

What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO

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1 Introduction

Is there a deepened strategic cooperation between Russia and China pointing to an actual military alliance (in form if not in name)? And why is it of high importance to clarify whether Russia and China are eternal rivals or working on building an alliance? The participants of an international workshop of think tank experts conducted in Berlin in mid-January 2020 that this author attended came to a clear assessment—there was broad consensus that what we face is an emerging alliance between Russia and China—in form, if not in name.¹ In particular, the experts agreed that:

1. Russia and China are united in their strategic aim to turn the current international order, which they perceive as dominated by the West and led by the US, into a multipolar world with zones of interests linked to the greatest powers.
2. They are clearly backing each other while ganging up against the West and are increasingly coordinating their work, including through military exercises (which are key for developing trust, increasing military interoperability, and for sending strategic messages).
3. While they are like-minded and similar in many regards, they are also complementary in the designs of their military-strategic postures:

¹The workshop entitled “Russia-China: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?” was hosted by the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University, the Foundation for Science and Democracy and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation on January 13–14, 2020 in Berlin. The basic argument of this article goes back to the author’s presentation at the workshop (Meyer zum Felde, 2020a) and the text was finalized in late November 2021, with minor revisions made in April 2022.

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- (a) China is focusing on the maritime dimension with a long-term and strategic perspective, its aspiration being to become the world's leading great power by 2049 (the 100th anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China).
- (b) Putin's Russia is a continental land power and one of only two nuclear superpowers. It acts opportunistically and takes risks if there is a promising opportunity to restore some of its lost imperial greatness.

It is this combination of unity, resolve, like-mindedness and similarities on the one hand and of complementarity in their postures on the other that makes an emerging Russian-Chinese Alliance highly dangerous for the West.

Further, both countries have strong leaders who have no need to find multilateral consensus. This allows for hybrid campaigns creating ambiguity, as well as for high-intensity military offensive campaigns on short notice, prepared by "snap-exercises." Both lead patriotic and heroic people who are fully behind them, with high levels of confidence to fight and win a patriotic war, if necessary. Both have felt humiliated by the West during their history, and still feel humiliated at the present time. Both are revisionists—Russia is looking back 30 years to the former greatness of the Soviet Union and to Imperial Russia, while China is looking back hundreds of years to the time when it was the center of the civilized world.² Both are increasingly gaining ground with their more assertive, self-confident behavior: Russia has been successful in Syria, Libya, and the wider Middle East, filling the growing power vacuum left there by the USA; China has been successfully pushing its expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Both generate the preconditions and prerequisites for achieving their revisionist aims and ambitions—in geopolitical, geo-economical, and geostrategic terms. They may consider themselves to be overall strategically defensive—but they are both capable of acting aggressively, including with offensive military operations at the regional level in their respective "near abroad": Russia in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea regions; China around Taiwan and in the South China Sea. They can adopt a "division of labor" approach together: China acting in the Indo-Pacific; Russia in Northeastern and Southeastern Europe; and Russia, with Iran, Syria, Libya in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

²See chapter "Putin's Russia: Global Strategic Outlook and Policies—What Role for China?" by Hannes Adomeit.

2 What an Emerging Military Alliance Between Russia and China Could Look Like

2.1 *Examples from History and the Lessons the West Can Learn from Them*

Historic examples such as the Soviet-German Rapallo agreement after World War I and the German-Japanese-Italian alliance during World War II show that interest-driven, purpose-oriented military alliances can be of a very different nature, duration and intensity.

There is a wide spectrum of possible manifestations—on one end, highly integrated joint and combined planning within the framework of a formal alliance already in peacetime, and coordinated military operations across different theaters in a great war (as was the case between imperial Germany and Austria in World War I, or the USA and UK in World War II). On the other end of the spectrum, it is possible that even if an ad-hoc military alliance is formally declared, no concrete military cooperation actually happens, neither in broad terms based on common aims nor in the coordinated planning of operations across respective theaters.

When asking what an opportunistic de-facto military alliance between Russia and China could mean for Europe's security, the answer must therefore differentiate from the outset between several possibilities:

- (a) Is it only limited cooperation in some fields that both partners are interested in (like in the German-USSR Rapallo model of the 1920s)?
- (b) Is it a de facto alliance with a geopolitically regional division of labor, but lacking in-depth coordination or orchestrated joint action (like the German-Japanese example in World War II)?
- (c) Or, do we see an emerging military alliance that is based on a strategic concept with highly integrated planning and commonly coordinated execution on a global scale—like the British-American model during World War II, which later gave rise to NATO?

These three different types of potential alliances would require different responses and would have different consequences for NATO allies on both sides of the Atlantic and their like-minded partners around the globe. In principle, therefore, the following three hypothetical “models” deserve attention and proper analysis:

- (a) *Limited military cooperation* between Russia and China in select fields of mutual interest.
- (b) *A de facto (rather than formal) military alliance* of global reach against Western institutions and US-led alliances that is, however, not underpinned by strategic coordination.
- (c) *A formal political and military alliance* between Russian and China (possibly joined by other regional powers such as Iran) based on a strategic framework

with integrated planning and capable of coordinated, large scale and high-intensity operations simultaneously in two or more theaters of war (i.e. both in Europe, its periphery and in the Indo-Pacific region).

2.2 Implications and Consequences of a “Model B” Alliance—Dangerous and Not Unlikely

Even the most limited case of a “Model A” type cooperation, and certainly the moderate “Model B” version of a Russian-Chinese de facto military alliance would have far-reaching consequences for Europe’s security. Conversely, “Model C” seems as yet unlikely (though not entirely impossible). Therefore, this analysis focuses on Model B as a worst-case scenario that cannot be ruled out nor deemed highly unlikely, and discusses its possible consequences for Europe’s security. Model B supposes an *opportunistic* rather than a strategic alliance between Russia and China. This means a de-facto military alliance where both Russia and China are united in their geopolitical intent to change the international rules-based order according to their interests; jointly undermine the unity and resolve within Western institutions and US-led alliances; and follow a “division of labor” principle, taking separate approaches in their respective regions without strictly coordinating their plans and activities. The framework of such a non-formalized, purpose-driven de facto alliance would *not* be based on a coordinated geostrategic approach and would *not* be underpinned by integrated operational planning, and would therefore also *not* include pre-planned mutual support in case of a conflict with military land, air or naval forces. However, even such a moderate kind of de facto military alliance between Russia and China would have far-reaching negative consequences for NATO in Europe, both at the geopolitical and strategic-operational level, and could become a nightmare scenario for Europe’s security. What could this look like, and how can it be prevented from happening?

2.3 A “Nightmare Scenario” Based on “Model B”: War Between China and the USA in the Indo-Pacific Creates an Opportunity for Russia to Achieve Revisionist Aims in Europe

In this scenario, an opportunistic, audacious Russian leader uses the opportunity of an escalating major confrontation between China and the USA in the Indo-Pacific region to simultaneously test NATO in Europe with the aim of achieving as many of his revisionist territorial and geopolitical goals as possible. Such an opportunistic large-scale attack against NATO in Europe, conducted by Russia while the USA is fully engaged in a major war with China in the Indo-Pacific, becomes more likely the

more some particular *prerequisites* would occur. The following list contains such elements that could change the risk calculus in Moscow.

Russian willingness to accept the risk of launching a large, military campaign of high intensity with regular forces (i.e. a regional war) in Europe would rise,

- (a) if the USA got engaged in a major conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific region and both sides escalated the conflict to high intensity military campaigns rather than keeping their power struggle limited to political, diplomatic, economic or other non-military instruments;
- (b) if in such a conflict with China, the USA were forced to commit all available air, land, maritime and other forces and capabilities to this theater of war in order to gain the upper hand;
- (c) if the USA's focus on major military confrontation with China created significant gaps in NATO's deterrence and defense posture in Europe and the Europeans were unwilling or unable to fill those gaps³;
- (d) and if Germany, as the key NATO ally in Europe's center, or a group of allies around Germany, could be discouraged by hybrid activities or nuclear coercion from fulfilling their NATO commitments in peacetime, during the transition from peacetime to crisis and conflict, or during the course of war. This would be the case, e.g., if the political and military decision-making process were delayed, the transfer of authority regarding in-place formations was not timely transferred, reinforcements were not rapidly deployed, or if Germany did not fully play its critical role in the Supreme Allied Commander Europe's (SACEUR) rear area of operations.

Russia's leadership would be even more encouraged to take risks if they could plausibly rely on the following assumptions regarding their ally China:

- (a) Firstly, as a result of China's military buildup in terms of quantity and quality, especially in the maritime, air, space, cyber and also nuclear dimensions over recent years, China would be capable and willing to engage the US in a full-blown war, and China would no longer be forced to avoid confrontation due to military weakness. As of this writing, there is no reason any more for China to

³Of specific relevance would be areas critical for denying Russia large-scale offensive operations. In Moscow's risk calculus, the primary factor is the extent to which the US remains present and capable of fighting and winning a war in the European theater; however, European NATO allies' ability to deliver their own share and fill gaps is another major factor. In terms of military forces and capabilities, key for operational success are rapidly available larger formations with high combat effectiveness as reinforcements (armoured brigades and divisions), enablers for joint multi-domain operations, sufficient air power to achieve air superiority as the indispensable prerequisite for successful operations in the land and maritime domains, and sufficient naval power to maintain a firm grip on NATO's sea lines of communication across the North Atlantic and including the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. If NATO's defense posture became obviously hollow particularly in these critical areas, be it due to shifting US priorities or an unwillingness of key European force providers (Germany, Great Britain, France) to step in, this would certainly change the risk calculus in Russia.

fear rapid defeat right from the outset of hostilities, while unlike in the past, US military planners now need to take significant US losses into account.⁴

- (b) Secondly, a military conflict between the US and China would be large-scale and long-lasting, so that in the USA, not much attention, political energy, military forces and capabilities would be left for a crisis provoked by Russia in other regions of secondary priority, e.g. in Europe's Baltic Sea region. It would be helpful for Russia if China's assertiveness created the perception in the USA that a military confrontation is unavoidable sooner or later. This would imply that the USA would re-allocate the bulk of its air and naval forces as well as its force-multiplying enablers to the Indo-Pacific region and also make these services their budgetary priority at the expense of the US army. For deterrence and defense in Europe, this would mean that in the land domain only, a minimum of reinforcements could be expected, and that the key prerequisite for any success on the ground—a favorable air situation—would have to be achieved by European air forces.⁵ *As of late 2021, none of the European nations had any comparable capacity nor the plans or budgets to compensate for such a strategic re-allocation of US forces and capabilities.*
- (c) Thirdly, Russia would have a free hand and perhaps could count on Chinese support with covert or open hybrid activities against all critical elements of NATO's and the EU's posture.
- (d) Fourthly, with regard to China, no precautionary measures would be needed in the Far East (Siberia, Arctic) to protect Russia's territorial integrity and strategic interests from China.

Needless to say, the Russian calculus would be most encouraged to take on high risks:

- (a) if China *contributed pro-actively* with substantial forces and capabilities (including disruptive technologies and future force multiplying enablers) to coordinated conventional military operations beyond covert hybrid support. This could be done at Europe's southern flank with a "second front," e.g. through a deployment of Chinese naval forces and land-based missile systems for additional A2/AD bubbles for sea denial in the Mediterranean and along Europe's sea lines of communication to its partners in the Indo-Pacific;
- (b) if China closely cooperated with Russia vis-à-vis Europe in coercive *nuclear messaging* and in their strategic missile activities (and vice versa Russia with China in the Indo-Pacific theater).⁶

These points are important for answering the question of what Europeans can and should do to prevent their nightmare scenario from becoming reality. Point by point,

⁴For reflections on the military power balance between the USA and China, see Department of Defense (2021) and Colby (2021a).

⁵For a reflection on the implications of a military conflict between China and the US for European security see Colby (2021b).

⁶See chapter "China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence" by Brian G. Carlson.

they indicate exactly what European NATO nations can and in their own best interest must do to discourage or deny every single prerequisite. Overall, they must strive to prevent any constellation in which these prerequisites all apply together.

3 The Impact of a Russian-Chinese De Facto Alliance on Europe's Security

What would the negative consequences of a military alliance between Russia and China be in detail? And how would the political and military situation be affected?

The emergence of a Russian-Chinese-led military alliance would have a series of consequences at the level of security, defense and alliance policy, as well as at the military-operational level. These consequences also need a detailed analysis with a view to peacetime relationships during international crisis management and regarding defense in case of crisis and conflict.

3.1 Consequences of a Russian-Chinese Military Alliance for Peacetime Relationships

NATO as a whole and its member states need to review their entire policy toward and their relationships not just with Russia, but also with China fundamentally.

As for *Russia*, a military alliance with China will make the Russian relationship with NATO neither better nor worse, as there was not much left from the previous “strategic partnership” between NATO and Russia, neither from the NATO-Russia Founding Act (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1997), nor from the wider “Partnership for Peace” framework even before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁷ As a consequence of Russia’s aggressive behavior toward Ukraine in 2014, including the illegal annexation of Crimea and the first change of territorial borders in Europe by military force since World War II, and the subsequent large-scale 2022 invasion, NATO’s relationship with Russia remains bad. There is little hope of moving toward meaningful dialogue as of this writing.

Regarding *China*, the situation is different and more fluid. Although NATO language with regard to China has intensified in recent months, China has so far been perceived by NATO as a whole only as a challenge, not as a threat (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021).⁸ However, the more China’s military cooperation activities with Russia provide evidence of a de facto military alliance, the more

⁷For reflections on the deteriorating relations between NATO and Russia, see Meyer zum Felde (2018) and Brauss (2021).

⁸For a reflection on NATO’s relations to China, see Kaim and Stanzel (2021).

NATO and all its member states have reason to perceive not only Russia, but also China as a threat to their security and in military terms, as an adversary in times of military conflict. They all would need to change their relations with China accordingly, with far-reaching consequences across all fields from diplomatic relations to financial, trade, economic, and military relations. It can be expected that China will react—the challenge will then be to manage the deteriorating relationship with China in a way that does not lead to all sides finding themselves caught in a downward spiral that does not allow any more for cooperation in other essential policy fields, such as climate change and global trade.

3.2 Consequences of a Russian-Chinese Military Alliance for International Crisis Management

Regarding crisis management and stabilization in Europe (Ukraine, Balkans) and at Europe's southern and southeastern periphery (Libya, Sahel zone, ISIS, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Yemen), it will become more difficult, complex and complicated to achieve a common view among actors and parties involved. In several crises within Europe and on Europe's periphery, Russia has expanded its influence and quite often acts as a spoiler rather than a responsible actor.⁹ Part of the geopolitical reality is that where the USA has withdrawn and left vacuums, China, with its expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its military dimension, has meanwhile also stepped in and has become a European power.¹⁰

For practical crisis management around the globe and specifically across Africa and the Middle East, a military alliance between Russia and China would mean that the role of the United Nations and its Security Council (UNSCR) would become even more limited due to vetoes by Russia and China. Crisis management missions of the IFOR, SFOR, and KFOR type without an UNSCR Chapter VII mandate ("enforce compliance") would then become difficult. Furthermore, Russia and China will constantly present a coordinated counter-narrative to de-legitimize Western crisis management missions, and to defend their own flagrant violations of international law (e.g. Russia on Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and China on territorial claims in the South China Sea or possibly Taiwan).¹¹

⁹For Russia's role in Europe and Europe's periphery, see Bechev (2019); Stronski and Himes (2019) and "Syria, Ukraine, Libya, Yemen" (2020)).

¹⁰For China's expanding global influence, see McDonald and Burgoyne (2019); for China's influence in Europe, see Zeneli (2019); Bhadrakumar (2019) and "China's Expanding Influence in Europe and Eurasia" (2019).

¹¹For China's approach to interventions, see Fung (2019).

3.3 *Consequences of a Russian-Chinese Military Alliance for Deterrence and Defense in Crisis and Conflict*

Deterrence and defense is, of course, the field with the most significant and the most serious impact and consequences for NATO, both at the level of defense policy and at the military-operational level.

3.3.1 Political Aspects

On *Russia's* side, when pitted against NATO as the adversary in a conflict, the backing of a military alliance with China would have hugely positive effects that cannot be overestimated.

First and foremost, there would no longer be a need for precautionary measures against an “eternal rival” with incalculable interests along a long, shared border in the Far East, which for decades and centuries had required a lot of military attention, effort, and permanent stationing of military forces and capabilities.¹² With China as an ally on its side, Russia in its military planning can make all its military resources available and concentrate them for a high-intensity, large-scale military operation against NATO if it wished to launch a regional invasion in Northeastern or South-eastern Europe.

Russia could also count on political support from China as a great power with permanent member status on the UNSCR, which in times of tension and crisis is an important source of legitimacy.¹³ It will become more difficult for the West and within NATO to condemn Russia's behavior as aggressive, illegitimate and not in line with international law if China and possibly other nations around the globe opposed this view and prevented the UNSCR from making respective resolutions.

Depending on how close the cooperation in their military alliance would be, Russia could also count on the influence China has across Europe through its BRI. In particular, the state-owned Chinese enterprises across Europe could play a helpful role to the advantage of Russia and the disadvantage of NATO's European member states and the EU, if so directed by Beijing—especially during the transition from peacetime routine business to crises and conflict. This creates a huge resilience problem for NATO and the EU as well as for each single member state that is relevant in NATO's responsiveness concept and during crisis and conflict that is vulnerable in its critical civil-military infrastructure (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland).

¹²See chapter “Imperialist, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China's Changing Views of Russia” by Jo Inge Bekkevold.

¹³See chapter “Cooperation Between Russia and China in Multilateral Organizations—A Tactical or a Strategic Alliance?” by Olaf Wientzek.

Technological cooperation across the civil-military complexes of both powers¹⁴ could help both Russia and China to further modernize and improve the quality of their assets toward modern, digitalized warfare including “joint-all-domain” operations also on their side. The effect will be that the West can no longer be sure to effectively compensate for the larger quantity of Russian or Chinese forces and capabilities through the higher technical complexity and quality of Western systems. As a long-term result, NATO would face a counter-alliance led by two great powers, both of them indeed then *peer* actors.

Russian energy resources and dominance due to Europe’s dependence on energy supplies on the one hand, and China’s growing technological leadership in new technologies which are “dual use” for both civilian and military applications on the other are difficult to assess factors and may have far-reaching consequences for security and defense.¹⁵ If properly managed bilaterally between China and Russia to their advantage and used as weapons against NATO, it will be a complex challenge for NATO allies to develop effective political, economic and technological counter-activities.

Another field where both powers can benefit from their complementarity to their advantage (and to America’s and Europe’s disadvantage) would be their approach to the land and maritime domains. NATO already has difficulties coping with Russia as Europe’s predominant land power and its operational implications for defense. China is systematically expanding its role as Asia’s predominant maritime power (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2018), with nevertheless also the potential for creating an unprecedentedly large army for land warfare, as well as for high-tech/digital-based air and space power.

On the US side, a military alliance between China and Russia including a strategic “division of labor” with a Russian focus on Europe and a Chinese focus on the Indo-Pacific would most likely be a further incentive for the USA (with a bipartisan consensus) to give priority to the Indo-Pacific as the most dynamic region, focus on the primary challenger China, and concentrate forces and capabilities in this region (Colby, 2021b). A military alliance between Russia and China would not only mean a “Russia supported by China” and hence, a more serious Russian threat against NATO in Europe—which would require more US support for Europe, but also, and the USA may see it this other way round, a “China supported by Russia” (which remains a nuclear superpower on the same footing as the USA), and hence a more serious Chinese threat for the Indo-Pacific region! This implies that Europe as a region with lower priority could be left with the problem of deterring and defending against the threat posed by Russia with significantly less attention, awareness,

¹⁴See chapters “Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor” by Sarah Kirchberger and “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix.

¹⁵See chapters “Digital Authoritarianism and Technological Cooperation in Sino-Russian Relations: Common Goals and Diverging Standpoints” by Elina Sinkkonen & Jussi Lassila and “Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution” by Richard A. Bitzinger & Michael Raska.

interest, political energy, military presence and also military reinforcements from the other side of the Atlantic.

This consequence would hit *Europe* hard. For many decades, Europeans have developed an understanding that their mission during conflict is in essence to contribute their forces as junior partners alongside very substantial US in-place formations of highest fighting quality, with air supremacy provided by overwhelming US air power and under the umbrella of unique extended nuclear deterrence. Primarily, US naval forces would maintain a firm grip on the North Atlantic, and after the arrival of masses of US REFORGER¹⁶ reinforcements, NATO allies would then collectively stop any Soviet/Russian invasion with counterattacks against all enemy echelons (follow-on forces attack), or by escalating the conflict vertically (nuclear political messaging) or horizontally (Russia's soft underbelly). All of this was based on the fundamental assumption that the main force provider for Europe across all domains, both in the conventional and the nuclear role, would always be the USA, and that it would perform this main role deliberately. This view now seems to be overtaken by the US strategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific, the changed US priorities, a fatigue with the burdens of being the leading world power, and of course the fundamentally changed geopolitical situation. To what extent the 2022 invasion of Ukraine will reverse this trend is as yet uncertain.

As US defense officials have stated since 2014 time and again, Europe can still trust that the USA remains reliable in their security guarantees for Europe and will continue to be the most relevant NATO ally. But Europeans also must realize that this will no longer include a massive American peacetime presence in Europe, nor overwhelming air power from day one of a high intensity war, and for sure not a deployment of masses of heavy reinforcements for Europe across the Atlantic. Since the Obama administration, the message has been made clear: "The cavalry will be there, but not the entire US cavalry any more."¹⁷ Such expectations would be even more unrealistic if and when it came to a major war between "the West" and a Russia-China Alliance, simultaneously in both the Indo-Pacific and the European region.

Even if a major crisis between the USA and China in the Indo-Pacific region did *not* escalate into open war, and it were only Russia which escalated a crisis into a military conflict with NATO in Europe, the USA could not simply return to the old pattern and engage fully within Europe to protect and defend its European allies against Russian aggression "with the entire US cavalry." As long as the USA has reason to expect that China could attack in Asia simultaneously with a Russian aggression in Europe, it has no other choice but to put its center of emphasis on the higher prioritized Indo-Pacific region. This means "China first," and leaves it to the

¹⁶Until 1989, REFORGER ("Return of Forces to Germany") was the periodically exercised concept for large scale reinforcement of Europe in times of tension with masses of continental US (CONUS) land and air forces.

¹⁷Jim Townsend, the Pentagon's Defense Director for Europe, brought it to this well understandable point, in a NATO meeting in 2016 that this author attended.

Europeans to defend themselves against Russia with limited US support only (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2021, pp. 95–96). Compared with the former American priority in World War II, “Germany first,” Europe has to face the reversal of that order and recognize the consequences from now on.

3.3.2 Military-Operational Aspects

The military-operational aspects that are relevant for the planning and conduct of wartime operations in Europe are just as far-reaching as the political implications of a Sino-Russian de facto alliance. They include, in telegram style:

1. A higher likelihood that a crisis could be escalated to open conflict.
2. A significantly changed constellation of time, space, and forces, i.e. of all fundamental operational categories, to the advantage of an aggressor, would be the most important impact of a military alliance between Russia and China.
3. Initial operations: Faster success for the aggressor that will also be easier to achieve through a de facto alliance with China.
 - (a) On *Russia's* side, this changed time-space-forces constellation where Russia as the aggressor has the advantage of initiative and is able to determine where, when, and how the attack takes place anyway would mean that Russia could conduct its initial offensive operations with increased effectiveness. It could concentrate more forces and capabilities in its chosen theater of war, attack in echelons, and achieve early breakthroughs against even a sustained defense, without any need to keep other large forces as reserves in other (eastern) military districts.
 - (b) On *NATO's* side, the opposite effect would become clear: reduced effectiveness of defense operations (due to fewer US land forces and lack of rapid reinforcements), questionable air superiority (due to reduced US air power), and questionable access to and maritime dominance over the Baltic and Black Seas (due to Russian dominance with A2/AD).
4. Follow-on operations: It will be easier to discourage and deter the launch of NATO counterattacks to reoccupy lost territory.
 - (a) On the *Russian* side, overwhelming forces would be available to counter a NATO counterattack due to activated and re-deployed armies and army corps from all military districts, including reserves from the Far East.
 - (b) On *NATO's* side, a defeat in its initial operations could lead to insufficient political will, unity and resolve to restore the *status quo ante* through large counterattack operations after several weeks or months. For such a joint all domains follow-on operation, not enough forces may be available due to a lack of large reinforcements across the Atlantic and insufficient European reinforcements. Furthermore, some European nations might become victims of hybrid campaigns and nuclear coercion.

5. Rear area civil-military total defense operations:

- (a) On *Russia's* side, a war-capable, well-functioning and systematically trained civil military “whole of government, whole of society” total defense structure is in place, based on which both the transition from peacetime to conflict and war, as well as initial offensive operations and later on, defense against large-scale NATO counterattacks can in theory be supported with high effect and according to required timelines (Geiles, 2017). Even though Russian forces have performed far worse than assumed during the 2022 attack on Ukraine, which may in the short term reduce the military threat posed by Russia to NATO, learning effects and more targeted rearmament in the medium term cannot be ruled out.
- (b) On *NATO's* side: member states are already highly vulnerable through Russian hybrid means, but can be far more easily undermined through additional Chinese hidden or open hybrid support across the full transition process from peace to crisis and conflict. This has a huge impact on NATO's ability to lead (with reduced and questionable command, control, communication functions), to have situational awareness (reduced and questionable intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance functions), to rapidly move NATO's response forces and heavy reinforcements into the theater of war (reduced mobility and effectiveness of sea ports, airports, railway systems, roads) and to maintain the functioning of governments, economies and societies under wartime conditions (due to reduced effectiveness of critical civilian infrastructures) (Savolainen, 2019).

3.4 *The Possible Impact on Russia's Risk Calculus*

Three main developments together—(1) the long-standing ignorance and unwillingness of key European NATO allies to accept a major burden shift on defense; (2) a shifting US military focus to the Indo-Pacific and preparation for a military confrontation with China, and (3) an emerging de facto military alliance between China and Russia—may have a significant impact on Russia's risk calculus whether or not to take an opportunity to test NATO with open military aggression. That may be in a regional war in the Baltic and/or Black Sea Region, or in an even broader approach also involving the stronger Russian positions and those of its possible anti-Western allies across the wider Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Iran, perhaps Libya, perhaps even NATO member Turkey). Many allies, who are not themselves exposed and do not feel directly threatened by Russia, have long been downplaying the Russian threat and did not take implementation of the agreed NATO concepts seriously enough. However, in the context of an emerging Russian-Chinese alliance, there is a higher probability that Russia may take higher risks in testing NATO's resolve to defend its member states.

3.5 *The Impact on NATO's Risk Calculus and Most Vulnerable Point*

A Russian-Chinese military alliance would also change NATO's risk calculus and have an impact on NATO's current political and military "Achilles heel": how to maintain unity and resolve after defeat in initial operations?

With regard to Russia's possible intentions, the predominant view in NATO has so far been that a revisionist but isolated Russia could, provided an opportunity to do so would occur, try to test NATO to see how far it could go. But the fundamental assumption has been that once confronted with NATO's demonstrated unity and resolve—based on rapid political and military decision-making and underpinned by NATO's multinational forward presence formations and rapidly deployed reinforcements, especially the NATO Response Forces (NRF)—Russia would step back immediately. Accordingly, the enhanced forward presence for the most exposed allies in the Northeast was designed to counter not more but limited aggression, such as an incursion of non-attributable "little green men in little green tanks" against Ukraine in 2014, rather than to conduct high intensity delay and defense operations from day one. Also, the division-sized enhanced NRF was designed to rapidly reinforce, but not to win heavy defense battles against attacking Russian tank armies or army corps. Indeed, the fundamental principle to defend "one for all, all for one" is manifest in NATO's multinational Response Force, as well in its multinational enhanced forward presence battle groups on the soil of its most exposed allies. Although their operational effectiveness is rather weak and not designed to win a battle against heavily armored Russian divisions, their deterrent effect is high due to this multinational character. It denies Russia any military option to isolate a single NATO member state without being fully involved in a war with the entire Alliance, including three nuclear powers. At the same time, Russia does not have the slightest reason to argue that NATO would pose a military threat to Russia's own security by positioning substantial combat formations close to Russia's borders. Hence, for the situation since 2014, the current posture has been an acceptable compromise that works for the time being—and as long as in Russia's risk calculus a large military offensive against a NATO member makes no sense.

This is the context for why the NATO Wales summit in 2014 made the fundamental decision to go for "responsiveness and reinforcements" rather than for a new version of the Cold War "forward defense" posture, which worked so well for Western Germany. The reason for this was politically rather than operationally driven.¹⁸

¹⁸USA, UK and France did not want to be caught in a permanent, static forward deployment (because they wanted to maintain flexibility to move their forces also to other possible hotspots). Germany insisted on a fair treatment of Russia, despite of its unacceptable aggressive behavior against the Ukraine, and wanted the NATO Russia Founding Act be respected as the last remaining cornerstone of the broken security architecture in Europe (including its restrictions regarding permanent stationing of substantial allied combat forces).

However, the risk of this (for political reasons intentionally moderate) current NATO posture is the possibility that Russia could—counter to expectations—attack on a large scale with large conventional formations from day one, rather than in a hybrid manner with non-attributable “little green men” only. In this case, Russian troops, reportedly according to Putin, “could take Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw or Bucharest in two days.”¹⁹ This is what NATO’s in-place forces and reinforcements such as the VJTF and NRF could not deny, due to a lack of rapidly available and combat capable heavy larger formations for initial defensive operations. In case of a large-scale military invasion and occupation of Baltic states’ territory and parts of Poland, NATO would need to prepare over some weeks or even months for a large-scale, high intensity counterattack in order to reconquer lost territory and restore the *status quo ante*, i.e. territorial integrity of all its member states. This is NATO’s most vulnerable “Achilles heel.” The operational and political problem with NATO’s current responsiveness and reinforcement concept is that it can be undermined by Russia at this stage, both politically and operationally. *Politically*, consensus in NATO decision-making may be difficult to achieve once the territories of some allies have already been occupied and NATO’s initial operations to defend them have failed. In such a situation, some member states might prefer appeasement and could argue that “the problem can never be solved by military means” and that “only diplomacy, sanctions and dialogue could end the war.” In case of nuclear coercion by Russia, the argument will be made that “although the aggression and landgrab was terrible, illegal and will never be acceptable, an escalation toward nuclear war must be avoided under any circumstances.” Fertile ground for “opting out” must be taken into account particularly in member states whose political leaders are driven by a pacifist mainstream thinking within their societies and that do not want to suffer similar physical destruction as the media will report from the frontline states during wartime. Given the fact that political control by the North Atlantic Council over NATO military authorities also continues in wartime and does not end with the outbreak of hostilities, the possibility cannot be excluded that the North Atlantic Council might fail to agree when SACEUR requests authorization for preparing and launching a large-scale counter-attack operation. Once exposed allied countries were occupied, the risk of NATO losing its unity and resolve is higher, the longer it takes to assemble and deploy the bulk of its (i.e. in essence America’s) air, land and naval forces for a large-scale counterattack. At the *operational* level, a group of NATO nations led by the USA could still conduct a large counterattack operation to liberate e.g. the Baltic states or Poland from a Russian occupation. However, e.g., in case of an “opting out” by Germany and/or other allies in central Europe, it would be difficult for such a remaining “coalition of the willing” to successfully operate

¹⁹For a report on this non-public threat, see Brössler (2014); the then incoming NATO Military Committee Chairman General Petr Pavel voiced related concerns on May 27, 2015 (Bender, 2015). The credibility of this threat is underlined by the results of multiple US wargames indicating that it would take Russian troops at maximum 60 h to reach the outskirts of e.g. Tallinn or Riga (see Shlapak & Johnson, 2016, p. 1) and a Polish wargame that indicated a Polish defeat within 5 days (Kramper, 2021).

without freedom of movement in their rear area. It is to be hoped that the turnaround in Germany's defense policy announced by Chancellor Scholz in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will reduce the risk of such a scenario.

In the geopolitical situation since 2014, where NATO's possible adversary in wartime was assumed to be an isolated Russia, this political and operational risk of NATO's responsiveness concept has been assessed as manageable due to a rather low probability of the above-described worst case. However, in case Russia enjoys military and political backing by China and perhaps also substantial support through common hybrid activities against NATO across Europe, the risk of NATO being defeated in its initial defensive operations and consequently losing its political unity and resolve is significantly higher. The consequence of this political and operational vulnerability is that *an emerging military alliance between Russia and China would call for a different approach for the defense of Northeastern Europe*. With such a revised or alternative approach, NATO would need to avoid a situation in which NATO's initial defense operations on the ground would come to a preliminary end, followed over weeks or even months by a pause for building-up the forces for a large counterattack operation. Losing its "center of gravity," i.e. political unity and resolve among the 30 NATO allies and operational partners would then mean final victory for Russia in such a war, and probably also the end of NATO as an alliance.²⁰

3.6 Consequences for NATO's Defense Posture

In sum, the impact of a Sino-Russian military alliance on Russia's risk calculus and hence on Europe's security is evident: the geopolitical effect is that Europe may become a victim rather than an actor in this new age of geopolitical great power competition. On February 24, 2022 we saw a return of military conflict and war to Europe rather than a stable "Europe that is free and at peace" (Bush, 1989). This should give NATO reason enough for drawing three conclusions:

First: the Wales and Warsaw-strengthened defense posture must be fully and more quickly implemented.

In the context of an emerging Russian-Chinese alliance, which is currently still at an early stage, and especially in light of Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, there is significantly less time to reconstitute and adapt the national force postures as currently agreed among NATO allies in the NATO Defense Planning Process. NATO member states need to accelerate and intensify their implementation efforts. On a positive note, with the largely implemented Rapid Reaction Plan (Wales summit 2014), the enhanced NRF, the enhanced Forward

²⁰The notion of political will being the center of gravity within NATO had been put forward in 2010 by then-SACEUR Admiral Stavridis in relation to Afghanistan (see Benitez, 2010) and was pointedly put forward by SACEUR General Breedlove in 2015 during internal NATO discussions under the impression of the Ukraine crisis.

Presence and Tailored Forward Presence (Warsaw summit 2016) and the NATO Readiness Initiative (Brussels summit 2018) (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2014, 2016, 2018), the Alliance is well underway in building up rapidly usable but small numbers of forces and capabilities, which enables NATO to still cope successfully with hybrid warfare up to a limited incursion. However, NATO member states and the Alliance as a whole are too slow in reconstituting significant numbers of large combat formations (brigades, divisions, corps) for reinforcements (Brauss, 2021; Meyer zum Felde, 2020b). Also, efforts to re-establish a civil-military “total” or “comprehensive defense” posture both in the frontline states (like in Western Germany until 1989) and in rear-area Central Europe are still in an embryonic phase at best. However, all these elements would be indispensable prerequisites for any successful delay, defense and counterattack operation in a high-intensity regional war against a revisionist and aggressive Russia tacitly or actively supported by China, if a Russian leader decided to re-establish Russia’s former great power status with dominance in its near abroad through open war, rather than only testing NATO’s resolve and solidarity with a hybrid campaign. Hence, in the case of an emerging Russia-China alliance, an effective NATO defense posture that is fit for the purpose of deterring Russia needs to be in place by the mid-2020s rather than in the 2030s.

Second: upgrading, overhauling or even a full review of NATO’s Wales and Warsaw Defense Posture may become unavoidable.

If there is more evidence that a military alliance between Russia and China matures and intensifies, the current NATO defense posture as agreed at the recent NATO summits would have to be upgraded, overhauled or even fully reviewed, because the underlying fundamental assumption would no longer be valid. Russia may not be the only peer adversary who poses a threat to allies. So far, the consensus among NATO nations does not go further than to address China as a “challenge” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021). But in a fundamentally changed geopolitical situation, which a maturing Sino-Russian alliance would constitute, NATO allies must prepare for all the political, defense and operational implications of the new reality: Russia may be politically and militarily supported by a rapidly rising great power, China, and even worse, that both may be joined in their anti-Western military alliance by other partners, such as Iran (Russia, China, and Iran have already held joint naval drills in 2019; see Chamberlain, 2021).

Third: Europeans need to accept transatlantic burden shifting in order to “keep the Americans in”.

While significantly fewer US forces and capabilities will be available for fighting and winning a regional war in Europe, some European NATO allies, including Germany as a key member, have long hesitated to fully implement their current commitments and were not even considering further upgrades in response to the deteriorating geopolitical situation (Meyer zum Felde, 2020b). US representatives have been clear in recent years that the US military is no longer able to fight and win two major wars simultaneously in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, and that the primary US focus is shifting toward China (Russia is perceived as the near-term, but China as the long-term and more difficult, bigger challenge; see Colby, 2021b). It follows that

Europeans need to take on much more of the burden of deterring and defending NATO member states in Europe against Russia. Against this background, the NATO capstone documents for NATO defense planning agreed at Wales, Warsaw and Brussels have all been designed toward a fairer transatlantic burden-sharing and more European forces, capabilities and contributions. However, in terms of implementation, European member states—first and foremost Germany—have taken a steady but rather slow approach in their turnarounds and implementation efforts.²¹

What remains required in Europe vis-à-vis Russia is significant US military presence and power, particularly in critical capability areas—extended nuclear deterrence, critical enablers and force multipliers, air power, naval power, cyber. In return, Europeans need to accept the US request for burden shifting and take more responsibility for filling the gaps in NATO's deterrence and defense posture. This applies particularly to Germany, despite its obvious unwillingness to keep its pledges and again play its role as the conventional backbone for collective defense in Europe. Whether or not Europe will be able to maintain its security depends first and foremost on the USA, and next on Germany. Both need to take their responsibilities seriously, and consequently accept that in military burden sharing and shifting, they have to take their fair share according to their political and economic weight. Above all, it is essential for Europe's security that both give the Russian leadership no reason to change its risk calculus. The USA must not be perceived as disengaging from its commitments to Europe's security, and Germany must not be perceived as the weakest ally in NATO that under pressure might opt out, be it in peacetime, crisis, or conflict.

4 Concluding Recommendations

To conclude, China's potential support for Russia's revisionist agenda in Europe, possibly within the framework of a military alliance, has a deep impact on Russia's as well as on NATO nations' own risk calculus. Russia may be encouraged to opportunistically launch a large-scale offensive in the Baltic or Black Sea region and have success in its initial operations due to operational gaps on NATO's side to defend effectively. NATO member states, under the pressure of their citizens, may be discouraged to sustain a regional war until NATO gets the upper hand. With such perspectives, NATO's deterrence would become less credible, and Europe's

²¹In the case of Germany, there will be a first fully equipped and ready combat brigade no earlier than 2023, a first division with three combat brigades no earlier than 2027, and the pledged full size of three divisions with 8–10 combat brigades as late as the early 2030s. In terms of increased defense budgets, the figures correspond with that trend: in 2024 (10 years after the Defense Investment Pledge of Wales), not more than 1.5% of the German GDP is intended for defense (rather than 2% as agreed in 2014), and only weak commitments have been made recently to reach the 2% as late as in the early 2030s. With the new SPD-led coalition government in charge, even these recent pledges are now far from certain.

nightmare scenario of a simultaneous war in both the Indo-Pacific and the European theater, in which the USA's security umbrella for Europe would become insufficient, could become a possibility. All of this needs to be prevented.

From the results of this analysis, the following set of recommendations for NATO and NATO member states can be deduced:

1. Europe should maintain its indispensable transatlantic bond and accordingly, avoid any equidistancing between the USA on the one hand and China on the other.
2. The West as a whole should do its utmost to de-link China from Russia and prevent a Sino-Russian military counter-alliance from becoming a reality.
3. The Europeans should in their own interest help both the USA and China to solve their geopolitical great power competition with political, diplomatic, economic and other civilian means, rather than with military instruments. The heavy losses Russia sustained in the war against Ukraine may be a helpful argument to that end. Europeans also need to convince US public and political leaders that exclusively focusing on a major confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific region, with the effect of a hollow and less credible deterrence and defense posture in Europe, is not the appropriate response to the challenge of an emerging military alliance between Russia and China.
4. Europe should demonstrate solidarity with Western democracies around the globe and interest in other regions' security beyond Europe's direct periphery. Accordingly, NATO should not become a global alliance, but intensify its third core function, i.e. cooperative security, through partnerships on a global scale with like-minded nations. Europeans should also encourage the USA to neither retreat from regions critical for Europe's security (Middle East, North Africa) with the consequence of vacuum-filling by others, nor to step back from its role as the world's leading power. It is also in Europe's best interest that the USA remains capable of enforcing and protecting the international rules-based order and that the USA, if necessary, could conduct and win more than just one war.
5. NATO, the EU and member states should undertake all efforts for averting their worst-case scenario, i.e. simultaneous military confrontations both in the Indo-Pacific between the USA and China and in Europe between NATO and Russia.
6. For the time being, as long as Russia cannot rely on more than rather limited Chinese support, NATO's moderate strengthened deterrence and defense posture should be implemented fully, and faster. This is a long set of "more of the same," but beyond this list, there is also a need for fresh ideas to be developed.
7. Depending on how far and fast the Russian-Chinese emerging alliance will develop, a further significant upgrade of NATO's defense posture should be developed and the military implications of an emerging de facto military alliance between Russia and China be fully taken into account.

Most likely, this will mean for the Europeans:

- (a) even more defense spending beyond 2% of GDP;
- (b) more efforts on joint-all-domain operations, digitalization and cyber;
- (c) more investment in emerging and disruptive technologies;

- (d) more civilian-military preparation for total defense;
 - (e) more resilience building in NATO and EU vis-à-vis China and Russia;
 - (f) more European combat-capable formations, large reinforcements and sufficient logistic stockpiles for sustained high-intensity warfighting operations;
 - (g) further commitments for crisis management and stabilization in Europe's periphery.
8. Based on further NATO adaptation to the changing geopolitical realities, and from a respected position of strength without being provocative or posing a threat to others, NATO should engage in meaningful dialogue, confidence building and perhaps a revitalization of arms control with China (and eventually also Russia) once the time for this has arrived. Although both countries have to be seen as the West's systemic rivals for now, and in case of crisis and conflict perhaps both as potential adversaries, it is indispensable to at least find a way for peaceful coexistence. NATO's strategic community should not ignore the fact that in other essential fields of global politics beyond security and defense, close cooperation even with China and Russia remains essential, e.g. climate change and environmental protection, despite systemic rivalry and increasingly robust geopolitical great power competition.

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