side is not ready to hand over any part of Europe to the Russian sphere of influence. The turning point in defining the position towards China and finding ways to curb it in the coming period should be the update of the current Strategic Concept from 2010, called *Active Engagement, Modern Defense*. The NATO security environment has changed dramatically since 2010, as evidenced by the fact that the Strategic Concept proposes strategic cooperation with Russia, only briefly references terrorism, and makes no mention of China (Đorđević & Glišić, 2013, pp. 43-59). The update of the Strategic Concept should be seen as an opportunity to strengthen the cohesion of the Alliance in the conditions imposed by the new strategic reality and to unite the various streams of recent adaptations into one coherent strategic picture. In this context, NATO should consider the changes that are occurring in the emerging multipolar world order, which are bolstered by the Russian Federation's and China's efforts to gain a substantial role in international politics (Yorke, 2020, p. 12). Also, according to the Reflection Group's guidelines, when updating the strategic concept, the member states should strive to preserve

NATO's three key tasks and enhance its role as a single and essential transatlantic consultation forum.<sup>1</sup>

## CHINA AND EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY

On its way to becoming a global power, China certainly represents a significant challenge for Euro-Atlantic security, especially if we keep in mind the possibility of replacing the United States on the pedestal of international politics. As indicated by the comprehensive analysis presented by Doshi (2021) in his monograph entitled *The Long Game - China's Grand Strategy to Displace the American Order*, China has managed, by implementing its blunting strategies in the period from 1989 to 2008, the building stage from 2009 to 2016, and global expansion from 2017 onwards, to significantly threaten the position of the United States as the only global power in the existing world order, through all three dimensions: political, economic, and military. In line with estimates given in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (The White House, 2021, p. 8), China is becoming increasingly intrusive and pervasive, and it is the only competitor potentially able to combine its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to pose a lasting challenge to a stable and open international system. Also, China's ambitions and intentions to reshape the international order in line with its system and national interests are becoming more obvious. In preparing the analysis of China as a significant security factor for Congress, the United States Department of Defense pays special attention to China's national strategy to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049, as well as to its efforts to strengthen the People's Liberation Army (Department of Defense, 2021) as much as possible. In accordance with the above-stated, two time-separated goals for the modernization of the Chinese army are visible. The first goal implies the completion of essential and necessary modernization by 2035, while the second refers to the transformation of the People's Liberation Army into a "world-class" armed force by 2049, when the centennial of the founding of the People's Republic of China will be marked. The above-mentioned report of the Ministry of Defense (Department of Defense, 2021, pp. III-XII) provides certain conclusions and recommendations on the basis of which the main characteristics of Chinese development and its potential impact on the

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<sup>1</sup> NATO's key tasks according to the Strategic Concept of Active Engagement, Modern Defense are: (1) Collective Defense; (2) Crisis Management; and (3) Cooperative Security.

United States and NATO can be considered. The “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” strategy by 2049 aims to make China equal to the United States or even surpass American global influence and power in international politics, displace the existing alliances and partnerships in the field of security that the US side has in the Indo-Pacific region, and revise the international order in accordance with the authoritarian system in Beijing and its national interests. In line with the foregoing, China is increasingly willing to oppose the United States and other countries in areas where their interests diverge. In this context, it recognized in 2019 the need for its armed forces to play a more active role in advancing foreign policy, emphasizing the more global character that Beijing attributes to its military power. China is stepping up its efforts to implement its development strategy based on military-civilian fusion to ensure synergy between its economic, social, and security development to build an integrated national strategic system and capabilities that will serve the Chinese national rejuvenation. Military-civil fusion primarily refers to the development and acquisition of advanced dual-use technologies, as well as to the deepening of the reform of the scientific system relevant to defense. China’s military strategy is based on the concept of “active defense” and accordingly dominates strengthening the People’s Liberation Army. In November 2020, the Communist Party of China published a document entitled “Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (trial)”, which is described as “top-level law” in China’s doctrinal system, and which should, among other things, strengthen requirements and procedures for joint operations, combat support, mobilization, and political work. Besides, the Chinese leadership is increasingly advocating that the People’s Liberation Army should take a more active role in achieving national foreign policy goals, so the revision of the law on the national defense of the Chinese armed forces is tasked with defending “overseas development interests”. In parallel with the growing interest of China at the global level, there is growing pressure on the People’s Liberation Army to develop the capabilities needed for an engagement abroad. Accordingly, the Chinese military is continuously improving its presence abroad, including assistance in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. It has already been recognized as a significant contributor to the United Nations peacekeeping operations, which is certainly a good opportunity to gain experience in deploying military forces outside its borders. Also, China is trying to establish the strongest possible overseas logistics and the necessary infrastructure for basing forces in order to provide the People’s Liberation Army with the best possible conditions for projecting power over long distances. In addition to the base in Djibouti,

China is looking for additional opportunities in other countries to support the projection of the strength of its armed forces. China has been continuously increasing its defense budget for more than 20 years and is currently the second-largest military power in the world, after the United States, but with the strongest navy. However, it should still be borne in mind that the armed forces of the United States have over 750 overseas bases in over 100 countries, and that they participate in the total defense costs at the global level with 45% (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2014, p. 82). In any case, based on available indicators, particularly those given by the United States Intelligence Community (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021, pp. 6-9), China is becoming an increasingly important global and regional actor, seeking to use coordinated instruments of the entire government to demonstrate its growing strength and force regional neighbors to agree to Beijing's preferences, including its claims to disputed territories and claims to sovereignty over Taiwan. Tensions on the China-India border remain high despite withdrawals from some locations along the disputed border. Increasingly frequent activities and a larger presence in the South China Sea are signaling to Southeast Asian countries that China has effective control over disputed areas. China is similarly putting pressure on Japan over disputed areas in the East China Sea. In addition, Beijing will intensify pressure on the Taiwanese authorities to move towards unification and condemn what it sees as increased engagement between the United States and Taiwan. Also, there is growing cooperation between China and Russia in areas of complementary interest, with a focus on economic cooperation, but also in the field of defense, which has become especially evident in recent years. As for the nuclear program, China will continue to expand and diversify the platform of its nuclear arsenal in its history, with the intention of at least doubling the size of its nuclear stockpiles over the next decade, thus setting up a nuclear triad. Beijing is not interested in arms control agreements that might limit its modernization plans and will not agree to substantive negotiations that lock in the nuclear advantages of the United States or Russia. It is evident that China is building larger and more capable nuclear missile forces that are more resilient, diverse, and better prepared than they were in the past. China's activities to gain dominance in space are also intensifying. Beijing is working hard to equalize or surpass the United States' space capabilities. According to the above, the People's Liberation Army of China will continue to integrate its capabilities, such as satellite reconnaissance and positioning, navigation, and satellite communications. As for cyberspace, it is estimated that China can trigger cyber-attacks that can cause, at the very least, localized and temporary



disruptions to the critical infrastructure of the United States. On the other hand, China is a world leader in the application of surveillance and censorship systems to monitor its population in order to preserve the unity of the party and the people. Also, China will continue to expand its global intelligence activities to support growing political, economic, and security interests around the world, increasingly challenging the alliances and partnerships of the United States, particularly in its region. Across East Asia and the Western Pacific, which Beijing considers its natural sphere of influence, China is trying to exploit doubts about the United States' commitment to the region, undermining Taiwanese democracy and expanding its influence. In any case, China will continue to intensify its efforts to shape the political environment in the United States, including promoting its political preferences, directing public discourse, pressuring political figures who Beijing believes oppose its interests, and dampening China's criticism on issues such as religious freedom and the suppression of democracy in Hong Kong. In line with the position of Western countries, the scope of China's power and global reach are acute challenges for open and democratic societies, especially due to China's aspirations for greater authoritarianism and strengthening its territorial ambitions. For most allies, China is both an economic competitor and a significant trading partner. China is, therefore, best understood as a systemic rival across the whole spectrum and not as a purely economic player or just a security actor focused on Asia. Although China does not pose an immediate military threat to the Euro-Atlantic area, like the Russian Federation, it is expanding its military reach to the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Arctic, deepening defense ties with Russia and developing modern weapons and military equipment, including a growing nuclear arsenal. The Euro-Atlantic community is increasingly feeling China's influence in every area. At the same time, through its initiatives, China is gaining more and more infrastructure across Europe, with a potential impact on communications and interoperability. Yet, as the Reflection Group claims (Yorke, 2020, p. 18), due to its economic development, China is a driver of global growth, trade, and investment and a significant investor in many NATO countries. It has started to develop a strategic and commercial presence in the Euro-Atlantic area through the Belt and Road Initiative, the 16+1 format (then 17+1, and afterwards China-CEE), numerous bilateral agreements, and the implementation of the military-civil fusion strategy. The member states will continue to build relations with China, enhance economic and trade ties, and seek to cooperate with China on issues such as climate change and biodiversity. Also, China has a central

role when it comes to facing global challenges, such as the goals of sustainable development.

## NATO AND CHINA

NATO-China relations practically did not exist until the early 2000s. The growth of China's international influence gave impetus to the opening of political dialogue between the two sides in 2003, which later contributed to the establishment of military cooperation in 2010. It is important to point out that the relations between NATO and China have never been formalized but a regular political dialogue has been established at several levels. China's growing power and growing self-confidence are very important geopolitical and geo-economic factors that greatly influence the change in NATO's strategic calculations. In light of the above, the Trump administration and some members of Congress have called on NATO to assess the security implications of growing Chinese investment in Europe and to step up its efforts to combat potential negative impacts on transatlantic security. As expressed in the US National Security Strategy from December 2017 (The White House, 2017, p. 47), US officials are increasingly concerned that China is gaining a strategic foothold in Europe by spreading its unfair trade practices and investing in key industries, sensitive technologies, and infrastructure. China's investments in key infrastructure and telecommunications systems, such as 5G networks, are of particular concern, with some reports suggesting that the US could limit military cooperation and intelligence sharing with allies who allow Chinese investment in telecommunications networks. At the NATO summit in London in December 2019, it was emphasized that China's growing influence represents both an opportunity and a challenge to be addressed at the Alliance level (NATO, 2019, Para. 6). It is important to note that this is a significant change in NATO's policy towards China. On that occasion, the NATO Secretary-General emphasized that such an attitude was not encouraged by NATO's intention to move to the South China Sea but by the fact that China was increasing its influence and expanding its activities in the Euro-Atlantic area. Although it is welcome as a first step, the reference to China in the London Declaration must be accompanied by the adjustment of NATO's strategic documents and, above all, the Strategic Concept. In view of the above, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg instructed the Reflection Group in 2020 to prepare a set of ideas and guidelines that the allies should consider as they move towards the development of a new Strategic Concept. It can be said that the Reflection Group has rather sharply

defined the challenge arising from China's growing power and role in international relations, arguing that this country is "best understood as a systemic rival of the whole spectrum, rather than a purely economic player or security actor focused only on Asia". At the NATO summit in Brussels in June 2021, the process of developing a new Strategic Concept was launched and the Reflection Group report was adopted. The heads of state and government of NATO defined China in Brussels as "a systemic challenge to the international order based on the rules and areas relevant to the security of the Alliance." On that occasion, Beijing's nuclear arsenal, which is growing rapidly, military cooperation between China and the Russian Federation, and the use of disinformation campaigns were mentioned. The interest in engaging with China on issues of common interest, such as climate change, was reaffirmed, and a call for "reciprocal transparency and understanding" in the nuclear field was made. However, according to both Bloch and Goldgeier (2021), the statement remained unclear as to which tools NATO should use to respond to the challenges posed by Beijing, probably leaving the space for the above-mentioned to be covered by the new Strategic Concept, which will be adopted in Madrid at the end of June 2022, as well as the documents that would follow its adoption. According to the Reflection Group assessments (Yorke, 2020, p. 12), NATO must devote much more time, political effort, and concrete action to address China as a security challenge based on an assessment of its national capabilities, economic strength, and stated ideological goals. NATO needs to develop a strategy to move closer to a world in which China will be increasingly important by 2030. This includes an adequate assessment of the impact of China's technological development, as well as monitoring and protection against any Chinese activities that could affect collective defense, military readiness, or resilience in the Alliance's area of responsibility.

As the Reflection Group claims (*Ibid.*, p. 17), China represents a completely different kind of challenge for NATO than the Russian Federation, both in essence and in the scope of military engagement. Unlike the Russian Federation, China does not currently pose a direct military threat to the Euro-Atlantic region. However, China has an increasingly recognizable global strategic agenda, backed by its economic and military strength. China has proven its readiness to use force against its neighbors, as well as economic coercion and intimidating diplomacy far beyond the Indo-Pacific region. In the upcoming period, China's further development is likely to influence NATO in building adequate capabilities for collective resilience, protection of critical infrastructure and sensitive sectors, including supply chains, and to focus on the development and deployment of new

technologies, such as 5Gnets. In the long run, the assumption is that China will project military power on a global level, including potentially in the Euro-Atlantic area. It is important to emphasize here that industrial policy and the military-civil fusion strategy are central components of China's systemic challenge to NATO. Military modernization in all domains, including nuclear, naval, and missile capabilities, introduces new risks and potential threats to NATO and its strategic stability. According to the Reflection Group estimates (*Ibid.*, p.36), China has growing capabilities for long-range missile strikes, which poses a significant threat to the Euro-Atlantic area, while expanding its work on modern technologies. In a broader context, modern technologies will change the nature of warfare and enable new forms of attacks by hypersonic missiles and hybrid operations. Modern technologies also play a significant role in space, which has become NATO's operational domain and will continue to evolve as Russia and China increase their capabilities. The development of sophisticated military technologies for engagement in space by Russia and China threatens the allies' security, and space is becoming a new arena of geopolitical competition. Likewise, as noted by the Reflection Group (*Ibid.*, p. 27), China's ambition to become a world leader in artificial intelligence by 2030 and the world's leading global technology superpower by 2049 should not be overlooked. Also, according to the Reflection Group (*Ibid.*, p. 17), China is conducting more frequent and intensive disinformation campaigns in numerous allied countries, theft of intellectual property with implications for the security and prosperity of allied countries, as well as cyber-attacks. In addition to the above, and as stated by Bloch and Goldgeier (2021, p. 4), Chinese control of a growing part of critical European infrastructure, from telecommunications networks to port facilities, directly affects NATO's readiness, achievement of interoperability, and secure communication. Although China does not pose the traditional threat as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War, Chinese warships and planes are still engaged in the eastern Mediterranean, the North Atlantic, and the Arctic, and the Chinese military is conducting joint exercises with the Russian military in the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea. Also, Beijing now controls about 10% of the capacity of European ports, primarily along the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, including Piraeus in Greece, Valencia in Spain, and Zeebrugge in Belgium. Besides, China's challenge to NATO stems not only from the deployment of its military forces but also from investments in technology, including 5G, as well as from its role in supply chains at the global level, which could significantly jeopardize NATO's combat capabilities. In view of the recommendations of the Reflection Group (Yorke,

2020, pp. 26-28), NATO should improve its ability to coordinate strategy and maintain allies' security vis-à-vis China. There is a critical need to increase the political coordination of NATO-allied countries on issues where China's stance is contrary to their security interests. The Alliance should continue its ongoing efforts to address and solve China's challenges through existing structures. Also, NATO should increase its capabilities to adequately anticipate and respond in a timely manner to Chinese activities that undermine the Alliance's security, including countering China's military-civil fusion strategy. On the other hand, NATO should keep open the possibility of political dialogue with China on common interests and differences, such as arms control. Given the already existing China-Russia relations, it is necessary to improve NATO's institutional capacity to monitor, analyze, and assess how cooperation between the two countries in the military, technological, and political fields, including coordination in disinformation campaigns and hybrid warfare, affects Euro-Atlantic security. Looking ahead to 2030, NATO will have to secure a position that will allow it to protect itself from any attempts by China to use coercion against the member states, implying the assumption that China will not be able to take advantage of the differences between them. NATO's future engagement with China is very problematic without an adequate strategy. According to Connolly (2020, p. 1), a confrontation between China and the Euro-Atlantic community is neither desirable nor inevitable, while NATO's failure to adequately respond to China's growth and manage the challenges it poses could make confrontation more likely over time. In this context, it would indeed be irresponsible for the Euro-Atlantic community and its institutions to continue to delay revising their strategies and capabilities in light of the profound changes brought about by China's growing power and current behavior in international relations. The lack of an adequate strategy, as Holslag (2019, p. 138) points out, can enable China to do what it practiced in its neighborhood, to accept dialogue to reduce criticism, but continue to change the balance of power on the ground, i.e., to accept dialogue not with the intention of being cooperative but to increase the strength needed to ignore the concerns of its so-called associates and partners. From the point of view of European NATO members, China has so far been largely perceived as an economic rival, with sporadic challenges related to global governance, security, and very rarely military concerns. However, the situation is changing significantly and requires new approaches, especially bearing in mind that the combined Russian-Chinese naval presence in the NATO lobby during the exercise activities exceeded the presence of naval forces of European member states, calling into question their naval power.

In modern circumstances, China's shift from a policy of restraint and non-interference to greater self-confidence is evident, reaffirming its ambitions as a force with global interests, which includes joining the Russian Federation in resistance to Western influence (Đorđević & Jeremić, 2016, pp. 469-473). According to Holslag (2019, p.140), in the circumstances of the development of the Belt and Road Initiative and the melting of the polar ice, China is beginning to see the Eurasian soil as one big geopolitical field for a game, with the final aim reflected in significant strategic changes. In order to win that game, China is investing heavily in the development and production of strategic aircraft and aircraft carriers, as well as regulating ports and harbors around the world. Thus, China expects free access to navigation in the European seas while seeking to restrict freedom of navigation in its own and neighboring seas, using the most prestigious means and mechanisms to implement the concept of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD). Regardless of the above-stated facts about the growth of Chinese power and its projection into the "NATO yard", the security consequences of China's rise are not of major importance for European NATO members. Namely, as Holslag (2019, pp.144-145) notes, European countries have long since abandoned their ambition to maintain military dominance, while the United States has maintained the assumption that the best security guarantee is to remain number one, despite the fact that several European nations have long agreed to second-class military status. There is no doubt that these circumstances have a negative effect on NATO's view of China as a security threat. However, in a broader context, European allies are beginning to realize that NATO must address the political, defense, and security challenges posed by China. According to Connolly (2020, p. 24), for allies from Central and Eastern Europe, the urgency of the Chinese challenge is overshadowed by Russia's challenge, but they are ready to support the United States' position in exchange for its continued commitment to Europe's territorial defense. However, several allies continue to look to China more through the lens of economic opportunities rather than security challenges, including cooperation with China under the Belt and Road initiative. When analyzing such a complex problem, we must not omit the fact that China is a major geo-economic issue, which may negatively affect the efforts undertaken or which would be undertaken by NATO to curb its growth and development. In fact, the key factor in this process is the European Union. According to Biskop (2021), it is not up to NATO or the United States to decide which Chinese investments can and cannot be allowed in the European Union. So, if the United States wants to do something about China in the areas not primarily related to defense, the

solution is not to channel their activities and efforts through NATO but to talk directly with the European Union. This would have a positive impact on NATO's ability to focus on its core tasks, i.e., deterrence and defense. In any case, the United States will try to use the process of drafting and adopting a new Strategic Concept to sharpen NATO's focus on the threats posed by Beijing, but will also keep in mind that NATO is less important and effective than the European Union in dealing with Beijing in the field of economic and technological challenges. Given the above, it is to be expected that any effort by the United States and its allies to respond to China will require overcoming NATO's borders. For the needs of this paper, it is of special importance to emphasize that China is gradually starting to defy NATO from the position where it is the weakest, testing its essential principle of solidarity and commitment to the defense of common values by relying on different perceptions of security among European member states. To NATO's great regret and disappointment, there are very deep divisions among European allies stemming from various political, historical, and geographical factors. In a general sense, and unrelated to defining relations with China, there are deep divisions among European allies, primarily between Greece and Turkey due to territorial conflicts, and between Turkey and France due to different attitudes towards the civil war in Libya. In addition to the above, when considering the importance of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, for some partners such as Turkey, France, and Germany, it does not occupy an important place in their foreign policy priorities. There are considerable differences among the allies in terms of defining a common position and approach to China. In general, among the European countries, Lithuania is the most committed to suppressing China's influence, while Turkey has by far the mildest approach. Besides Turkey, several European NATO members, most notably France, Germany, Italy, and Portugal, oppose the idea of NATO taking a full role in China's politico-military containment. They want to limit interaction with China to dialogue and selective cooperation, arguing that Beijing should not be seen as an adversary and that multilateral cooperation should be strengthened instead. This is especially relevant given the fact that European public opinion is often skeptical of NATO as a military alliance because the United States has used it inefficiently in some conflicts, especially in Afghanistan. Even the officials of several European countries were of the opinion that, unlike the United States, China has no globalist aspirations or historical facts that would indicate power projections in distant regions. When we move from the general to the thematic levels, Denmark, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Estonia, Canada, and Germany are especially interested in suppressing

China's activities in cyberspace. Regarding the use of Huawei equipment for the introduction of 5G networks, the allies are also divided. On the one hand, the US, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have already imposed restrictions on this company's operations, but that is not the case with Chinese investments in Italy, Greece, Hungary, and Portugal. In addition to the above, even though the Indo-Pacific region is an area of high importance for the United States, this is not the case when analyzing the interests of European allies. This region is, to some extent, of strategic importance for the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands, but not for the realization of the national interests of the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and other NATO members. In light of China's activities in the Arctic, the containment of Beijing is of particular interest to Canada, Denmark, and the Baltic states, while for other NATO members, it is not an issue that occupies a high place on their strategic geopolitical agenda. Looking at the Belt and Road initiative, Italy and Greece have become key points of this Chinese economic project. According to Western officials, China's economic initiatives have reshaped the regional balance of power, deepened divisions within the European Union and lured weak European countries and large, influential companies into economic dependence. This is especially evident during the establishment and implementation of the initiative for cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, better known as China-CEEC, or as a 16+1 format, bearing in mind that as many as 12 NATO members participate in it. The future of this initiative is being questioned by many because of its negative impact on NATO unity. On the other hand, according to Nouwens and Legarda (2020, p. 6), the Chinese leadership sees NATO as an alliance focused on the United States and thus as a tool that Washington can use to maintain its global dominance and prevent China from coming to the pedestal of international politics, especially bearing in mind the "century of humiliation" from 1839 to 1949. So, according to China, the United States needs NATO to support its "global hegemony". Given the above, Beijing sees NATO as another component in its broader geopolitical competition with the United States. Since relations between the United States and China have deteriorated over the past few years, the Chinese side has repeatedly expressed concern that Washington could force NATO to define China as a new adversary. Also, the Chinese leadership sees NATO as a "legacy of the Cold War", which has lost its legitimacy after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and therefore seeks a new enemy to justify its existence. China will continue to strive to disintegrate NATO unity through the economic, strategic, and security dimensions. As Una Aleksandra Berzina-Chernkova



states (2021, pp. 54-55), according to Chinese estimates, many NATO member states, primarily Germany and the United Kingdom, consider economic growth based on bilateral cooperation with China to be very significant. Also, France, in its intentions to implement the idea of Europe's strategic autonomy, is not yet ready to support the position of the United States towards China. Of course, in terms of security, the Chinese side never omits the fact that the Indo-Pacific region is an area of interest for the United States but not its European allies. Bearing in mind that the position of each member state is crucial in defining NATO's final approach and strategy towards China's growing power and role in international relations, it is certain that all future scientific research dealing with this topic will be largely based on neoclassical realism. In fact, neoclassical realism is a theory that retains a neorealist emphasis on international structure as the primary determinant of state action but also introduces typicalities that occur at the unit level as intervening variables. As Sperling (2017) argues, resorting to a unit (or state) level of analysis avoids the determinism of neorealism, explains the choice of national foreign policy in conditions of uncertainty, and captures the objective link between systemic necessity and domestic choice. The above-stated implies that the analytical logic of neoclassical realism can be summarized as follows: external changes in the relative distribution of power (independent variable) are broken through domestic constraints and possibilities (intervening variables) that generate the most common cases of unusual and unexpected foreign policy (dependent variable). According to the above-mentioned author, neoclassical realism was revived in the study of NATO's strategic approach during its engagement in Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011, when it became very clear that the Alliance was prone to internal dysfunction, which was later shown in Syria. Given the above, non-functional realism can be a potentially powerful framework for understanding strategic thinking within NATO, especially where there are difficulties among the member states in defining an appropriate response to a generally recognized security threat, as is the case with defining an appropriate NATO strategy to restrain the growing power and influence of China.

### **MILITARY NEUTRALITY OF SERBIA IN THE AGE OF MULTIPOLARITY**

The transition of the world order from unipolar to multipolar creates increasingly difficult circumstances for preserving the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia and also for its eventual accession to the European

Union, if it wants to preserve the status of a military-neutral state. The Republic of Serbia declared its military neutrality in December 2007, when the National Assembly adopted a Resolution on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia. The National Assembly passed a resolution declaring the Republic of Serbia's military neutrality in relation to current military alliances until a prospective referendum is conducted, at which a definitive decision on the matter would be made. It is evident here that the decision on military neutrality was made at a time of unipolarity, with the dominant role of the United States and NATO. Implementation and consistent adherence to the concept of military neutrality is incomparably easier during the unipolar or bipolar world order. However, in the conditions of multipolarity, preserving the concept of military neutrality faces many challenges, primarily because the concept itself must comprehend, accept, and respect far more actors of global influence than in the unipolar and bipolar world orders. This viewpoint is supported by the recent decisions of Sweden and Finland, two nations with a long history of military neutrality, to begin the process of joining NATO. Explaining the possible economic benefits of the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia, Stojković and Glišić (2018, p. 597) present this concept as a result of the development and influence of various historical and political factors in the late 20th and early 21st century, stating the fact that neutrality itself is traditionally different from the neutrality of military neutral states. The Republic of Serbia's military neutrality implies that it relies primarily on its own capabilities to protect national interests, but it does not rule out close cooperation with other countries, as well as alliances and international organizations such as NATO, CSTO, and the European Union. Accordingly, since declaring military neutrality, the Republic of Serbia has made significant efforts to improve military cooperation, primarily with the permanent members of the Security Council (China, the Russian Federation, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States), as well as with NATO under the auspices of the Partnership for Peace and the European Union under the auspices of the Common Security and Defense Policy. Some of the mentioned actors, primarily NATO, have made public statements several times that they recognize and respect the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia, especially when certain countries reacted to the purchase of military equipment from the Russian Federation and China, and after the reaction to the joint exercises with members of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces. Given the fact that the removal of world orders and global powers from the pedestal of international politics almost always results in armed confrontations,

maintaining the Republic of Serbia's military neutrality is a significant matter with a very unclear future. As a result of the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar order, the influence of the Russian Federation and China is becoming increasingly obvious, both in the Western Balkans and on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. According to Western officials and analysts, the Russian Federation has a very negative impact on the interests of the United States, NATO, and the EU in the Western Balkans. According to Larsen (2020, p. 2), the Russian Federation does not see the Western Balkans as a sphere of privileged interest, as is the case with Ukraine or the South Caucasus. However, the Russian side has a special geopolitical interest in the region, strengthened by its historical and religious ties, especially bearing in mind that the Western Balkans is "Europe's weak periphery", where Russia can project power by gathering local resistance to regional integration into NATO and the European Union. China is a relatively new but fast-growing power in the Western Balkans, with significant investments. Since launching its Belt and Road initiative, China has funded several significant construction projects in the Western Balkans. China has allocated more than six billion euros in loans to the Western Balkans, mainly for the energy and transport sectors (Larsen, 2020, p. 3). On the one hand, the Belt and Road initiative opens up new opportunities for trade development, modernization of energy capacities, and filling of significant infrastructural gaps, which certainly contribute to visible economic growth. Chinese investments, on the other hand, decelerate the substantial changes required for eventual EU membership and alter the geopolitical and geo-economic landscape of the region.

## CONCLUSIONS

The emerging multipolar order also has a significant impact on changing the relationship between NATO and China. During the unipolar world, NATO had almost no cooperation with China or significant interaction in international politics. The cooperation was primarily aimed at calming the crisis situation in Afghanistan and countering the activities in the Gulf of Aden, as well as some joint activities in the fields of training and education. Some NATO officials considered establishing a NATO-China Council based on the NATO-Russia Council but withdrew from it, given the limited scope of institutionalized cooperation with the Russian Federation, especially since 2014, i.e., after the annexation of Crimea. However, the situation has changed significantly with China becoming a global power and investing more and more effort in global expansion, which has become increasingly

visible since 2017. China's growing power in the political, economic, and military dimensions bothers the United States the most, given its desire to maintain its global dominance, which includes protecting its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. With the growing influence of China in international politics, the United States is trying to include NATO in restraining Beijing, which was not the case in the previous period. According to US officials, China poses a threat to the collective security and prosperity of allies. However, according to Bishop (2021), the Biden administration is far more flexible in its assessment of China than the previous one, and it believes that strategic competition does not and should not prohibit cooperation and engagement with China when it is in the US's best interests. So, it is very close to the position of the European Union that China is a partner, competitor, and rival at the same time. However, American and European interests do not completely overlap. For the United States, China's rise is much more problematic than for the European Union. It is certain that the attitude and role of NATO in curbing Beijing on its path to the pedestal of international politics will depend on the attitude of the United States towards China. For the Euro-Atlantic community, the Chinese challenge is not primarily military but is mainly focused on areas where NATO has neither strong expertise nor any regulatory competencies, such as economic issues, new technology development, and foreign investment. Given the above, improving NATO's partnership with the European Union and with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region is essential for a successful response to China's growing power and influence. The establishment of the trilateral pact AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US) in September 2021 shows that the United States is aware of that. As far as the military sphere is concerned, the challenge is certainly the increasingly visible expansion and projection of China's military power, both regionally and globally. However, in practice, China's military restraint has been primarily on a bilateral level, with occasional activities of the naval forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and, to a lesser extent, Germany in the Indo-Pacific region. It is necessary to keep in mind the fact that only a very small number of NATO member states have naval capacities that would enable engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the fact that some NATO members do not want to provoke China. In order to define a comprehensive and objective conclusion on the subject, it is important to note that throughout NATO's existence there has been a debate on the possibilities of its engagement at the global level for the interests of individual member states outside the area defined by Article 6 of the Washington Treaty. As Webber, Sperling, and Smith note (2021, pp. 20-21),

during the Cold-War bloc division of the world, NATO had no military engagement to fulfill its purpose of collective defense, despite the fact that some member states had very large challenges to pursue their national interests, such as the United States in Vietnam, the United Kingdom in the Falkland Islands, France in Algeria, and the colonial powers of Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands in preserving their colonial possessions. However, after the end of the Cold War and the replacement of the bipolar international order with a unipolar one, NATO began the practice of military engagement outside its area of responsibility, according to the often uttered slogan “out of area or out of business”. With the adoption of the Strategic Concept from 1991 in addition to collective defense and crisis management, the military operations outlined in Article 5 of the Washington Agreement have become a daily practice of NATO, as evidenced by the examples of Afghanistan and the Balkans. However, even during the unipolar international order and the supremacy of the United States, the allies debated NATO’s engagement at the global level, such as in Iraq. Observing the development and changes of NATO during the transition of the international order from bipolar to unipolar, as noted by Glišić, Stojković and Lađevac (2019, pp. 327-349), this alliance was very skilful in finding new tasks that would be its responsibility to justify its existence. It is certain that this approach has secured NATO the epithet of the most successful military alliance in history. Whether it will remain the most successful military alliance during the multipolar period will certainly depend on its ability to adequately counter China’s growing power and role in international relations, but also on the fact that the Indo-Pacific region is primarily a US zone of interest. As already mentioned, in terms of NATO’s place and role in countering China’s growing influence, the United States’ position has evolved significantly. Initially, the US administration was more in favor of a division of labor with European allies, expecting them to take greater responsibility for European security, freeing up US resources to redirect to the Indo-Pacific region. However, the changing geopolitical reality and China’s growing strategic foothold in Europe in recent years have prompted the United States to reconsider this approach and give NATO a greater role in dealing with it. This became especially evident with the arrival of the Trump administration, which, in its relations with European allies under the auspices of NATO, advocated priorities related to the fight against terrorism, more equal distribution of burdens among allies, and restraint of China. Thus, with the era of the Trump administration, the position is abandoned that the United States, together with its partners, such as Japan and South Korea, engage in restraining China, and that NATO retains its

role in the European contingent to restrain the Russian Federation and carry out certain regional interventions, such as the intervention in Libya in 2011. In view of all the above, it can be concluded that the multipolar world order imposes very complex conditions for the adoption of an appropriate NATO strategy to counter China's growing power and influence. This is primarily reflected in ensuring unity among European allies, especially when considering the influence of China through various levers of economic cooperation, including the Belt and Road initiative, the 16+1 cooperation format, and China-CEEC. The seriousness of this conclusion is especially indicated by the data presented in the Bloomberg review in 2018, showing that Chinese investments in Europe are almost twice as large as the US's. Also, the fact that China is a rival on a wide range of issues significantly complicates finding an adequate NATO response to curb China, which is especially related to the economic dimension and the development of modern technologies. In any case, the big question for NATO is whether it is prepared to stand up to rising Chinese influence or whether it will continue to ignore it. The demand to focus more on China has grown significantly in recent years at NATO headquarters, but a full consensus on that issue has yet to be reached. On the other hand, Beijing will continue to be cautious about NATO's intentions and will continue with its intentions to separate the United States from European allies, especially targeting France and Germany by strengthening economic and trade relations. The big question is whether NATO will be able to cope with two challenges in the future brought by the multipolar order: China and Russia. This could represent its end, but it could also be a great incentive for its revival, which should include reconsideration and amendment of Article 10 of the Washington Treaty to create conditions for membership of some partner countries that cooperate with NATO under the auspices of the Partners Across the Globe program, primarily Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand. A possible NATO membership of the three countries would certainly have a positive effect on strengthening its ability to face China's growing power and role. Any future strategic consideration of how NATO can contain China, including the development and implementation of a new Strategic Concept, should give priority to a global approach over NATO's global presence. This is especially important if we keep in mind the fact that China is a long-term issue. On the other hand, Russia will remain an immediate and unpredictable challenge in the coming period, which is best shown by the current situation in Ukraine. It is to be expected that many of the issues raised here will be better understood after the adoption of the new Strategic Concept at the upcoming NATO summit

in Madrid, scheduled for late June this year. Without any doubt, our conclusion is that the emerging multipolar order will significantly complicate the Republic of Serbia's position as a military neutral state and will have a substantial negative impact on the realization of the Republic of Serbia's path to full integration into the European Union if it wishes to maintain military neutrality.

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