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**New developments in NATO-
China relations and their
potential impact on Sweden's
future relations with China**

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Executive summary

- In 2019, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) decided to prioritise China as a security concern. At the time, members had disparate views about how to approach China, but their analyses of China have since increasingly converged. Nonetheless, the discussion on how much of NATO's focus should be on China is still ongoing. NATO's most recent communiqué, from July 2023, describes China as striving "to subvert the rules-based international order".
- The areas about which NATO is most concerned with regard to China, such as cyberspace and space, are primarily global and have the potential to directly affect Euro-Atlantic hard security. The exception is the intensification of the partnership between Russia and China since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which could also have a direct impact on Euro-Atlantic hard security. Partly because of NATO's worries about China, the organisation's collaborations with its Asia-Pacific partners have also deepened.
- China's tone, official view on and concerns about NATO sum up the country's approach to the organisation. China's tone became more negative after NATO mentioned China in its strategic concept for the first time in 2022. China's long-standing official view of NATO is that it is a relic of the Cold War manipulated by the US at the expense of European strategic autonomy. China's biggest concern, however, is not Europe but whether NATO will involve itself more in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Chinese-Swedish bilateral relations are unlikely to change in the short term because of Sweden's NATO membership. Long before Sweden submitted its application, China believed that Sweden's loyalties belonged to the NATO camp. Sweden's NATO membership will therefore not change China's fundamental approach to Sweden.
- In contrast, Sweden may have adopted NATO's viewpoint, or at least rhetoric, on China in connection with its NATO application process. I also suggest that NATO membership might increase the possibility that the government could start to reinterpret existing Swedish regulations on military exports to allow Sweden to export military materiel to Taiwan in case of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.
- The impact of Sweden's NATO membership on its relations with China is likely to depend on how NATO-China relations develop in the Indo-Pacific region. Future events could have considerable ramifications for NATO-China relations, and hence also for Sweden as a future NATO member. While I deem it improbable that Article 5 (the collective defence clause) of the North Atlantic Treaty would be triggered if a military conflict broke out between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region, there are other ways in which NATO could intervene if such an event occurred.

Introduction

This report presents an overview of some of the most recent developments in NATO-China relations and considers their potential impact on Sweden-China relations once Sweden becomes a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). My analysis is based on material collected from primary and secondary texts, as well as interviews with officials and scholars who work with or on NATO. The report's 7 sections progressively shift from a focus on NATO-China relations to how NATO-China relations might affect Sweden-China relations in the future. Section 1 is this introduction. Section 2 lays out how I have chosen to methodologically interpret the general narrative about NATO. Sections 3 to 6 provide a brief history of the rationale that undergirded previous NATO expansions, an account of NATO's current worries about China, an examination of the Russia factor in NATO-China relations, and an outline of China's worries about a NATO expansion into the Indo-Pacific region. Sections 7 and 8 deal with how Sweden's relations with China might change following NATO membership and a scenario study of how Sweden might have to act as a NATO member in the eventuality of a military conflict between China and the US. Section 9 presents the conclusions of the report.

NATO as the existing alliance and “NATO” as a metonym

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO has resurfaced as a topic of greater currency in discussions among pundits and in news coverage, at least compared to five years ago when President of France Emmanuel Macron called the organisation “brain dead”.¹ The invasion is frequently said to have given NATO a new lease of life, echoing the statement of a British official in the 1970s that “Moscow could always be counted on to save NATO”.² Chinese media have also closely followed the course of the war and mentions of NATO increased significantly after the full-scale invasion.³ It is in itself unremarkable that Chinese media are reporting on a global event, but that editorials published by official media outlets and the Chinese government are increasingly making more direct comments about NATO, its policies and its actions does warrant attention. This is even more noteworthy given that mention of NATO was almost entirely absent from Chinese official communications in the two decades before the full-scale invasion. Between 2002 and 2020, NATO was directly mentioned only 18 times in the regular press conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, compared with the US that was mentioned almost 5000 times in the same period.⁴



Figure 1 Number of times NATO was mentioned in Chinese media, 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022.⁵

NATO currently occupies a critical position in global affairs but discussion of the organisation is complicated by various ambiguities, not the least because statements which refer to “NATO” do not necessarily denote the existing alliance named NATO. “NATO” often functions as a metonym for multilateral military defence alliance and has at times stood-in for other concepts and entities. A similar case in everyday language would be how the word xeroxing, derived from the company Xerox, came to mean copying a document using a photocopier. The by-now classic international relations question: “why is there no NATO in Asia?”, most famously articulated by Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, is not a discussion about why NATO has not expanded to Asia – it is about why there is no NATO-like organisation in Asia.⁶ Similarly, when Kai He in May 2023 wrote about the potential emergence of an “Asian NATO”, he meant an “Asian equivalent to the transatlantic security alliance”.⁷ When the former British Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister Liz Truss called for an “economic NATO” to counter Beijing’s authoritarianism, this was conceptualised as a “network of liberty” in which “free nations” worked together to push back China.⁸ “NATO” as an economic alliance is thus transformed into something far-removed from the mission of the existing NATO alliance. Another muddling of “NATO” is that Chinese official statements have long claimed that NATO furthers the hegemony of the US,⁹ to the point where NATO has become synonymous with US hegemony. What different interlocutors mean by NATO can therefore vary considerably.

The metonymical dimension of NATO will have and already has had concrete consequences for both the portrayal and the interlinked politics of NATO. After the Vilnius Summit Communiqué was issued on 12 July 2023, a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs remonstrated that “Asia-Pacific countries do not welcome [it] and many NATO countries do not approve [of] ‘NATO’s Asia-Pacification’ [北约亚太化]; the Asia-Pacific region does not need an ‘Asia Pacific version of NATO’ [亚太版北约]”.¹⁰ Does “NATO Asia-Pacification” refer to a potential geographical expansion of NATO to the Indo-Pacific or an “Asia Pacific

version of NATO” to a separate NATO-like organisation in the Indo-Pacific? I think the exact meaning, especially in the latter expression, is equivocal. While the message is clear that China does not want anything resembling NATO in the Indo-Pacific, the consequences for NATO would be starkly different depending on whether China is referring to the existing NATO or a separate and not-yet-existing military alliance. In the realm of these uncertainties and guessing games, especially in terms of prognosis, it is important to remember that what is probably most important is not how high-up officials in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) “really” view NATO, but the presumptions or pretences on which the Chinese government will act vis-à-vis an “Asian” NATO (and vice-versa for NATO in regards to China).

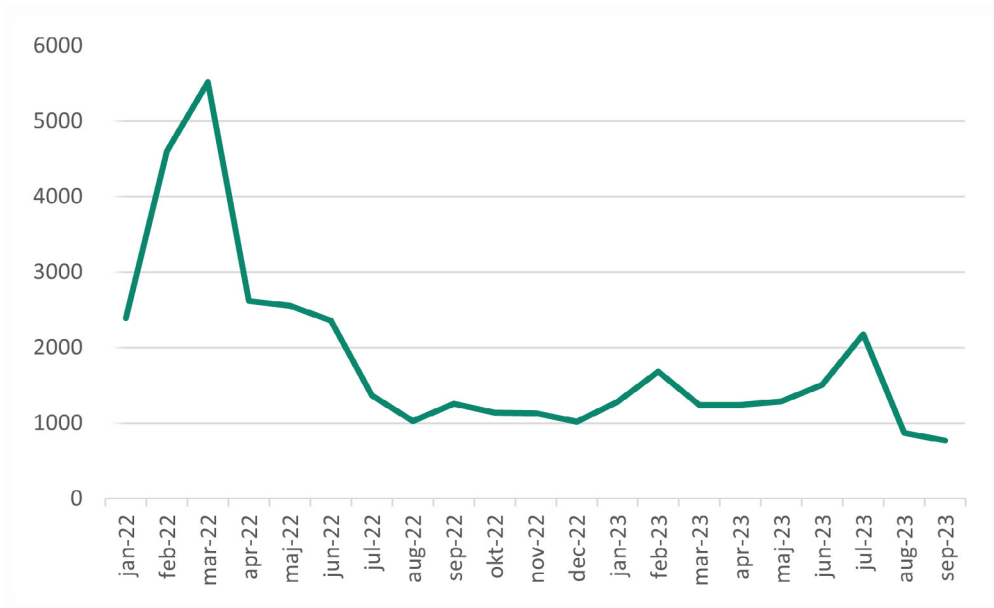


Figure 2 Number of times NATO was mentioned in Chinese media, 1 January 2022 to 30 September 2023¹¹



Figure 3 Number of mentions of NATO in British media, January 2022 to 30 September 2023¹²

Should NATO be a static or a dynamic alliance? Questions about geographical scope

Although some commentators have declared that “NATO-China relations were virtually non-existent until the early 2000s”,¹³ Jeffrey H. Michaels makes a convincing case that this is a misreading of the past. Tracing the history of NATO-China relations, Michaels identifies four periods of NATO-China relations: from the 1950s to the late 1960s, when China was regarded as an adversary of NATO; from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, when China turned from an adversary into an ally; from the mid-1980s to the end of the 2010s, when the relationship became more ambiguous; and, since 2019, as China has become a NATO priority.¹⁴ Michaels argues, however, that the reasons given for the recent prioritisation of China by NATO have been somewhat misconstrued by its current Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg. During the London Summit of 2019, Stoltenberg stated that “for the first time in NATO’s history we will ... address the rise of China”. China, Michaels points out, had been rising for a long while before this, so why only start to address its rise in 2019?¹⁵ His answer is that worsening relations between China and the US led to a subsequent push by the US in 2019 for NATO to directly address China.¹⁶ Sten Rynning’s agrees, and he elaborates that the US was worried that China might gain the upper hand in technological developments such as “artificial intelligence and enabling technologies, including dual-use technologies that impinge on the military’s ability to operate and project power”. In 2019, the then US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, warned that if European NATO members did not remove Chinese systems from their security networks, the US would no longer be able to share certain information with them.¹⁷

The recent NATO prioritisation of China is a new chapter of a longstanding conversation within NATO about whether NATO should be a dynamic or a static alliance; or, in more post-9/11 language, how NATO can conceptualise itself as an alliance with global reach while not becoming a global alliance.¹⁸ According to Timothy Andrews Sayle, NATO expansion has until now followed the rationale of the apocryphal dictum attributed to Lord Hastings Ismay, its first Secretary General, that in Europe NATO should “keep the Russians out, the Germans down, and the Americans in”.¹⁹ The inclusion of new member states has contributed clear strategic and military benefits, according to the Ismay dictum, even if some of these states, such as Türkiye, did not fit neatly with NATO’s rhetoric on democratic values. In contrast, when discussion arose of non-European nations joining, this was quickly shut down. Despite calls over the course of its history for NATO to expand its functions beyond European political and security issues, this has not happened.²⁰ Those in charge of NATO, both during and after the Cold War, continued to concentrate on NATO’s deterrence mission in Europe in order to avoid diluting NATO’s original purpose.²¹ A strong shift towards China, divorced from European security concerns, would essentially redefine NATO’s mission and its geographical scope. It should, however, be highlighted that constructions of geographical regions are elastic. For instance, the US diplomat and scholar George F. Kennan opposed Italy’s NATO membership on the grounds that it did not have an Atlantic coast. His advice however was not followed.²²

NATO's current worries about China

While many high-ranking NATO officials have worded their opinions of China in strong language, consensus documents have been considerably more measured. Stoltenberg made explicit references in 2020 and 2021 to the humanitarian situations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, respectively.²³ Just before the Vilnius Summit in July 2023, *Foreign Policy* published an article by him in which he asserted that “Beijing is threatening its neighbors and bullying other countries”.²⁴ Such statements on what China's leadership considers to be its internal affairs or the country's relationship with its neighbours are completely absent from NATO's consensus documents. The only statement in the most recent NATO communiqué that can be interpreted as not directly connected to Euro-Atlantic hard security is that China “strives to subvert the rules-based international order” and NATO members will “stand up for our shared values and the rules-based international order”.²⁵ Whether this should be read in the sense that China is challenging NATO's “interests, security and values” because it has a directly negative effect on Euro-Atlantic hard security, or that NATO has an interest in safeguarding the rules-based international order globally – which is not mutually exclusive with the former – is unclear. The communiqué's statement on the importance of the Indo-Pacific region and its Asia-Pacific partners (Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, known as the AP4), “that developments in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security ... underpinned by our shared commitment to upholding international law and the rules-based international order” – is similarly vague.²⁶

Individual NATO members have a variety of views on NATO's global reach and how it should approach China. One of the reasons for this vagueness could be that it gives NATO leeway to deliberate further on the direction in which the organisation wants to proceed. The other areas that the communiqué addresses in connection with China are more concrete: cyber, space, hybrid and other forms of asymmetric threat; disruptive technologies; confrontational rhetoric; disinformation; key technological and industrial sectors; critical infrastructure; strategic material and supply chains; maritime domains; the deepening strategic partnership with Russia; and the lack of transparency in China's expansion and diversification of its nuclear arsenal.²⁷ Apart from the strategic partnership with Russia, these other areas are global in scope and could therefore directly impact Euro-Atlantic security. That NATO is starting to focus more on these global questions is a nod towards NATO's aim to increase its global reach. The question is how to facilitate this. There is a growing recognition by NATO that many concrete security risks are global in nature and are becoming more so. Global economy-related questions, such as strategic material and supply chains, which in the past may not have been as significant a part of hard security, are now accepted as having the potential to pose significant risks to Euro-Atlantic hard security.

Although NATO members' analyses of China have converged more in recent years –from the “London Declaration” in 2019 which reticently mentioned China only once to the Vilnius Communiqué which mentions China 16 times²⁸ – the conversation within NATO about how to address China is continuing. After the 2022 NATO Summit, President Macron and the then Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, made it clear that China would not be a central policy concern of NATO. Based on an interview with a NATO official, Rynning writes that this was why the US failed to gain agreement on labelling China a “systemic rival”.²⁹ One reason why France, for instance, has been more hesitant than some members to endorse NATO establishing symbolically stronger links with the AP4 is that, under the leadership of Macron, it has articulated its own Indo-Pacific strategy. France, as a resident power in the

Indo-Pacific, has its own interests in the region and, according to Céline Pajon, has cast itself as a balancing power beyond and between US-China rivalry. Consequently, the French government is keener to carve out a third path to the Indo-Pacific with European Union member states in order to achieve European strategic autonomy, instead of having to rely on NATO.³⁰

That there are internal disagreements about NATO's engagement with China and the Indo-Pacific region became apparent in discussions about a planned NATO liaison office in Tokyo. In May 2023, news broke that NATO was planning to open an office in Japan, the first of its kind in the Indo-Pacific.³¹ However, the announcement was premature.³² A month later, it became clear that France objected to such an office and, since setting up a NATO office requires consensus among all members, could veto such a decision.³³ As a result, mention of the Tokyo office was allegedly dropped from the Vilnius Summit Communiqué.³⁴ Macron asserted during the summit that, “[w]hatever one says, geography is stubborn: the Indo-Pacific is not the North Atlantic”, while Stoltenberg stated that “[t]he issue of the liaison office is still on the table, it will be considered in the future”.³⁵ Rynning has summarised the implications of this dynamic succinctly, “[f]or as long as NATO's European allies are divided ... NATO will ... only have a limited capacity to address China as an alliance”.³⁶ How this internal conversation pans out is, I believe, likely to set the agenda for future relations between NATO and China.

The Russia factor in NATO-China relations

Given that one of NATO's supposed objectives is to “keep the Russians out”, it follows that China strengthening its partnership with Russia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine would be of great concern. In the Anglophone world, China-Russia relations are often characterised as an “axis of convenience”. Bilaterally, since the mid-1990s, this has been based on the “three-nos” guiding principles: no alliance, no conflict and no targeting of any third country.³⁷ Hugo von Essen writes in his recent report that Russia-China economic relations have grown closer since the full-scale invasion but strict limitations are still in place. Trade between the two countries has reached new heights but economic ties are limited by Russian fears of exploitation and Chinese worries about secondary sanctions, its reputation and economic relations with Europe and North America.³⁸ A study of Chinese and Russian information operations confirms this general trend. There are convergences between Chinese and Russian information operations due to the increasing overlap in their opposition to the US and aims to establish a multipolar world. Nonetheless, there are still significant divergences, and China, for example, cares more about its international image than Russia.³⁹

The deepening partnership notwithstanding, there are clear limits to the “friendship without limits” and I find it improbable that China would seek to form a military alliance with Russia in the near future. If the Russia-Ukraine war continues on the same protracted path, China's fundamental approach to Russia is unlikely to change. If a major event occurs that fundamentally alters the power-dynamic, however, such as regime change in Russia, then all bets are off. My hypothesis is that it is more likely to be the politics of the Indo-Pacific that push China and Russia closer. China's greatest concern about NATO is the strengthening of its partnership with the AP4. In June 2020, Stoltenberg stated that for NATO to address the security consequences of a rising China, it would need to work together with its close and like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁰ In 2022, the Heads of State and Government

of the AP4 countries were invited to attend the NATO Summit for the first time. In addition, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept mentioned the importance of the Indo-Pacific region for the first time.⁴¹ Given that China's greatest geopolitical anxiety is US involvement in its neighbourhood, it would cause great alarm for China if it perceived that the US were extending its already long arm further into the Indo-Pacific through NATO. If China were to feel existentially threatened in the Indo-Pacific, this would probably push it closer to Russia, as Russia is one of the few countries in the region that would be likely support China's position in a confrontation with the US.

China's view of NATO's role in the world

According to Liselotte Odgaard, China's relations with NATO "changed decidedly" in 2022 when NATO defined one of its core tasks in its Strategic Concept as countering Chinese military, economic and industrial challenges. In the immediate post-Cold War period, the relationship (although ambiguous) had been one of dialogue and coordination, and China had even provided limited support to counterterrorism initiatives by the US and NATO.⁴² The recent shift is reflected in China's official narrative on NATO, which has been ramped up considerably and turned hostile since 2022.⁴³ How much action will follow on from China's escalating language is difficult to discern. Mathieu Duchâtel notes that "there is clearly irritation in Beijing", but that "China's order of priorities is clear, and is encapsulated in the formula '2, 3, 4, 5': the US bilateral alliances in East Asia, AUKUS, the Quad, and the Five Eyes. A Euro-Atlantic alliance focused on resilience in the Euro-Atlantic area poses no threat to China".⁴⁴ At the same time, Odgaard writes that "China has been watching NATO closely for more than two decades... While NATO has not been a driver of China's strategic choices, it has contributed to Beijing's assessment that formal alliances might entrap China".⁴⁵ Moreover, there is the added difficulty in reading Chinese official statements about NATO, or any Chinese foreign policy statement for that matter, as the domestic audience is in most instances far more important to the Chinese government than the international one. The Chinese government is especially keen to appease domestic nationalists and anxious not to appear "weak", particularly in its engagements with Western countries.⁴⁶ Given this context, it should be underlined that, although inflamed, China has largely only been responding in its official communications to statements NATO has made about China.

Regardless of who the intended audience is, China's position on NATO has been consistent and stems from its outlook on the international system and its position within it.⁴⁷ Harking back to the Cold War, China has been sceptical of formal alliances, mainly because of entrapment concerns; that is, anxieties about becoming involved in conflicts because of the unilateral actions of an ally.⁴⁸ Based on her interviews with high-ranking military officers in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Odgaard maintains that NATO's focus on Chinese-Russian cooperation has awoken Beijing's worries about entrapment, and that China does not want to be regarded as helping to recreate a buffer zone in Eastern Europe, which would involve force and war between Russia and NATO.⁴⁹ Two post-Cold War events in particular have shaped China's view of NATO as an alliance dominated by the US. First, NATO's bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade during the Yugoslav Wars where even though the US claimed it was an accident, the Chinese public and establishment remain unconvinced. Second, NATO's intervention in Libya, where China argues that NATO abused UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to carry out regime change.⁵⁰ Chinese media and official statements usually describe NATO as a relic of the Cold War led by the US, and claim that it has had to sustain

a “Cold War mentality” to justify its continued existence, which has led to China to being scapegoated and framed as a threat.⁵¹ A sample of the commentaries on and rejoinders to the Vilnius Summit and communiqué in the official Chinese media includes: “A NATO immersed in the old Cold War dream endangers world peace and stability”,⁵² “NATO shows its true colors as a war machine”,⁵³ and “NATO deserves the label ‘criminal organization’ within meaning of the Nuremberg judgment”.⁵⁴

How the Chinese government narrates the relationship between NATO, the US and Europe can be gathered from an “in-depth” article published by the *People’s Daily* – the mouthpiece of the CCP – in May 2023: “The US Exploitation of the Ukraine Crisis Destroyed European Stability”. In it, the authors write that the US has used the “Ukraine crisis” to make Europe more dependent on it for energy and security, resulting in diminished European strategic autonomy. Since the Cold War, the US has persistently pushed for the eastward expansion of NATO, which has put pressure on Russia’s “strategic survival space” and increased US control of European politics, military affairs and economics. Europe has had to pay the price for the Ukraine crisis, which was partly caused by US-led NATO politics. Meanwhile, US arms dealers have made vast profits as NATO countries continue to provide weapons to Ukraine and increase their military defence budgets.⁵⁵ Referring again to her interviews, Odgaard presents a more nuanced Chinese view of Europe in relation to recent developments in NATO. Odgaard writes that China hopes to separate the US and Europe, and to deter Europe from increasing its military engagement in the Indo-Pacific. In addition, as China believes that the US has gained and Europe lost from the Russia-Ukraine war, China wishes to work together with Europe to end the war by peaceful means. In the long term, China wants to cooperate through dialogue and communication with Europe in areas such as trade and compatible security outlooks.⁵⁶

China’s anxieties about NATO’s involvement in the Indo-Pacific Region

While the above section outlined how the Chinese government narrates (and perhaps understands) the relationship between NATO, the US and Europe, it is still true that “the Euro-Atlantic area poses no threat to China”. Following Duchâtel’s formula of “2, 3, 4, 5”, it becomes apparent that China’s biggest concerns are in its own neighbourhood. A Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson did repudiate “NATO’s Asia-Pacification” and an “Asia Pacific version of NATO”, while a spokesperson for the Chinese Mission to the European Union “sternly admonish NATO” that “China will firmly safeguard its own sovereignty, security and development interests, [and] firmly oppose NATO’s ‘eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific’”.⁵⁷ China’s permanent representative to the United Nations, Zhang Jun (张军), has criticized that, “NATO professes to be a regional organisation, but [has] broken the regional scope of its own treaty stipulations, encroaching on the whole world [with its] eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific, bringing negative influence and destructive elements to regional and even global security”.⁵⁸ “Eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific” (东进亚太), is, as far as I know, a new Chinese term that specifically describes NATO’s perceived intrusion into the Indo-Pacific and there does not yet seem to be a standard English translation of it.⁵⁹ The earliest instance of its use I have found dates to a regular Chinese Foreign Ministry press conference on 4 May 2023,⁶⁰ when a spokesperson used the term in response to a question about the news that NATO was going to open a Tokyo office.⁶¹

“Eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific” is distinct from “Eastern expansion” [东扩] and “northern expansion” [北扩], which is used to describe the recent NATO membership applications by Finland and Sweden.⁶² This new coinage has caught on in the Chinese media sphere and a week after the Vilnius Summit, the *People's Daily* published an article with the title, “International Observation: NATO’s ‘Eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific’ destroys regional peace and stability”. In it, Liu Chang (刘畅) elucidates that the “eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific” is simply implementation of a crucial aspect of the US “Indo-Pacific Strategy”. The fact that NATO invited the leaders of the AP4 to the Madrid and Vilnius Summits “magnifies” how the US is speeding up the “Eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific” and NATO’s “Indo-Pacification”. Now that the Biden administration has completed the setting up of AUKUS, according to Lin, it is turning its attention to convincing European states through NATO to shift their strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific. Stressing that East Asia has experienced neither war nor a refugee crisis since the Cold War, Liu writes that this is because East Asia “abandoned Cold War bloc confrontations and zero-sum thinking, adhered to the ideas of openness and forgiveness, [and] pushed towards [a] regional safety order on the basis of deep reciprocal reliance and regional integration”. An “eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific” would destroy this peaceful regional order.⁶³ I believe that the interplay between the “eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific” and the outcome of the discussions on China within NATO will define the contours of future relations between the two.

Consequences for Sweden’s relations with China due to Swedish NATO-membership

A 2022 report by Hillevi Pårup found very few official Chinese statements about Sweden’s NATO membership bid, but that most Chinese media reports had been negative about Sweden’s application.⁶⁴ This picture has remained constant, although media attention has decreased. Most of the articles in the official Chinese media mention Sweden’s membership application process in connection with another context without comment. The few articles to exclusively address Sweden’s membership have been succinct and descriptive. One, “Swedish prime minister: Sweden will ‘as quickly as possible become a full NATO member’”, quotes Jan Öberg, a NATO-sceptic Swedish researcher, on Sweden’s future membership: “from staying far away from wars for 200 years to suddenly being drawn into wars, Sweden will lose more independence in foreign diplomacy [and] cannot avoid spending a huge amount of capital to adapt to NATO”.⁶⁵ Compare this with Öberg’s own opinion piece, “US-Nordic Summit sees NATO expansion, confusion and repetition”, published in *Global Times* (an English-language offshoot of the *People's Daily*). As soon as the US becomes involved, the tone changes drastically. Öberg writes that “US/NATO psycho-political projection and manipulation by ‘fearology’” mean that “The Nordic security elites will not confront the US; they’ll be more loyal to Washington than to their own peoples’ traditional preference for civilian conflict resolution and disarmament”.⁶⁶

Since China sees NATO as being manipulated by a hegemonic US project, and given China’s historical aversion to military alliances, it is to be expected that China would be negative towards any NATO expansion, including Swedish membership. Nonetheless, Sweden’s application and Finland’s membership have not caused public consternation. When Marianne Björklund asked Wang Yiwei (王义桅), the editor of an academic book series about

NATO published in China and a professor at Renmin University, about Sweden's proposed membership of NATO, he responded that "[i]n reality, you were already like members of NATO. You had exercises together before you applied to become members...we understand that you want to stand stronger against Russia and that you have a right to join NATO. But we hope that this will not lead to China becoming an enemy and that this will not push China closer to Russia".⁶⁷ A similar view was expressed by Jian Junbo (简军波), a scholar of China-EU relations, who said that the Chinese are aware that Sweden wants to join NATO because of Russia, not because of anti-Chinese feelings. Thus, China does not have any strong views on Sweden joining NATO.⁶⁸

I believe that there will probably not be any short-term practical bilateral consequences for Sweden from China's side when Sweden becomes a NATO member. Sweden, however, might approach China differently. In a much-debated article within Sweden, Trita Parsi and Frida Stranne argued in *Foreign Policy* that Sweden suddenly became much more hawkish towards China in the "panic-stricken" atmosphere that followed Russia's full-scale invasion and Sweden's NATO application, in a change that could not be explained by events in the Swedish-Chinese bilateral relationship alone. As evidence, they referred to the June 2023 report by the Swedish Defence Commission, *Allvarstid*. According to Parsi and Stranne, in its assessment of China, *Allvarstid* departs ominously from the previous report, *Värnkraft*, published in 2019. The new report has, Parsi and Stranne writes, "adopted Washington's view that China threatens and challenges the rules-based international order".⁶⁹ In one of many responses, Arvid Åhlund claims that Parsi and Stranne make factual errors, that the shift in Sweden's attitude has been gradual and that this shift can be explained by bilateral events.⁷⁰ Parsi and Stranne's rejoinder was that Åhlund did not focus on the security aspects expressed in the Swedish Defence Commission Report but on Swedish popular opinion.⁷¹

Parsi and Stranne are correct that *Allvarstid* dedicates much more space to China than *Värnkraft*. In *Värnkraft*, the section on China is five pages long and appears under the chapter on "Asia". In *Allvarstid*, China has its own chapter that covers 12 pages. Parsi and Stranne also highlight that *Allvarstid* describes China as a threat,⁷² and referring to what the Swedish Security Service has raised, the report does describe China as an "intelligence" and "security threat" to Sweden,⁷³ while acknowledging that China does not constitute a "military threat".⁷⁴ Such descriptions are absent from *Värnkraft*. To split hairs, there is no description in *Allvarstid* that China constitutes a threat to the rules-based international order. The closest it gets is that "US actions are motivated by the perceived Chinese threat to the rules-based international order".⁷⁵ What the report does state is that: "China's geopolitical ambitions challenge global security and the rules-based world order in the long term".⁷⁶ This may be only a slight difference, but could indicate that while Sweden perceives China as a security threat to Sweden, it does not perceive it to be an overt threat to the rules-based international order. Nonetheless, the depiction of China as a "challenge" to the rules-based order is word by word how NATO describes China. The perception of China as a threat might therefore have endogenous origins – the Swedish Security Service was already writing that China was a threat to Swedish security in 2021, before Sweden's NATO membership application.⁷⁷ However, the perception of China as a challenge to the rules-based international order might be exogenous and linked to Sweden's NATO application, with the possibility of overlaps. Instead of having adopted "Washington's view", I argue that it is more accurate to say that Sweden might have adopted NATO's view, at least at the rhetorical level.

To contextualise, though, several events not connected to NATO might explain why Sweden would use stronger language about China in 2023 compared to 2019: Sweden has a new government that has long campaigned for a tougher China policy; China has not criticised Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and instead deepened its partnership with Russia; the hard-line US policy on China during the Trump and Biden administrations and Sweden's reliance on the US as a security partner even before its NATO membership application; and the EU's strategic outlook, which characterises China as a "strategic rival". The latter was launched in March 2019, and is unlikely to have influenced *Värnkraft* which was published just two months later. Nor is the more sceptical turn towards China exclusive to Sweden, but shared by many European countries, such as in the German government's strategy on China published in July 2023 or a report by the British Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee published in August 2023.⁷⁸ Parsi and Stranne are thus probably erroneous in attributing Sweden's harsher security language on China solely to Sweden's application to join NATO.

Nonetheless, Parsi and Stranne may not be entirely incorrect, and it is notable that *Allvarstid* uses the exact same wording as NATO rather than, for example, the wording in the EU's strategic outlook: "strategic rival". During the Vilnius Summit, Prime Minister of Sweden Ulf Kristersson stated that Sweden would as a NATO echo the US presence and support for Ukraine by, among other things, showing more interest in the security concerns of the US, such as China and the Pacific Rim, "if we want to be truly Transatlantic, [then we] cannot just expect a US presence in Europe, but [should also expect] European engagement in common questions globally".⁷⁹ Mike Winnerstig has speculated that as a member of NATO, there might be more pressure on Sweden to distance itself further from China, but paradoxically that Sweden might also grow closer to China as a result of its NATO membership. The reason for this is that Sweden needed to appease the US more than NATO members when Sweden's security was not guaranteed by NATO, but by joining NATO Sweden might no longer have to toe the US line as meticulously as its security would now be guaranteed. Sweden could therefore move closer to China. According to Winnerstig, how China-Sweden relations unfold will depend on how Sweden acts in the future.⁸⁰

I imagine that one outcome of Sweden's NATO membership that could directly affect Sweden-China relations is a change in Sweden's military materiel export framework. *Allvarstid* outlines how NATO membership "changes the conditions of Swedish war materiel export and improves the opportunities for the Swedish defence industry".⁸¹ In May 2023, Taiwan announced that it would acquire Link-22, NATO's secure radio system, with US help. Link-22 was developed by seven NATO countries and if the US has agreed to help Taiwan acquire it, it means that the other NATO countries involved in its development, including Germany which until now has been the most restrictive European NATO member with regard to the export of military materiel to Taiwan, have approved the decision. This signifies, according to Chieh Chung (揭仲), that NATO countries are more likely to ease restrictions on the export of military equipment and technology to Taiwan in future.⁸² Despite the fact that it was not NATO that helped Taiwan acquire Link-22, and that NATO would probably not undertake something similar in the current circumstances, it was still discussed and approved by NATO members. In Tsuruoka Michito's judgment, it is as a security forum for dialogue and information exchange that NATO plays one of the most crucial roles for Japan.⁸³ I extrapolate from this that the same is true for all the AP4.

There are current discussions within Taiwan to make a proposal to NATO that Taiwan should participate in this information exchange, although the response to any such proposal would, I

think, probably be negative.⁸⁴ In 2021, Taiwan was set to acquire M982 Excalibur, an extended-range guided artillery shell jointly developed by the US and Sweden. The US approved the sale but Sweden did not, which meant that in the end Taiwan did not acquire it.⁸⁵ According to the current Swedish framework for the export of military materiel, the recipient must be a recognised state, and Sweden does not recognise Taiwan as a state.⁸⁶ Once Sweden joins NATO, such dialogues may change and procedures could be put in place to reinterpret or even revise the current Swedish framework for exporting military materiel. This could lead to Swedish developed military materiel being exported to Taiwan. This scenario would become even more likely if a crisis in the Taiwan Strait were to occur.

Sweden's NATO obligations in the eventuality of a Taiwan Crisis and a US-China Conflict in the Indo-Pacific Region

The biggest repercussion of Swedish NATO membership for Sweden's relations with China would probably not be linked to bilateral ties but hinge on how NATO-China relations develop, the crux being the Indo-Pacific area. In May 2022, Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida declared that "Ukraine may be East Asia tomorrow", and that "[p]eace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is critical not only for Japan's security but also for the stability of international society".⁸⁷ Such prognostications have been repeated by Stoltenberg on numerous occasions, such as before the Vilnius Summit when he wrote that, "[w]hen I visited Japan and South Korea at the start of this year, their leaders were clearly concerned that what is happening in Europe today could happen in Asia tomorrow".⁸⁸ This is where the level of metonymy becomes crucial. The future is always uncertain and full of projections but the nature of the security dilemma creates an extra layer of anxiety. Security dilemmas are defined as problems in which one state's security-enhancing actions lead to another state becoming more worried about its own security. Actions thought to be defensive appear offensive to the other side and even if there was no security threat to begin with from either side, this could become a security crisis because it is perceived to be so. Both NATO and China have vastly different versions of current events. It is NATO's view that the Indo-Pacific is important primarily because it could directly affect Euro-Atlantic security, while China's interpretation of NATO's actions is an 'eastern advancement into the Asia-Pacific'. These contrasting views provide fertile ground for security dilemma anxieties.

The "Ukraine may be East Asia tomorrow" stance is not exclusive to NATO and its partners. Russia is now trying to convince China that the security concerns facing Russia are analogous with those China faces in the Indo-Pacific – and there is apprehension in China that what is happening between Russia, the US and NATO in Europe might be replicated in the Indo-Pacific. Zhang Xin (张昕) argues that "the success or failure of Russia's efforts to convince China of the essential similarity between the Russia-NATO conflict in Europe and the China-US one in the Asia-Pacific will have a significant impact on the future of the bilateral relationship".⁸⁹ There are diverse evaluations in China of Russia's current war but one strand of thought that has gained traction is that although China does not agree with Russia's reasons for invading Ukraine, China would not want Russia to lose because China would then face the US (or the West) alone – and the US would come after China after it has finished with Russia. The only way now is therefore to stand with Russia.⁹⁰ One of the innumerable scenarios for how the future might play out as a result would be that China becomes more aggressive in the Indo-Pacific, a decision to some degree influenced by

Russia, and the US responds by diverting resources from Europe to the Indo-Pacific. This would weaken NATO forces stationed in Europe and push China and Russia closer, which could lead to a more favourable position for Russia in Ukraine.

If a crisis did occur in the Taiwan Strait, the current regional and global geopolitical situation would be drastically changed. Based partly on my interviews, it seems certain that were such an event to take place in the foreseeable future, NATO would not provide any military assistance to Taiwan. What might happen, however, is that NATO as an alliance could give political support to Taiwan. Individual member states could also implement economic sanctions against China.⁹¹ Arguably, the most important role NATO could play in the event of such a crisis would be as a platform for dialogue and information exchange – if not directly with Taiwan, then with the AP4 countries, which would be more directly affected by the crisis simply by virtue of geographic proximity. NATO members might as a result of such dialogue and consultations within the alliance, in combination with domestic discussions and discussions in other international forums, act more in solidarity with Taiwan at the bilateral level. One outcome for Sweden could be to reinterpret the current framework for the export of military materiel. An opinion poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in April 2023 found that 35 percent of Swedish citizens would support the US in a conflict with China over Taiwan (49 percent wanted to remain neutral). This was the highest level of support among the citizens of the 11 European countries included in the poll (the second being Poland with 31 percent).⁹²

Much of the international speculation around NATO's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region is about what would happen if a war broke out between China and the US over, for example, Taiwan or the Tiaoyutai/Diaoyudao/Senkaku islands, and whether Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the foundational text of NATO, would be triggered. Article 5 defines the terms for collective defence, which is “one for all and all for one”. According to Duchâtel, there is some ambiguity regarding whether Article 5 would be activated if a US base in the Pacific were attacked by China.⁹³ Ideationally, NATO's Article 5 was initially designed for threats from the Soviet Union.⁹⁴ During the Suez crisis, the US made it clear that Article 5 could not be used for interventions outside of what was defined as the North Atlantic area. Mutual defence in the North Atlantic area remained the most important priority.⁹⁵ When Article 5 was invoked for the first time on 12 September 2001, the day after the attacks on World Trade Center, this was not how European NATO members thought it would have been invoked during the Cold War. Instead of the US helping European states, the situation was now reversed.⁹⁶ Could Article 5 be extended to cover a US base in the Indo-Pacific region? Article 5 is vague – probably deliberately so – so it is debatable, but I find it unlikely that Article 5 would be triggered if such a war were to break out.

Article 5 states that “the Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all”.⁹⁷ In a strict interpretation, a US base overseas cannot count as an attack *in* North America as the land on which the base stands is still the sovereign territory of the host country, although the question of jurisdiction throws up some questions. (Even if it were US territory, to quote Macron the “Indo-Pacific isn't the North Atlantic”).⁹⁸ This would also go against the previous US position on not supporting interventions outside of what is defined as the North Atlantic area, although the war in Afghanistan might indicate otherwise. When push comes to shove, however, NATO might opt for a more generous interpretation and disregard what could be viewed as technicalities, given the importance of the US in NATO. There is only one precedent

for when Article 5 has been invoked, which makes it difficult to assess how members will interpret its scope. If Article 5 were to be invoked during such an event, Sweden would be obliged to assist the US war effort.

Although popular discussion often centres around whether Article 5 would be triggered in the event of a military conflict between China and the US in the Indo-pacific, it is worth keeping in mind that Article 5 does not need to be triggered for NATO to undertake military action. There are other, probably easier, pathways that NATO could pursue to implement military action if it decides to do so. During the Kosovo War of 1998–1999, NATO carried out a campaign of aerial bombardment of Yugoslavia. In October 1998, NATO members authorised the use of military force in Yugoslavia through an action order (ACTORD), even though the proposed military intervention was at the time inconsistent with the explicit terms of the United Nations Charter and Security Council practice.⁹⁹ Another option would be to invoke Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, by which members can bring issues to the attention of the North Atlantic Council. Article 4 is a consultation process that can lead to some kind of joint decision or action that represents the alliance. It was most recently invoked following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰⁰ If a military conflict occurred between China and the US, I find it more feasible that members would invoke Article 4 and come to a joint decision about what to do, such as providing political support or even agreeing to a new ACTORD.

Such a decision would perhaps derive from a recognition that if European NATO members proved unwilling to provide support for the US in such a conflict, the US might in turn withdraw its security guarantee to Europe, occupied, as it would be, with a military conflict in another region. As the US is the biggest player in NATO, the loss of US support would have severe consequences for the European security apparatus. Although supporting a military conflict on the other side of the globe would not find strong justification in NATO's *raison d'être* as a deterrence mission in Europe, the *realpolitik* of it could be interpreted as a demand that European members should agree to support the US in one form or another – to invoke Ulf Kristersson's scratching-backs-sentiment. From this angle, the Indo-Pacific is inextricably linked to the Euro-Atlantic area, and what happens in the Indo-Pacific theatre might have significant ramifications for NATO, NATO-China relations and, by extension, Sweden-China relations.

Conclusions

My reading of the potential consequences of Sweden's NATO membership for Swedish-Chinese relations is therefore that:

- i. China is unlikely to change its approach to Sweden because of Sweden's NATO membership.
- ii. Sweden is likely to change at least its rhetorical stance towards China to align its politics more closely with NATO policy.
- iii. Sweden may partly as a result of its NATO membership reinterpret its current framework for the export of military materiel in the eventuality of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.
- iv. If a crisis were to occur in the Taiwan Strait, the chances that NATO might provide any military support to Taiwan are very slim.

- v. NATO may, however, provide political support to Taiwan and individual member states could impose economic sanctions on China,
- vi. If a military conflict did break out between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific, perhaps as a result of such a crisis, I judge the probability of Article 5 being triggered as low.
- vii. If article 5 were to be triggered, Sweden would be obliged as a NATO member to support the US in its military efforts.
- viii. Taking into consideration pragmatic concerns if such a military conflict occurred, NATO members, including Sweden, could agree military support to the US following the use of Article 4.



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About the Swedish National China Centre

The Swedish National China Centre was established in 2021 as an independent unit at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). The Centre conducts policy-relevant research and aims to contribute to a long-term improvement in the state of China-related knowledge in Sweden. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Swedish National China Centre or UI.

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