

The Western Flank

The Geosecurity Periphery NATO Forgot It Had

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The most successful military alliance in history, NATO has managed its strategic outlook to contend with the geosecurity threats of its day. From the onset of its existence, NATO was primed to deter and defend its eastern flank against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1991, and during the United States' unipolar moment, NATO maneuvered its strategic outlook to its southern flank in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, resulting in the Alliance enacting Article V for the first and only time. In recent years, NATO's northern flank has been given significant attention and resources due to Russia's Arctic military projection and Chinese extraregional interest.*

With Russia reasserting itself into the security and defense architecture of Eastern Europe and the Arctic, NATO's eastern and northern flanks—a relatively new geosecurity periphery—have reorientated themselves into vital geosecurity areas. What is more, due to the sensitivity of North Africa and the Middle East

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to terrorist organizations and mass migrations, NATO's southern flank has maintained prominence in the Alliance's Mediterranean geosecurity commitments. For NATO, these geosecurity peripheries are classified as the primary geopolitical zones of importance, seeing that 28 members inhabit close geographical borders with either one or two of these flanks. However, there is another geopolitical flank that is underappreciated in the strategic outlook of NATO—the Pacific coast of Canada and the United States.

As the international rules-based order is adjusting to multipolarity, power politics, and strategic competition among the top echelon of the major and great powers, NATO has attempted to divert its strategic outlook to incorporate new and potential challenges and obstacles to its defense and deterrence mandate. At NATO's December 2019 London summit, the Alliance recognized that "China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges," a first for the Alliance.¹ By contrast, its communiqué from the NATO 2021 summit referred to China's regional and global behavior as "present[ing] systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and areas relevant to Alliance security."²

Reinforcing this assertion is the growing number of NATO members developing and initiating an Indo-Pacific strategy that centers on their unique geopolitical and diplomatic position in the region. For instance, the United States emphasizes the importance of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with India, Japan, and Australia; its Trilateral Security Pact with Australia and the United Kingdom creating an Anglosphere in the Indo-Pacific; France's determination to carve an axis of partnership with India and Australia; and the United Kingdom's desire to heighten its Global Britain strategy are but a few examples of NATO members spreading into the western flank.

Despite these strategic maneuvers, NATO—as a collective organization—is finding it difficult to reach a consensus on how the Alliance should operate within the Indo-Pacific and deal with China, reflecting the wide-range views and national interests that prevent the Alliance from crafting a reliable strategy.³ To resolve these strategic issues, this article will showcase the importance of classifying the western flank as a vital geopolitical and geosecurity periphery. What is more, it will present the gravity for how the western flank can increase intra-alliance cohesion and unity on assessing geosecurity threats and challenges arriving from China and the Indo-Pacific, along with developing burden-sharing schemes that enhance the Alliance's defense and deterrence mandate. Lastly, the article will present recommendations for how NATO can design a strategic outlook for its western flank. These recommendations will underscore priorities within preexist-

ing, near-term, and long-term objectives regarding two areas of capabilities—physical and digital.

NATO's Western Flank—A Historical Retrospect

With China and the Indo-Pacific emerging as the geosecurity and geo-economic danger regions of the multipolar rules-based order, it is not odd for NATO and its member states to reorientate their national interests and strategy to accompany their prominence. However, for NATO and the United States to stress the sudden implication of China on vital transatlantic geosecurity areas of operation and not emphasize the Alliance's western flank is perplexing.

From the onset of its existence, NATO closely associated China and the Far East with its geosecurity interests. After all, the Big Three—the United States, France, and the United Kingdom—had important military commitments, colonies, and territories in the Far East. These possessions required significant security and defense inquiries to ensure that the Big Three's forces would not be hindered in their transatlantic mandate for collective security against the Soviet Union by Chinese aggression—thought at the time as a “junior partner in an [Communist] axis.”⁴ Moreover, as the United States became more committed to the Vietnam War, US security and defense agencies sought to “share the burden” of military involvement by pressuring its NATO allies to provide military forces.⁵

The concept of a western flank can be traced to the 1960s. In assessing the polarity of the global order and the future of China as a great power, renowned *New York Times* foreign correspondent, C. L. Sulzberger attempted to decipher if NATO's European members would confront future Chinese military aggression against the United States.⁶ Commenting that NATO's western flank was solely focused within the United States' geosecurity periphery, Sulzberger concluded that NATO's European members would defend and contain the Alliance's eastern flank against the Soviet Union as initially designed. He argued that such measures would de-escalate further intra-alliance friction on the Washington Treaty's articles of assistance in out-of-area jurisdictions.⁷ By doing so, however, Sulzberger also noted that NATO's European members would be bound by Article V to help the United States in defending its western flank if the Soviet Union attacked across the Bering Strait or by launching missiles from the Arctic.⁸

NATO's western flank was also hinted at by Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State from 1961 to 1969, on the eve of China becoming a nuclear power in 1964. To reflect the growing disparity of nuclear powers in the world, Dean Rusk argued that North America could “one day be on the firing line of the world's newest nuclear power, ‘Red China.’”⁹ To showcase the seriousness of this possible geosecurity threat, Rusk reminded his European NATO counterparts that North

America was inside the jurisdiction and treaty mandate of the Alliance and anticipated that if a nuclear attack by China on the United States occurred, the United States would expect their NATO allies to hurry to their aid, just as the United States would do in Europe.¹⁰ Rusk also asserted the legitimacy of NATO's western flank as Canada and the United States have extensive geographical coastlines along the Pacific.¹¹

The Western Flank and China

When assessing the geosecurity gravity from China's great-power rise, regionally and globally, the main concerns do not negate NATO's historical dilemma with its western flank. For instance, the nuclear threat that China constitutes has not left the strategic thinking of NATO leaders. After observing China's militaristic behavior toward Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the United States, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg rightfully asserted that NATO's interests in China were natural, given its conventional nuclear capabilities and its progress to invest heavily in "new long-range weapons and missile systems that can reach all NATO countries."¹²

Although China's nuclear modernization is not a significant departure from its early nuclear strategy, President Xi Jinping does seek to use nuclear modernization to establish military superiority over the United States in specific geopolitical peripheries to achieve China's military and political objectives of regional hegemony and solidify China's status as a global great power.¹³ In light of these developments, any discussion around NATO's western flank should be observed as a thoughtful continuation of US strategic thinking toward NATO and its western flank, along with the role the Alliance has in upholding Article V in a non-European geopolitical theater, as stipulated by Dean Rusk in 1966.

Geosecurity Gravity of Sino-Russian Relations

During the Cold War, there were fears among NATO's European members that the Soviet Union would attack the western flank of the United States, thereby causing the United States to transfer its conventional military and nuclear capabilities and personnel to the Pacific geopolitical theater—leaving Europe without its principal ally and ripe for Soviet westward expansion. What is more, the thought of a Sino-US armed conflict during the Cold War unnerved NATO's European members, who feared that the United States would relocate most of its capabilities and troops to challenge a geosecurity threat that was closer to the US homeland.¹⁴ These worries remain salient in the strategic outlook of NATO's European members today.

Unlike the Cold War trepidations of Russia attacking the United States' western flank, the fear today is that deepening US strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific will undoubtedly increase the likelihood of a Sino-US conflict. As early as 2016, China was earmarked by the Obama and Trump administrations as the primary geosecurity threat to the United States' global posture and primacy interests, something the current Biden administration has reiterated in its national security and defense outlook.¹⁵ However, the US strategic "pivot" toward the Indo-Pacific has caused minor intra-alliance friction among the United States and its NATO European allies.¹⁶

Europe is also worried about the growing military and political connection between China and Russia. Although Sino-Russian relations have peaked and dipped in the past, their current relationship offers both governments ways to achieve their political and military objectives. As such, the growing closeness between China and Russia poses significant security challenges for the transatlantic community.¹⁷ For instance, Chinese support for Russia in the United Nations Security Council, and vice-versa, indicates that both countries are not isolated in the overall structure of the rules-based order.¹⁸ In 2019, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg implied that Russia's decision to violate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and develop new intermediate-range missiles in Russia resulted from China's decision to develop similar forms of nuclear weapons, resulting from the treaty not binding Chinese nuclear proliferation.¹⁹

Sino-Russian military cooperation and collaboration have accelerated, with both countries conducting joint naval exercises in transatlantic jurisdictions including the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, and the Arctic.²⁰ Russia and China have also increased their technology platforms and services for military use by signing multiple agreements to cooperate in innovative research and development projects, ranging from heavy-lift helicopters, Lada-class submarines, and early-warning missile defense systems.²¹

Back in 2001, both countries signed a Sino-Russian "treaty of friendship" that explicitly highlighted their cooperation against "threats of aggression":

When a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats.²²

For NATO's European members, the growing Sino-Russian military and political connection could result in the two countries developing a global double flanking strategy that would utilize the predicament of US military prioritization of the Indo-Pacific to push and pull US military and strategic capabilities toward its

western flank, seeing it as the more prominent geosecurity threat.²³ Such a maneuver would isolate Europe against Russia. On a transatlantic level, China could provide Russia with cyberespionage technology and data information that positions Russian leadership in an advantageous position, dividing the Alliance's unity and cohesion and preventing the development of a firm strategic understanding of its western geosecurity periphery.²⁴

Geosecurity Gravity of China's Unconventional Power

In a similar fashion to how former US Secretary of State Dean Rusk alerted NATO to the potential geosecurity challenges of a nuclear China in 1964, the United States—predominantly under the Trump administration—has been momentous in cautioning its NATO allies of the dangers posed by Chinese cyber, digital, and economic power. After these assertive announcements, NATO exclaimed that “China is coming closer to us. We see them in Africa, in the Arctic, investing in infrastructure in Europe and also in cyberspace.”²⁵

Almost overnight, the Alliance was fractured over the United States' insistence that Europeans “over-relied” on Chinese economic investments and 5G technologies.²⁶ However, this case has legitimate grounds for geosecurity concern. In 2012 Central and Eastern European (CEE) states were overwhelmingly enthralled over China's decision to establish a format for mutual economic cooperation with the 17+1 initiative—now the 16+1 initiative after Lithuania withdrew from the partnership in May 2021. For many of the CEE states participating in the 16+1 initiative, the extraregional engagement of China did not raise any cause for geosecurity anxiety, seeing as their proximity to Russia and the direct threat it posed was more concerning.²⁷ Moreover, many of the CEE states regarded any geosecurity threat from China as more of a Western European issue.²⁸

The assertiveness of the United States to broadcast China as a geosecurity challenge became a reality when China began to use its economic investments to attain its “core interests”—the Taiwan quagmire, Tibet, Xinjiang, the South China Sea disputes, and state-owned enterprises, such as Huawei—being excluded from the CEE markets.²⁹ Showcasing its unconventional power to impact the economic stability of NATO's European members, China has initiated trade sanctions, investment restrictions, tourism bans, widespread boycotts, and restrictions on official travel when it does not get its way on diplomatic matters. China recently recalled its ambassador from Lithuania, limited trade, and suspended rail services between the two countries after Lithuania authorized Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius and Taiwan reciprocated with plans to open a similar office in Taipei.³⁰ China has also exerted unconventional hard power

through state-issued threats and arbitrary detention of NATO allies' state officials.³¹

NATO's European members have begun to acknowledge China's growing geosecurity challenges in cyberspace. According to the Atlantic Council's China Plan, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has ongoing missions to maximize its ability to conduct multiple cyber operations, including but not limited to cybertheft, cyber-reconnaissance, cyberwarfare, and cyberattacks on information and military systems and civilian electric grids.³² What is more, NATO's 2020 "reflection process" report condemned China's ongoing "disinformation campaign" against its members, "widespread intellectual property theft" that presents geosecurity threats on allies' prosperity, and "cyberattacks" on NATO governments and societies.³³

Geosecurity Gravity of China's Conventional Power

China is due to have the second-largest military globally by 2050, a distinct great-power feature that will enable China to project its security and defense interests outside its regional jurisdiction. China has also made it clear that it yearns for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to evolve its green-water maritime capabilities into an efficient blue-water oceanic force. With a powerful blue-water navy, it can be anticipated that the PLAN will seek out new military dimensions in extraregional jurisdictions to promote, protect, and procure its geoeconomic and—by default—geosecurity interests.

Given China's experience in conducting joint and unilateral naval operations in transatlantic domains, NATO cannot flout future PLAN endeavors to interject in Euro-Atlantic maritime affairs. China could also use its blue-water navy to showcase its influence on vital European ports it has built as part of its economic investments of the 16+1 bloc and the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, NATO's European members would observe Chinese merchant vessels and PLAN naval ships at the Greek port of Piraeus, the Moroccan port of Tanger-Med, and other North African ports.³⁴ These ports will provide the PLAN unrestricted access to the Mediterranean and, as such, will force NATO naval and air forces to operate in close proximity to a significant portion of the PLAN.³⁵

China's declaration of being a "near-Arctic" state at the Arctic Council in 2018 will also have eminent geosecurity complications for NATO's western flank. With its enormous investments in Greenland, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, and Finland, through its Polar Silk Road, China will increase its extraregional footprint over the region, perhaps culminating in a "Sino-Atlantic Strategy" that will permanently coordinate and station PLAN and Chinese Coast Guard vessels in the Arctic and Pacific Ocean.³⁶ To navigate to and from the region, China will use the

Pacific route to navigate the Arctic Circle, potentially resulting in considerable congestion of sea lines of communication and intercrossing US and Canadian economic exclusive zones. Moreover, China would undoubtedly provide “white hull diplomacy”—ranging from rapid Coast Guard responses to interjurisdictional hassles including shipwrecks, ship collisions, equipment breakdowns, and search and rescue—to maritime geosecurity issues.³⁷ These interactions will drive Chinese, US, and Canadian coast guards and naval forces to come into close and constant contact, adding to future political, military, and diplomatic tensions along NATO’s western flank.

Keeping America In, Europe Assured, and NATO Capable

It has already been suggested that China will likely seek to divide NATO in future confrontations with the United States as a way to weaken the existing rules-based order and isolate the United States from its long-standing allies.³⁸ Moreover, many NATO European members have vivid worries about the United States purposefully withdrawing significant portions of its military and nuclear forces from the continent to focus on the Indo-Pacific and China, thereby entrapping Europe to join US efforts to contain Chinese hegemonic ambitions in the region. Lastly, there is also a fear that a swift strategic outlook to China and the Indo-Pacific would weaken the Alliance’s consensus on the Russian threat to its eastern flank—NATO’s traditional challenger and principal geosecurity periphery.

In the wake of these realizations, NATO has promised to “engage China with a view to defending the security interests of the alliance” and is developing an Indo-Pacific strategy.³⁹ However, it must be made clear that any extraregional engagement strategy arriving from NATO will need to incorporate US and European geosecurity concerns of overextension—an increasingly difficult thing to do amid Russia’s war with Ukraine and assertive posture toward Eastern Europe and NATO. Instead of focusing distinctly on the Indo-Pacific, NATO should prioritize a strategy that incorporates its western flank as the next legitimate geosecurity periphery of the Alliance.

During the 2021 NATO Summit, French president Emmanuel Macron charged that “NATO is an organization that concerns the North Atlantic, China has little to do with the North Atlantic.”⁴⁰ However, as the article has explicitly illustrated, China has very much to do with the North Atlantic as its conventional and unconventional power matures into a first-class global great power. It is interesting that President Macron was the leader to proclaim such a staunch position on the geosecurity challenges posed by China—as France once argued for its southern flank to be protected and made a geosecurity periphery of NATO.⁴¹

Due to years of fighting in Algeria, a former French colony, France proposed to NATO during the Cold War that a southern flank would benefit the geosecurity structures for defense and deterrence against hostiles and potential rivals, a decree spurned by the Alliance and the United States.⁴² Today, NATO's southern flank has become the secondary flank of geosecurity importance due to North Africa and the Middle East being vulnerable to terrorist organizations and mass migration.

As the Alliance revamps its strategic concept to reflect the changing nature of a complex multipolar rules-based order and heightening power politics and strategic competition, NATO must assume the legitimacy of its western flank's historical and contemporary geosecurity risks. Moreover, to ensure the significance of the alliance to US, Canadian, and European leaders, NATO must develop a formula to keep America in, Europe assured and NATO capable.

To "keep America in," implying the longevity and continuation of US conventional military capabilities in Europe, NATO's European members must acknowledge the western flank of the United States and Canada as a paramount geosecurity periphery. It is commonplace to assume that the United States' primary geosecurity concerns arrive from its eastern flank due to its experiences in the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the War on Terror in the 2000s. However, as C. L. Sulzberger expressed in 1967, "the US, which faces two oceans, tended often to be more 'Asia First' than 'Europe First' in its strategic outlook."⁴³ the United States' "Asia First" outlook should not be surprising as US history focused heavily on its westward expansion in the 19th century, the acquisition of Pacific colonies—such as Guam, the Mariana Islands, Hawaii, and the Philippines—devising the Open Door policy for China in 1899–1900, along with more attention to regional engagements in Pacific politics and trade during the early twentieth century.⁴⁴ The Pacific War against Imperial Japan and the subsequent wars in Korea and Vietnam further prove the United States' "Asia First" strategic outlook.

Aside from recognizing the challenges China poses to the fundamental norms and values NATO is founded on, legitimizing the geosecurity concerns arriving from its western flank can better organize and arrange the Alliance's political, military, and diplomatic consensus of the threat perception emanating from its westernmost periphery.⁴⁵ A recognition from NATO's European members on this subject will forecast to the United States that the Alliance observes its western flank, and the geosecurity challenges arrive from it, as a direct and existing dynamic that has vital importance for NATO's collective security and defense mandate and its strategic concept.

President Biden has staunchly asked the United States' transatlantic allies to solicit support for efforts to meet the military, technological and economic challenges posed by China.⁴⁶ Thus, for NATO to vividly proclaim the existence of the Alliance's western flank and legitimize the geosecurity concerns arriving from there, it can be anticipated that the United States would feel more confident in its security commitments to Europe as it would sense a certain reciprocal level of support by its allies for its geosecurity concerns that are "close to home."

In turn, Europe would be assured that the United States would not abandon its geosecurity commitments to the eastern flank—an anchored periphery the United States requires to be stable and secured to focus on the Indo-Pacific. With both transatlantic centers balancing their geosecurity peripheries, thereby restoring a sense of collective defense and security, NATO would be able to generate more cohesion and unity in the Alliance's strategic outlook on China and its consequences to the Alliance's western flank.⁴⁷ With more intra-alliance cohesion and unity, NATO would be more capable of strategizing and responding to the geosecurity challenges that will materialize out of a shifting multipolar rule-based order and the reality of bordering two antagonistic powers to its western and eastern flanks.

Strategic Outlook for a Western Flank

To make NATO's western flank plausible as a geosecurity periphery, the Alliance needs to create a strategic outlook for the region. To accomplish this task, NATO needs to plan for preexisting, near-term, and long-term objectives within two areas of capabilities—namely, physical and digital. Physical areas of capabilities are defined by the geographical borders, territories, and maritime assets that constitute the transatlantic region and its members' geopolitical possessions. Digital areas of capabilities focus on NATO's conventional and unconventional ability to use its military and security infrastructure to defend and deter geosecurity threats from cyberspace—ranging from cyberattacks, cyberespionage, and cybertheft of intelligence and intellectual property.

In developing physical areas of capabilities, NATO must explore existing military interoperability exercises toward the Pacific coasts of Canada and the United States. Although some NATO countries individually participate in the Rim of Pacific Exercises, it would be advantageous for the Alliance to begin a "NATO-Pacific Maritime Operation" that coordinates European, Canadian, and US naval ships to conduct maritime security capacity-building exercises and undertake situational awareness programs that will directly relate to geosecurity challenges emerging from the Pacific. A good example of how NATO can develop intra-alliance cohesion and procedural infrastructure for nontraditional maritime op-

erations would be Operation Sea Guardian, which manages NATO's maritime geosecurity issues in the Mediterranean.⁴⁸

In the near-term, NATO should focus its physical areas of capabilities on more forward-presence operations that distinctly reinforce and underline its military commitment to its western flank. The Pacific Pathways, a series of bilateral training exercises between the United States and its Asian partners, would be a good program for the Alliance to participate in as the first stage of its forward-presence operation.⁴⁹ Joining the Pacific Pathways program will expose NATO's European naval forces to various operational environments, doctrinal frameworks, and capability sets that are unique to the Alliance's western flank.⁵⁰

Having recently established the Joint Force Command Norfolk in Virginia, NATO should continue to expand its operational headquarters in North America and unambiguously station them on NATO's western flank.⁵¹ Not only will this provide significant optics as to NATO's seriousness in acknowledging its western flank and the validity of the geosecurity challenges, but it would also enable the Alliance to command its forces along the Pacific coast and (potential) forward-presence operations.

In the long-term, NATO should reconstitute Article V of the Washington Treaty to extend its collective security arrangement to include the US state of Hawaii. According to Article V, "the parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all." This treaty obligation, considered sacred to US president Joe Biden, has been the fundamental instrument in defending and deterring geosecurity threats from potential rivals and challengers among NATO members.⁵² However, on the Alliance's western flank, there is a significant treaty loophole that arrives from the collective security umbrella—seeing as the treaty only encompasses members located within the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.⁵³

When the Washington Treaty was signed in 1949, Hawaii was not an official state of the United States but rather a territorial possession and was just a few degrees south of the Tropic of Cancer. Due to these factors, Hawaii was not under the jurisdiction of NATO. This decision was an odd occurrence because in 1959, Alaska, after being granted statehood in the same year as Hawaii, was discerned as geographically part of North America, thereby deserved geosecurity protection as per Article V.⁵⁴ It is important to highlight that NATO's Article V obligations cover Alaska's noncontinental Aleutian archipelago which protrudes into the Pacific Ocean.⁵⁵ Alaska's incorporation into NATO's collective security mandate is understandable as the US state has close geopolitical proximity to Russia and presents a possible staging area for future military conflicts.

For NATO's western flank to have any military viability to deter and defend against geosecurity threats and challenges, it would be imperative for Article V to include the island chain of Hawaii. Although some would argue that Hawaii's geographical position does not fall within NATO's collective security mandate and that it would be distressing to see the Alliance extend its geography due to intra-alliance politics, it is worth noting that NATO has stretched its geography before, as shown by Turkey's designation as being part of the "North Atlantic."⁵⁶ Lastly, the geographical proximity of Hawaii to China has legitimate geosecurity grounds for concern. In a recent announcement, China proclaimed its ambitions to build an airfield on Kanton Island, 1,600 miles from Hawaii.⁵⁷ To maintain its prosperity and military significance in severe geosecurity areas, NATO must provide Hawaii its place in the Alliance's collective security mandate.

NATO's attention to its digital areas of capability also needs to adhere to China's growing technological dominance. For starters, NATO should extend to new frontiers in science and technology, unequivocally seeking dominance in Emerging Disruptive Technologies (EDTs). Early success in these areas will reaffirm NATO's existing cybersecurity capabilities and resilience while also enabling the Alliance to become a digital power, permitting it to establish and enforce new norms and standards of military EDTs and their incorporation for the transatlantic region and its geosecurity flanks.⁵⁸ Integrating these existing measures will make intra-alliance interoperability more appealing to members that may not have the economic or military resources to contend with China's great-power capabilities but who want to aid in securing NATO's western flank—members such as the Baltic countries, Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark.⁵⁹

In the near-term, NATO should promote "centers of cybersecurity" that develop and promote digital infrastructure that can galvanize and connect the Alliance's vast geosecurity resources in cyber military intelligence, cyber industrial establishments, and cyber operational foundations. For instance, NATO should promote its small, minor, and middle powers to find niche capabilities that can bridge onto the United States' digital preeminence, such as AI-infused deterrent measures, and establish cyber hubs in key digital cities—San Francisco, Miami, Oslo, and Vancouver.⁶⁰ These centers of cybersecurity would reinforce intra-alliance cohesion on cyberthreats and deepen cyber-capacity sharing methods, placing NATO in favorable geopolitical situations when operating outside traditional jurisdictions and contending with China's digital prowess.⁶¹

In the long-term, NATO needs to clarify and strengthen its stance on cyberattacks—formally enshrining what constitutes grounds for invoking Article V. In 2014, NATO declared that cyberattacks could invoke Article V, ambiguously directing such statements to Russia. However, it is worth pointing out that NATO

members—in Europe and North America—have frequently been the targets of cyberattacks originating from Chinese proxies.⁶² Although similar occurrences of cyberattacks are still occurring, NATO has not moved forward on this vital geosecurity matter.

To improve its resilience to cyberthreats from China and Russia, NATO needs to outline the types of cyberattacks that merit the invocation of Article V, along with advancing a counterinitiative to respond to hybrid forms of state-centric and proxy-centric cyber conflicts.⁶³ A proclamation should also include the prohibition of cyberattacks on civilian digital infrastructure and grids, along with the capacity to threaten cyberattacks to coerce a NATO member into appeasing the demands of an antagonistic power such as China or Russia. As such, NATO should vehemently proclaim that “a coercive threat against one is a coercive threat against all.”⁶⁴

Conclusion

With growing Sino-US great-power competition, NATO’s European members will likely label the ongoing event within their national strategic outlook. However, for NATO to remain a principal pillar in European and North American national security and defense as well as to maintain the stability and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic connection, the Alliance needs to reorientate its perspectives on the geosecurity challenges and threats posed by the Indo-Pacific and China. Although NATO has begun developing a strategic outlook on China through its NATO 2030 communiqué and its members unilaterally taking steps toward extraregional engagements, the Alliance should focus on the western flank as it shares close proximity to China.

It is clear from Chinese conventional and unconventional power and deepening Sino-Russian relations that a geosecurity threat arising from NATO’s western flank is legitimate. Furthermore, with multipolarity emerging as the primary construct of the rules-based international order, NATO cannot solely focus on its three geosecurity flanks that are closely related to its traditional mandate—the northern, southern, and eastern peripheries. Recognizing the existence of a western flank (a concept with strong historical precedent) would prompt NATO to begin strategizing about how it can incorporate the geosecurity periphery into the collective security and defense mandate of the Alliance. Such measures will showcase the prominence of NATO in dealing with and preparing for the strategic challenges that await its members.

By looking into NATO’s past—concerning its western flank, its stretching of the Alliance’s jurisdiction, and institutional directives—the Alliance can manage its intra-alliance cohesion and unity toward better fulfilling its principal mission.

NATO needs to establish a western flank strategy that projects existing, near-term, and long-term objectives through physical and digital areas of capabilities to accomplish this feat. Not only will NATO's western flank strategy unveil to China its seriousness in defending its members from conventional and unconventional geosecurity threats, but it will also prove that the Alliance is not brain-dead in dealing with the geosecurity dilemmas and problems of the current international system—reemphasizing its strategic posture to all or any contenders that seek to undermine, hedge, and dismantle the most successful alliance in history. Lastly, by recognizing NATO's western flank, the Alliance would successfully find a functional formula that can keep America in, Europe assured and NATO capable. 🌐

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