G.E.O.



NATO: old and new concerns

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G.E.O. - Politics

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ABSTRACT

NATO is the most important military alliance in existence, counting the United States, Canada and all the major European powers among its members. The creation of NATO, which followed the end of the Cold War, triggered a crisis between the two sides of the Atlantic that reached its peak during the Trump presidency and that now seems to have ended with Biden's arrival at the White House. The latest NATO summit, held in Brussels last June, showed a renewal of the various members around future strategies and challenges. Russia, the historical rival of the Alliance, was joined by China, considered a growing challenge to the stability of the West. But will the identification of common enemies be enough to guarantee the survival of Atlanticism?

This paper aims to provide a careful analysis of NATO, highlighting the developments that have affected it in recent years. In particular, it intends to investigate the development of relations with China and Russia, identified as the main challenges of the Alliance and the impact it may have, both on international order and on the future of the Organization. The Chinese desire to increase its political as well as economic weight will mainly be countered by diplomatic means in order to preserve the current international order. Instead, Russian expansionism will clash with NATO on new grounds, contested by the West.

1. Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization represents the largest and most enduring military alliance currently in existence. Established in 1949, at the dawn of the Cold War, it arose with the aim of guaranteeing the security of Western Europe against possible Soviet aggression. With the signing of the Washington Pact, a military alliance was therefore stipulated between the United States and some of the European states belonging to the Western Bloc. Over the years other Powers have joined, opposing the countries of the Warsaw Pact. However, with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, the Alliance's purpose suddenly became obsolete, necessitating a radical redefinition of objectives and strategies. Despite the achievement of some successes during the 1990s and the entry of new members from Eastern Europe, NATO's transition period has never ended definitively. For many years, the Alliance has suffered from a profound identity crisis and the fraying of relations between the United States and Europe. It is not just a question of a rift on defense issues but above all of political and strategic differences. The intensity of the differences varied according to the circumstances and the administrations in office but never completely disappeared; the lowest point of relations between the two sides of the Atlantic was probably reached during the years of Donald Trump's presidency. Indeed, Trump's distrust of multilateralism and his hostility towards Europe have further reduced the strength and credibility of the Alliance. Joe Biden's entry into office, on the other hand, has certainly revitalized the Organization. The NATO summit,held in Brussels on June 14, the first summit since Biden took office, has given a new impetus to the Alliance, generating renewed cohesion between the United States and European partners. A common strategy was outlined to face future challenges, mainly identified in Russia and China. During the summit, Moscow was explicitly identified as a danger to the security of Europe, driven by imperialist ambitions and eager to broaden its sphere of influence at the expense of the West. On the contrary, Beijing is considered a systemic adversary, yearning to subvert the current international order and change the rules on which it is based today. Added to these are other threats such as terrorism, cybercrime and climate change. However, not all critical issues have yet been resolved[1].

2. NATO: The Foundations

[1] Daclon C. M., "Il disimpegno USA è l'ultimo appello per l'Europa", *Huffington Post*, January 22, 2019.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is an intergovernmental military alliance, created when its twelve founding members (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States) signed the North Atlantic Treaty on April 4th, 1949[2]. Currently based in Brussels (Belgium), the organization now counts 30 signatory states and its membership is open to "any other European state in a position to further the principles of the Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area"[3].

2.1 The birth of NATO

As far as NATO's foundation is concerned, the organization was primarily established to create a system of collective security against the Soviet Union (USSR) and its allies. Indeed, being born right at the outset of the Cold War, NATO's purpose and role reflected the dynamics of the geopolitical tensions which arose between the USSR, the US and their respective allies in the second half of the 20th century. After the end of the Second World War, most European states were both militarily and economically weak and thus they began to rely heavily on the support of the United States to rebuild their nations. Washington for its part agreed to help the Europeans as it was convinced that a strong and integrated Europe was key to preventing a communist expansion across the continent. The emergence of these mutual interests led several European states and the US to strengthen relations with each other. In particular, the first act that officialized this new form of cooperation was the Marshall Plan, a program of large-scale economic aid to Europe launched in 1948 by Washington. Furthermore, in 1948 several events, including the communist tensions in Greece and in Turkey, the Berlin Crisis and the Soviet-sponsored coup in Czechoslovakia, led the Truman Administration to consider the possibility of forming a European-American alliance that would allow the US to handle the security of Western Europe, especially against the Communists[4]. In reality, Western European states were well aware of the security issues that started to rise in the continent due to the tensions between the two blocs. Thus, as early as March 1948, France, Belgium, the UK, the Netherlands and Luxembourg signed the Brussels Treaty, creating a system of collective security that guaranteed that if one of these nations was attacked, the others had to intervene. Nevertheless, these Western European states also recognized that a stronger player was needed to counterbalance the Soviet power. Therefore, complex negotiations started in order to conclude a treaty of collective

[2] David G. Haglund, "North Atlantic Treaty Organization", *Britannica*.

[3] The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 10, April 4, 1949.

[4] "Milestones: 1945-1952. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 1949", US Department of State Office of the Historian..

security between the US and Western European states. Eventually, on April 4th, 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty (also known as Washington Treaty) was signed between the members of the Brussel Treaty, the US, and other countries that had a strategic position on the Atlantic Ocean (notably Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Ireland, and Portugal).

2.2 The evolution of NATO

Even if it was thus originally created in the geopolitical context of the Cold War, NATO still operates in present times and, over the years, even several former Soviet states have been welcomed to join the organization. As a matter of fact, after the dissolution of the USSR, the organization changed its strategic purposes and began to adapt itself to the new challenges which emerged in the modern security environment, including cyberattacks and terrorism, for instance[5]. Notably, regarding the issue of terrorism, the events of September 11th, 2001 were a turning point for NATO, which invoked for the first time its collective defense clause (Article 5 of the Washington Treaty) and committed itself to the 'war on terror'. Lastly, over the years NATO gained importance primarily for its role in ensuring compliance with the UN Charter, the UN Security Council's resolutions, and the norms of humanitarian law and law of armed conflict.

Going back to NATO's principles, it is important to point out that in present times, under the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO's purposes are both political and military in nature[6]. Regarding the political goals, the organization not only aims at promoting democratic values and cooperation, but also at preventing conflict and building trust. From the military point of view, as previously stated, NATO is a system of collective security, based on the exercise of mutual defense in case of an attack against one or more members of the organization. This fundamental principle is thoroughly set out under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which holds that "if an Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked"[7]. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that, in accordance with the UN Charter, whenever there is a dispute, NATO is first and foremost committed to peaceful means and, only when diplomatic efforts fail, the organization has the power to resort to crisis management operations. These operations represent one of NATO's most important tools to address crises and they include military and non-military measures.

[5] " A short history of NATO", The North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
[6] "What is NATO? Basic Points", The North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
[7] The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 5, April 4, 1949.

2.3 The structure of NATO

As far as NATO's working structures are concerned, the organization is based on a civilian and a military structure. The core players of the civilian structure are NATO's permanent delegations, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). NATO's permanent delegations represent the interests of member states, and they contribute to the consultation process. Each delegation is headed by an ambassador, appointed by the government, and it is made up of several civil servants, generally from the ministries of foreign affairs and defense[8]. The NAC, on the other hand, is the major decision-making body within NATO, and it brings together representatives of member states in order to oversee the general work of the organization. The NAC has the authority to discuss and make decisions on all the activities of the Alliance, and its policies are approved on the basis of unanimity or common accord[9]. Finally, the NPG is an organ which is in charge of discussing and reviewing the nuclear policy of the organization. The NPG is chaired by the NATO Secretary General and it comprises all member states with the exception of France, which deliberately decided not to be part of this organ[10].

Together with the Secretary General, who is the Alliance's major civil servant, the organ that provides a fundamental link between the civilian and the military structure of NATO is the Military Committee (MC). In fact, it is the MC which is in charge of translating political decisions and guidelines into military direction. Moreover, it shapes the Alliance's military policies and strategies, and it makes recommendations regarding the Alliance's defense issues and military operations. The MC is chaired by NATO's senior military official and it is made up of several senior military officers.[11] Finally, NATO's Command Structure (NCS) is responsible for responding to security threats and, if peaceful means fail, it is in charge of organizing a military response to an armed attack against a member state. The NCS is based on two bodies: the Allied Command Operations (ACO) and the Allied Command Transformation (ACF). The former executes all of NATO's military operations, while the latter is responsible for the development of NATO's military structure, capabilities and forces.

3. NATO through the Trump and Biden Administrations

[8] "National delegations to NATO", The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 24, 2020.
[9] "North Atlantic Council (NAC)", The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, October 10, 2017.
[10] "Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)", The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, May 27, 2020.
[11] "Military Committee (MC)", The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, August 25, 2021.

The crisis afflicting NATO reached its zenith in the years of Donald Trump's presidency. On several occasions, the former President has defined NATO as a remnant of the Cold War, an obsolete organization, no longer able to effectively face the challenges of our times. Ever since his first presidential campaign, Trump has harshly criticized what he considered an unfair distribution of burdens within the Alliance. On several occasions, he has argued that the spending burden would penalize the United States by favoring Europe, which would passively exploit the security guaranteed by Washington without contributing adequately. The President therefore threatened to no longer satisfy the political and military protection needs of the allies except in exchange for a fair contribution to the maintenance of the Organization[12].

In the years of his presidency, Trump has increased tensions with European countries, adopting contradictory and unfavorable diplomatic conduct towards his allies. The President refused to support Ukraine in its efforts to contain Russia, limiting himself to formal condemnation statements. At the same time, the administration withdrew American troops from northern Syria, coordinating the operation with the sole Turkish president, Recep Tayyep Erdogan, but ignoring the other NATO members. These choices created further fractures within the Alliance but also favored the imperial ambitions of Moscow and Ankara. On the one hand, the United States has aroused the resentment of its European allies, hostile to Russian expansionism and deeply concerned about the authoritarian and illiberal turn that has affected the Turkish regime in recent years. Major protests have arisen from Eastern countries, such as Poland, Romania and the Baltic Republics, traditionally opposed to Moscow's maneuvers, considered potentially fatal for their survival. The discontent has reached such levels that the dispatch of air squadrons, the deployment of troops to the eastern borders and the conduct of joint military exercises have not allayed the aversion towards the Trump administration. On the other hand, Russia and Turkey, both eager to expand their sphere of influence to the detriment of their neighbors and to increase their international weight, have managed to gain positions in Eastern Europe and the Near East. By preferring bilateral to multilateral relations, Trump has undermined the foundations of dialogue within a multinational team such as that of NATO. This made it even more difficult for the Organization to function and for coordination between the thirty Member States[13].

[12] Koutsokosta E., "Il nuovo corso della Nato con Joe Biden presidente USA", *Euronews*, June 13, 2021.
[13] Tramballi U., "Nato in crisi d'identità: Trump ed Erdogan picconano quel che resta dell'Alleanza", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, November 8, 2019.

Although NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg of Norway has repeatedly reiterated the solidity of the Alliance over the past few years, it has not been possible to hide the Organization's state of prostration[14]. In 2019, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, during a press conference, spoke openly of "NATO brain death" and called for the establishment of a European security and defense system, independent and disconnected from the United States: an old project, repeatedly relaunched by Paris, which has gained increasing acclaim over the last few years, particularly among the Senior Members of the European Union, such as Germany and the Netherlands. Faced with Trump's hostility towards NATO, even the Eastern European countries traditionally most loyal to the United States have begun to consider the French proposal[15].

The arrival of Joe Biden at the White House has undoubtedly opened a new chapter in Euro-Atlantic relations. The new President reaffirmed the fundamental role of NATO, defined as an indispensable organization to guarantee the security of the West and the safeguarding of democracy. After years of deep crisis between the United States and its European partners, Biden has adopted conciliatory tones and shown his firm will to re-establish cordial relations, abruptly interrupted by Trump. This renewed climate of collaboration, promoted by the United States, has produced a substantial revitalization of relations between Washington and Europe, therefore also a relaunch of NATO. The desire, shown by the current administration, to smooth out the points of conflict and jointly face present and future threats, has reassured the NATO members who, for their part, have shown themselves to be more open to American requests[16].

However, despite a significant reduction of internal tensions in the Atlantic Pact, structural friction remains between allies, both due to differences in objectives and mutual competition. President Biden, in continuity with the disengagement policy implemented by his predecessors, wishes to reduce the international role of the United States. Aiming to reduce, in addition to the political implications, also the economic costs of American involvement, the process will inevitably lead to the demobilization of a large part of the US forces deployed around the world. In other words, both the State Department and the Pentagon aim to focus their efforts solely on systemic threats to the American leadership, ignoring minor crises: a strategy unwelcome to the European allies who, believing that they have favored the international success of the United States, expect the full and

[14] Romano S., "Trump, le parole di Stoltenberg e la verità sulla 'Nato americana'", *Il Corriere della Sera*, June 27, 2020.
[15] Tramballi U., "Nato in crisi d'identità: Trump ed Erdogan picconano quel che resta dell'Alleanza", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, November 8, 2019.
[16] "Biden e la NATO: ricucire gli strappi", ISPI, November 7, 2020.

unconditional support of Washington. To this fear of abandonment are added the conflicts with individual countries: economic and commercial competition with the European Union, political and diplomatic rivalries with Germany, France's ambition to establish a European autonomous defense force. Therefore, despite a clear improvement in relations, it is possible that such points of friction could have considerable consequences on NATO's stability in the long run.

4. The 2021 Brussels Summit

The NATO summit held in Brussels on June 14th was the first to take place during Joe Biden's presidency. During the summit, a clear redesign of strategies took place, defining the objectives and future potential threats for the Alliance; based on both the final communiqué and the words of the various leaders of the Alliance, the meeting cemented the bonds between the various Members and restored strength to the Organization. Naturally, each representative emphasized the aspects to which their country is most interested but all unanimously agreed on the common objectives and the climate of cooperation[17].

4.1 Agreements on new antagonists

The main novelty is represented by the clear positions taken by NATO towards China. Never before has the Alliance identified an alleged threat coming from Beijing. In the final communiqué of the Summit, the People's Republic was defined as the main challenge to security and international coexistence based on general principles and universally recognized legal norms[18]. In particular, it was underlined that the Chinese government is in open contrast with the fundamental values of the Atlantic Pact, which is centered on coexistence and respect for international law. While recognizing China's rank as a Great Power worldwide, NATO fears its plans and ambitions for expansion. In fact, in addition to the aims of the South China Sea and Southeast Asia, the Chinese government is also trying to increase its weight in Africa, Central Asia and Europe, especially with the Belt and Road Initiative project. For this reason, the Alliance has renewed its invitation to Beijing to respect its commitments and signed agreements, acting within the limits and rules of the international forum. The warning affects many different sectors, from the maritime and commercial fields, to the space and cyber sectors, all areas in which Chinese expansionism is manifesting itself[19].

[17] Marrone A., "Nato 2030: la partita comincia adesso", *Affari Internazionali*, June 16, 2021.
[18] Brussels Summit Communiqué, June 14, 2021.
[19] "La NATO ha cambiato posizione sulla Cina", *Il Post*, June 15, 2021.

Russia was the other antagonist of the Brussels summit, having been defined as the greatest threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Also in this case, the Kremlin was reminded of its constraints on compliance with its international obligations, an unavoidable precondition for starting a phase of detente, a period of less commitment on the international scene. In recent years, in addition to constant encroachments on Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, Russia has turned its gaze further south[20]. The historic Russian ambition to have an outlet on the Mediterranean has become a reality thanks to strengthened ties with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and the new agreements made with the Libyan government of General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar. The allocation of Russian soldiers and the acquisition of air-naval bases in these areas has certainly turned the strategic balance in favor of Putin. Similarly, the use of agents to spy on foreign powers or to violently repress political opponents are, for NATO, tangible signs of Moscow's aggressive and illiberal intentions. President Biden also met with the leaders of the Baltic countries on the sidelines of the summit in order to reiterate American support for the three small republics[21].

4.2 Security agreements

The allies then reiterated the need to recover the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the nuclear non-proliferation agreement signed between Iran, the European Union and the P5 + 1 (i.e. the five Permanent Members of the Security Council of the UN, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, plus Germany) in 2015. The United States has therefore moved closer to the positions of the other members, who wish to keep the dialogue with Tehran open, avoiding further escalation. Also in view of the disengagement from the Middle Eastern chessboard, all the allies agreed on the need to maintain acceptable relations with one of the main powers in the region[22].

Additional challenges have been identified in unconventional problems such as international terrorist organizations, cyber attacks and climate change, all of which are potential sources of insecurity. For a long time now, terrorism has reached global proportions, involving thousands of individuals and managing to hit the major world powers without difficulty. For this reason, the fight against terrorist organizations has come to be the main priority of the Alliance. Cybersecurity was

[20] Tito C., "Nato, l'America di Biden torna protagonista al vertice che affronta le sfide di Russia e Cina", *La Repubblica*, June 14, 2021.
[21] "Concluso il vertice Nato, al centro la 'sfida sistemica' della Cina. Draghi: 'Il focus sia il Mediterraneo'", *La Repubblica*, June 14, 2021.
[22] "Toni duri della Nato: 'La Russia una minaccia, la Cina pone sfide'", *AGI - Agenzia Italia,* June 14, 2021.

another of the threats considered, as States were forced to deal with disinformation campaigns, cyber attacks and criminal or illegal use of the most sophisticated information technologies. At the same time, even natural phenomena such as climate change can destabilize countries and entire regions, giving rise to phenomena, not only economic but also political, such as famine and migration, which could have repercussions on the West. All NATO members have therefore agreed on the need to adapt the Alliance's tools and strategies to adequately manage the spread of these phenomena[23].

5. NATO and China

Donald Trump highly criticised U.S. involvement in NATO because, in his words, his country was paying to militarily protect EU countries. Such statements seemed to be another attempt to go through with his campaign putting "America First", while being a member of NATO indeed brought many advantages to the country[24]. Throughout his mandate, he continued to discuss U.S. withdrawal from NATO and he progressively tried to put distance between the Alliance and the United States.

Joe Biden's decision to support NATO once he came into office is yet another attempt to serve U.S. rhetoric and vision of world balance. In fact, from the perspective of the United States, China and Russia are both dangerous because they could alter the fragile world order[25]. This is the reason behind America's renewed interest in NATO, because strengthening the country's relationship with other important players within the association to create a united front against what it perceives as challenging the status quo is a way to create a 'consolidated west' led by America itself[26].

"With China's rise, it is imperative that the international community adapts and engages them"[27]: this sentence highlights the tone of the conversation around China and the way in which countries should interact with it by creating their own China Strategy. European countries seem to adopt a weaker approach when compared to the U.S., probably because of the economic and trading ties

[23] "Biden, dirò a Putin che ci sono linee rosse da non superare", *ANSA,* June 14, 2021.
[24] Fontaine R. "Trump Gets NATO Backwards,The U.S. defends Europe out of self-interest", *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2018.
[25] Dinic L. "The Impact of NATO's China Strategy", *Foreign Policy,* July 22, 2021.
[26] Ibidem.
[27] Mendoza D.R., "NATO's Shifting Focus Towards A Rising China", *OWP,* July 10, 2021.

that have been established between EU countries and China[28]. An article released by China Briefing on May 27, 2021 affirms that China has become "EU largest trade partner in 2020"[29]. This is likely to continue despite the setback of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) which was supposed to be ratified by EU in the first quarter of 2021 but was frozen on May 20, 2021 by a resolution of EU Parliament[30]. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, referring to China, said "you cannot simply ignore China [...] one must not overrate it, either... We need to find the right balance"[31] Hence, a 'balanced' approach is the one that the EU would like to undertake when addressing China and trading with it, which does not correspond to Trump and Biden's confrontational rhetoric and actions.

Nonetheless, in the Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels on June 14th, 2021, China is mentioned 10 times in three paragraphs, namely paragraphs 3, 55, 56[32]. In paragraph 3, when talking about authoritarian powers who might affect the future of the world by posing a risk to the Alliance, NATO members define China's rise as something that "can present challenges" to the security of the Alliance and should be addressed in a way to contain the potential threat. In paragraph 55 China is defined as a "Systemic challenge" to the established world order because the country adopts actions and policies that are "coercive", in opposition with democratic ideals inscribed in the Washington Treaty. They continue referring to Chinese increased military capacity and nuclear arsenal, as well as the risk posed by its alliance with Russia. All these statements are quite strong, and negatively depict China, framing it as a country that lacks transparency and acts irresponsibly. In order, however, to reduce the severity of its previous statements, in paragraph 56 NATO members declare the intention to "maintain a constructive dialogue ... on common challenges"[33].

5.1 NATO and China: Chinese response to NATO's Communiqué

[28] Ibidem.
[29] Ibidem.
[30] Chipman Koty A. "European Parliament Votes to Freeze the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment", *China Briefing*, May 27, 2021.
[31] Mendoza D.R., "NATO's Shifting Focus Towards A Rising China", *OWP*, July 10, 2021.
[32] Brussels Summit Communiqué, June 14, 2021.
[33] Ibidem.

China Daily, the English version of *renminribao* 人民日报, the official state newspaper, followed the Brussels Summit publishing articles entitled:

- June 15, 2021 - NATO should reject being used as weapon in US' China policy: China Daily editorial[34]
- June 15, 2021 - No enemy? NATO will create one[35]
- June 16, 2021 - NATO chiefs put Beijing in firing line[36]
- June 16, 2021 - G7, NATO have no business meddling in China's affairs[37]
- June 18, 2021 - NATO playing perilous game with anti-China declamation[38]
- August 6, 2021 - China's military has always been a promoter of world peace[39]

Each title is clear about Chinese remarks on NATO and its declared position against China.

In addition to these articles, China's Mission to the EU issued a statement on Twitter[40] in which it posits that NATO is "slandering China's peaceful development"[41] , tarnishing its reputation. The spokesperson for the CMEU added that although China does not represent a systemic challenge, they will not "sit by and do nothing if 'systematic challenges' come closer to us", implying a reaction from the Chinese side, should they perceive a country or a group of countries as a "systemic challenge". Moreover, he added that this type of affirmation represents a reproduction of "Cold War mentality and block politics [...] create confrontation and fuel political competition".

6. NATO and Russia

As previously mentioned, relations between NATO and Russia developed after the end of the Cold War. In 1991 Russia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and in 1997 the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. However, effective cooperation was established in 1994 with the Partnership for Peace program, through which Russia later acted as peacekeeper to sustain NATO operations in the Balkans[42]. Moreover, the strengthening of the relations led to the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, which defined bilateral relations. In addition to that, in 2002 the foundation of the

[34]"NATO should reject being used as weapon in US' China policy", *China Daily*, June 15 2021.
[35]Zhouxiang Z., "No enemy? NATO will create one", *China Daily*, June 15 2021.
[36]Weihua C., "NATO chiefs put Beijing in firing line", China Daily, June 16, 2021
[37]Korybko A., "G7, NATO have no business meddling in China's affairs", *China Daily*, June 15, 2021.
[38]Weihua C., "NATO playing perilous game with anti-China declamation", *China Daily*, June 18, 2021.
[39]Guanghui S., "China's military has always been a promoter of world peace",*China Daily*, August 6, 2021.
[40] https://twitter.com/ChinaEUMission/status/1404565606892986375
[41] https://twitter.com/ChinaEUMission/status/1404565606892986375
[42] "Relations with Russia", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 2021.

NATO-Russia Council led to deeper cooperation, since its purpose was the discussion of security problems and of practical cooperation[43].

Despite this, NRC meetings were cancelled from August 2008 to spring 2009 due to Russian military activities in Georgia. NATO members condemned Russia for its behavior in recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moreover, starting from April 2014 NRC cooperation ceased following Russia's annexation of Crimea, which NATO opposes.

NRC represented a forum for consultation on security problems and practical cooperation in many areas of common interest; in the years of its functioning, Russia and NATO were able to define a significant amount of common interests.

Firstly, Russia supported NATO-led operations in Afghanistan (International Security Assistance Force), in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (until retiring in 2003), in fighting terrorism in the Mediterranean (Active Endeavour), and in counter-piracy operations in the area of the Horn of Africa (Operation Ocean Shield)[44]. Secondly, Russia participated in the counter-narcotics training of Afghan and Central Asian personnel[45]. Thirdly, Russia and NATO joined forces in fighting terrorism: in 2004 the Action Plan on Terrorism was signed; moreover, the creation of a system to exchange information on air activities, in order to block terrorist attacks, deepened their cooperation[46].

In addition, NATO and Russia's areas of interest include non-proliferation and arms control, transparency on nuclear weapons (it is worth mentioning the nuclear weapon accident response field exercises who took place between 2004 and 2007 in Russia, France, the UK and USA, which increased knowledge on response procedures in case of nuclear accidents) and civil emergencies (joint action in case of earthquakes, floods and the consequences of terrorist attacks[47]).

6.1 Russia's approach to NATO

The creation of NATO was perceived by Soviet leaders as a threat to the USSR. The admission of West Germany in the Northern Atlantic Organization alarmed Soviet leaders, whose feelings of

[43] Ibidem.
[44] "Relations with Russia", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 2021.
[45] Ibidem.
[46] Ibidem.
[47] Ibidem.

danger increased. The East-West conflict led to a mistrust of each other's intentions and to fear military abilities and nuclear development of the other side, who both feared retaliation[48].

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO started to broaden its fields of action: not only in defense, but also in increasing democracy and stability. Therefore, in 1993 NATO promoted the Partnership for Peace (PfP) for the former Warsaw Pact countries. The ambition of these countries was to gain full membership of NATO, though the decision was complicated due to discussions about the potential consequences. Despite this, in 1999 Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO and in 2002 Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became NATO members. NATO, by adding three former Soviet republics and what was considered the "security belt"[49] of the Soviet Union, led to an increase in fear in Russia.

In addition to that, the "rose" and "orange" revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively, in 2004 and the will of these countries to join NATO were perceived by Russia as an attack, as a way to weaken and diminish Russian power. Russian leaders were able to prevent and not let these countries join NATO, but in doing so the relations between Ukraine and Georgia and NATO continued to grow, while their relations with Russia deteriorated. Moreover, in 2008 NATO-Russia relations became extremely tense after Georgian President Saakashvili attacked South Ossetia, which proclaimed its independence after the dissolution of the USSR, and in which there were Russian peacekeeping operations, thus creating a deep crisis. Moscow's response of deploying an army to fight Georgia and recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was strongly condemned by NATO. The Georgia-Russia conflict profoundly weakened NATO-Russia relations[50].

Moreover, it is possible to assert that Russia's current interest in the Black Sea and in the Mediterranean is part of a plan to increase its security and influence. In particular, Russia considers the Black Sea as an important security zone, since the Caucasus, due to its instability, is not a reliable route for exporting Russian products and for military operations. Russian perception of the Mediterranean as a NATO zone and the idea that NATO's intention is to encircle Russia, led to politics that combine defensive aspects with the desire to be primarily active in the global stage[51]. In this framework, Russian actions in the Syrian conflict are to be intended as an opportunity to gain a

[48] Rogov, S., "NATO and Russia: A View from Moscow", *Politique étrangère*, no. 5, 2009: 108.
[49] Ibidem.
[50] "Relations with Russia", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 2021.
[51] Pierini, M., "Russia's Posture in the Mediterranean: Implications for NATO and Europe", Carnegie Europe, June 2021: 1.

role and an ally in the Mediterranean. Moreover, the increase in Russian energy exports in the Balkan region is part of a wider strategy that Russia has adopted in order to limit NATO and EU influence in the region[52].

The perception of threats from NATO has also increased with the deployment of NATO missile defense system in Romania, which are seriously perceived by Russia as negatively affecting the country's security[53]. Furthermore, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the annexation of Crimea is part of a strategy to create a 'security belt' and to increase Russian power in the Black Sea and to decrease NATO influence. The allies strongly condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine. In addition, Russia's recent actions at the border of Ukraine have raised wider concerns between NATO members. President Zelenskyy recently affirmed that NATO action is the only possibility to end the conflict in Donbas and that Ukraine should become a member of NATO[54]. Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin spokesman, believes that NATO membership would not help in resolving the conflict. "We very much doubt that this will help Ukraine settle its domestic problem. From our point of view, it will only worsen the situation. If you ask the opinion of several million people living in the self-declared republics (in the east) you will see that for them NATO membership is deeply unacceptable"[55].

It is possible to assert that Russian strategy in the past years has been focused on increasing power and increasing security by decreasing NATO power and areas of influence. In this framework, President Vladimir Putin's speech to the UN General Assembly in September 28, 2015 cleared his country's position, which would from then on take an important role in shaping world order, which would not be only decided by NATO Allies[56]. Thus, Putin's idea is to end United States' and Europe's imposition of a world order.

6.2 NATO perception of Russia

The Soviet Union was the great enemy of the West and the goal of NATO was to provide collective security against its threats. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO and Russia started to cooperate on common areas of interest. However, there were numerous difficulties, and indeed Russian behavior was raising concern between NATO Allies. For example, Russian operations in

[52] Stronski, P., "What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?", Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, May 2021: 4.
[53] Stronski, P., "What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?", Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, May 2021: 3.
[54] Grod, P., "NATO must stand with Ukraine against Russian aggression", Atlantic Council, June 2021.
[55] AFP, "Ukraine Urges NATO to Speed Up Membership in 'Signal' to Moscow", *Moscow Times*, April 2021.
[56] Pierini, M., "Russia's Posture in the Mediterranean: Implications for NATO and Europe", Carnegie Europe, June 2021: 9.

Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia made NATO-Russia relations more complicated, since the Georgian government was sponsored by the West. The Georgian-Russian conflict exposed all the difficulties and mistrusts between Russia and NATO. In this framework, in September 2009 Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the new Secretary General of NATO, said: "I believe that, of all of NATO's relationships with partner countries, none holds greater potential than the NATO-Russia relationship. Yet I also believe that none is so much burdened by misperceptions, mistrust and diverging political agendas (…) The historical baggage of the relationships between NATO and Russia and between the West and Russia cannot simply be ignored. And not all our disagreements are simply based on misunderstandings. Some of them are of a fundamental nature and, hence, will not disappear quickly"V.

In addition, the lowest point of NATO-Russia relations was reached with the Ukrainian conflict, the annexation of Crimea and the situation in Donbas. The relations are still extremely stretched, since NATO perceives Russian's operation as a threat and as illegal and illegitimate actions. Recent deployment of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border raised concerns in the country and in NATO Allies. Specifically, President Zelenskyy believes that to end the conflict it is necessary for NATO to grant Ukraine full membership[57].

In this framework, at the NATO Summit on June 14, 2021 in Bruxelles, NATO reiterated its mistrust in Russia:"Russia continues to breach the values, principles, trust, and commitments outlined in the agreed documents that underpin the NATO-Russia relationship (…) The conflict in and around Ukraine is the first topic on our agenda"[58].

Lithuania and Poland have also raised concerns on the 'weaponization' of migration by Belarus and on the military exercise involving Belarusian and Russian troops. This year more than 4000 migrants have crossed the border to Lithuania, 50 times more than had entered last year[59]. Rinkevics, foreign minister of Latvia, believes that this a "very clear case of hybrid warfare"[60]. In addition, Riho Terras, former head of Estonia's armed forces, believes that in the framework of the migrant crisis it is necessary for NATO to invoke article 4, in which consultations among members should be undertaken. Rinkevics backed Terras, conveying that he would approve an article 4 in

[57] Grod, P., "NATO must stand with Ukraine against Russian aggression", Atlantic Council, June 2021.
[58] Socor, V., "NATO Summit: Strong on Russia but a Net Disappointment to Eastern Allies and Partners (Part One)", Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 18, no. 97, June 2021.
[59] Milne, R., "Latvia warns of risk of 'incident' between Nato and Russia", *Financial Times*, August 2021.
[60] Ibidem.

there are the right circumstances[61]. The Baltic countries have expressed multiple concerns about Russian behavior, feeling in danger due to the geographical location and proximity to Russia.
It is therefore possible to assert that Soviet Union--and, after its dissolution, Russia--have represented the biggest enemy and threat to Western security and to NATO.

Conclusions

Thus, after years of crisis, instability and uncertainty, the latest Brussels summit clearly defined NATO's main future challenges. Namely, China and Russia have been defined as the Alliance's major international competitors. Despite the differences that still exist between the various members of NATO, unity seems to have been rediscovered as well as harmony around the major objectives. However, it is possible that the strategies pursued by each side of the Atlantic diverge, since some structural fractures within the Atlantic Pact have not been recomposed. Therefore, in a general climate of military disengagement, exploiting the differences between allies, China, Russia and other rival regional powers, such as Iran, could try to fill the power gaps left by NATO and exploit them to their own advantage. It is therefore essential for the Alliance, albeit taking into account some differences, to keep faith with the aims and objectives set insert citations.

The growing political and economic strength of China has placed a new actor at the center of the international arena, requiring the definition of new and more effective response strategies by the Western Powers. The conclusions of the Brussels summit confirmed this need, identifying Beijing as a potential systemic challenge. The authoritarian character of the Chinese government, in open contrast to the values of the Atlantic Charter, and the growing increase in its military strength and its nuclear potential have been identified as possible sources of destabilizing the current international order. However, while the United States leans towards a more assertive approach than China, the European partners do not want to broaden the game to the economic level, as this would risk compromising their solid and profitable trade ties. Therefore, despite the outraged Chinese reactions, NATO has stated that it intends to maintain an open and constructive dialogue with Beijing, albeit in the context of an established rivalry. It is certain that in the future, the Chinese government will continue its policy of growth, not only economic but also diplomatic and military, with the aim of consolidating its presence on the international stage. It is therefore likely that, in the next few years, the confrontation between NATO and China will mainly take place on a political and

[61] Ibidem.

diplomatic level, aiming to reduce the ambitions and expansionary projects of the People's Republic but without implementing an organic strategy of economic containment.

Russia's desire to revive the glories of the Soviet Union, returning to being the protagonist of world politics, represents NATO's greatest threat in the last twenty years. All the policies undertaken by the Kremlin aim at the creation of a 'safety belt' beyond the borders of the Russian Federation and the reconstitution of a vast sphere of influence that can rival the Atlantic Alliance, as well as bring new luster to the country. The absorption of former Soviet allies into NATO, the attempts of Russian penetration into the Balkans and the Mediterranean, and the conflicts that broke out in Georgia and Crimea quickly destroyed the fragile understanding that arose between Moscow and Brussels with the end of the Cold War. Political and strategic divergences, as well as historical and cultural ones, have proved difficult to overcome, indeed they have triggered a profound crisis, aggravated by internal repression and external aggression undertaken by Russia. It is possible that the Alliance will try to contain Russian arrogance by encouraging the entry of new members, frightened or hostile to the Kremlin. In the future, in addition to the traditional 'eastern front', the Mediterranean will become another area of confrontation between NATO and Russia, especially thanks to the recent successes of Moscow in Syria and Libya and the military bases installed there. In any case, the Kremlin will try to exploit any Western weaknesses to gain geopolitical 'points' and increase its power worldwide.

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