The Way Forward: How Should Europe Deal with Russia and China?

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1 Introduction

Many authors in this book agree that there is already a type of alliance between Russia and China or, at least, that an alliance relationship is emerging. This assessment is reflected in the international literature (Dibb, 2019; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021; Stent, 2020; a different assessment can be found with Kaczmarski, 2020/21). There are differences of opinion as to how deep this relationship is and how far both sides are prepared to go. However, in principle, the observations show a high degree of consensus.

This article addresses the following questions from a European standpoint: If Russia and China are forming a military alliance, (1) what does that entail for Europe, and (2) which political and military conclusions will Europe have to draw? Whilst the first question can be answered by looking at the European Union plus Great Britain, there is one problem with the second question: what is meant by 'Europe' as a political actor? Is it the European Union, whose desired common foreign policy is hampered by its many national interests? Or, is it the combined efforts of larger and leading European countries such as Germany, France, Italy and Great Britain—though the latter is no longer a member of the EU? The author tends towards the second position and wants this contribution to be understood as a collection of ideas on how the major European states should—in close cooperation with the institutions of the EU—respond to an emerging military alliance between China and Russia.

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2 The Relevance of History

In assessing the political relevance of a military alliance relationship between Russia and China, it is useful to look for historical examples, which might resemble today's situation. In both describing similarities and differences, one might find a better way to understand the consequences this existing or emerging alliance relationship might reveal. There are three cases, which come to mind: (1) the military alliance between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China during the late 1940s and early 1960s, (2) the Hitler-Stalin Pact from 23 August 1939, and (3) the German-Japanese-Italian Axis, which lasted from 1936 to 1945. Why should we consider these three cases? They were military alliances of different quality and scope, but they had one element in common: they were alliances between major military powers ruled by authoritarian regimes directed against the Western democracies. Their main intention was to fight or even destroy the world of free societies by pursuing brutal policies of subjugation, exploitation and domination.

These three alliances did not last long, however. The Chinese-Soviet alliance was the longest lasting one, at more than 15 years. It ended because China no longer wanted to be the junior partner. The German-Japanese-Italian Axis lasted for just 9 years and ended because all were eventually defeated by the Western allies and by the Red Army. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was very short-lived. It was pushed aside during Operation Barbarossa, during which Germany invaded Russia on 22 June 1941.

All three cases have one feature in common: all of these alliances brought about major wars and, for the same reason, caused major policy changes on the side of major Western powers, in particular the United States:

- The Soviet-Chinese alliance led to the outbreak of the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953 and left four million dead (Stueck, 2002; Weathersby, 1993, 2002). The Korean War led to fears in the West that an invasion similar to that initiated by the North Koreans and instigated by Stalin and Mao might also take place in Europe. Hence, it set off a debate among Western leaders, in particular in the US, about the difficulty of fighting two regional wars at a time on their own. Consequently, the North Atlantic Alliance gained in importance and even an effort towards German rearmament was initiated, since without a German military contribution to NATO's military posture in the centre of the Alliance's forward defence posture at that time, the defence of Europe was thought to be unrealistic.
- The Hitler-Stalin Pact led to both the German war of aggression against Poland and the Soviet wars of aggression against Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland, as well as to the annexation of the rest of Poland by the Red Army in October 1939. The Western response was the declaration of war against Germany by France and Britain and, later on, the issuing of the Atlantic Declaration as a signal for the need that something profound would have to change after the end of World War II. The United States' ultimate entry into the war against the Third Reich included a major effort by Washington to reset the international system both in Europe and globally after the eventual victory.

- The German-Japanese-Italian Axis paved the way for the Japanese aggression against the USA (first the attack on Pearl Harbor) and ended a long period of little interest in Pacific affairs by Washington. The alliance with Japan was of no use for the Third Reich, since Japan did not join Germany's war against the Soviet Union. On the contrary, Japan's attack against Pearl Harbor sped up the entry of the United States into the war against Germany in the European theatre. Again, as with the case of the war in Europe, the US remained the leading power in Asia-Pacific after World War II and started to reset the international framework in the region in conjunction with similar efforts in Europe.

In conclusion, there are three lessons to be learned from these historical examples: (1) a Russian-Chinese alliance might not last too long, (2) but such an alliance might pave the way—either directly or indirectly—for wars of a dimension we would not have seen since the Korean War or World War II. The Russian invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022 seems to corroborate this assumption. Another lesson (3) is that it is up to the Western democracies to draw their conclusions from the past and to try to prevent it from repeating itself by anticipating what kinds of contingencies might result from a Russian-Chinese Axis.

In following this line of argumentation, three pertinent questions arise: (1) What can Western democracies do to keep the Russian-Chinese alliance as short-lived as possible? (2) What kind of war contingencies do we have to reckon with in the event that the Russian-Chinese Axis persists? and, (3) what can Europe do together with the United States and other allies to prevent the worst from happening?

3 Can the Russian-Chinese Alliance be Broken?

There are many who argue these days that an alliance relationship between Russia and China would not last for long, since the interests of both sides will eventually diverge. The main fault line is seen in the presumably junior partner status of Russia, which is greatly outnumbered by China in almost all indicator of power categories—except in the field of strategic nuclear arms. China has 1.4 billion people while Russia has only 140 million. China is the second largest economy in the world behind the US and in 2020 had a GNP of 14.9 trillion USD measured in dollar parity. In 2020, Russia had—measured in dollar parity—a GNP of 1.6 trillion USD and ranked as the 12th largest economy. In purchasing power parity, the picture would look somewhat different: China would be the largest world economy; Russia would rank as the fifth largest economy close behind Germany. China's conventional armed forces outnumber Russia by far in terms of quantity, and increasingly in terms of quality, too. While China is becoming a leading actor in terms of modern technologies and is considered one of the most competitive industrial nations, Russia is lagging behind in most technologies (except military technologies) and is generally considered a power in decline. Besides that, Russia holds vast territory in North Asia, which China considers to be lost territories. On top of that, both China and

Russia have different plans and conceptions with regard to economic development and cooperation in Central Asia. As chapter "Partnership Without Substance: Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe" by Lucas and Lo in this volume notes, there also seems to be little coordination or cooperation between Russia and China in Central and Eastern Europe.

Both French President Emmanuel Macron and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel have tried in the past to convince the Russian President Vladimir Putin that it was in the enlightened interest of Russia to join forces with Europe and to refrain from making itself dependent on China. Other political leaders might have made similar attempts. These efforts, however, have thus far been in vain. Within the academic community, most experts today agree that the imperative of regime stability in Russia is so strong that there is no room for alternative options. During the tenure of Dmitri Medvedev (2008–2012), things looked different, however. Medvedev had a strong interest in cooperation with the West in order to further the economic and industrial modernization of Russia. Since 2012, when Putin again became the Russian President and huge numbers of Russians took to the streets to demonstrate against him, the tide has changed. Regime survival has become the paramount priority of Putin's policy, both domestically and internationally. As a couple of expert analyses have shown, Russia is ruled by a kleptocratic and corrupt power vertical, whose leading members have enriched themselves beyond comparison (Dawisha, 2014). Loosening political power would be a personal disaster for all of them. Hence, the more domestic resistance has grown within Russia, the tighter the regime has restricted the limits of political freedom. Consequently, the Russian government has been persecuting—and sometimes killing—leading opposition figures. Russian authorities are intimidating everyone who dares to voice opposing views. Russia has become a full-fledged authoritarian state (Omelicheva, 2021).

The Russian leadership holds that any democratic opposition has been instigated by Western democracies and that the domestic opposition has been by definition an instrument of the West to destabilize Russia.[1] This narrative can be found everywhere in the Russian political class, and has even made it into the military doctrine of the Russian armed forces. In this document, any domestic opposition in Russia is being depicted as premediated efforts by the Western alliance towards destabilizing Russia comparable to an armed invasion. Consequently, Russia sees itself empowered to react in kind and to launch its own destabilizing actions directed against Western democracies.

Under such conditions, it is hard to imagine that the current Russian elite would heed the well-meaning advice by Western leaders to disentangle themselves from their close relationship with China.[2] China is an even more authoritarian state than Russia and it shows symptoms of what famous writers in the 1940s and 1950s

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

[2] See also chapter "Domestic Politics: A Forgotten Factor in the Russian-Chinese Relationship" by Marcin Kaczmarski.

described as totalitarian rule (Arendt, 1951; Borkenau, 1940; Friedrich & Brzeziński, 1956; Neumann, 1942). As long as Russia's main priority is the stability of the kleptocratic and autocratic regime, it will be futile to expect that Russia might switch alliances. Russia is externalizing its domestic legitimacy deficit by taking a hostile stand against the West—and China is somehow doing the same, since the Communist Party of China is also facing serious domestic problems (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). This keeps both states together and will prevent either of them from contemplating suspending their alliance relationship. This might change once Putin has left office, but this might take many years to happen. Instead of hoping that Russia can be convinced to renounce its alliance with China, Europeans should rather look at the political and military risks that are associated with Russia's increased hostility towards the West and the concomitant danger that this alliance might lure Russia into risky military operations against Western states. This leads to the second question.

4 What Kinds of War Contingencies Do we Have to Reckon with in the Event that the Russian-Chinese Axis Persists?

As previously mentioned, the military alliance between Russia and China might increase the risk of war. However, what kind of wars would we have to expect? There are many variations of war, from small and regionally limited military conflicts to major wars of high intensity among leading industrial nations (Krause, 2019). There is reason to assume that we will see wars that start in a regional context with hostile activities below the threshold of kinetic actions, but which might become violent after a short period and might proliferate considerably and could end as major wars involving high-intensity warfare among powerful industrialized nations in various theatres in both the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific region.

Within the academic community, there is a growing sense that any major war dynamic might start with a regional war. As Brad Roberts has outlined, both the militaries in China and in Russia have studied regional wars with intense scrutiny with a view towards achieving military victory. Their aim would be to push back Western powers or to destroy US-led alliances around their regional perimeters (Roberts, 2020). In the Russian military doctrine, regional wars, which are expected to take place on Russia's periphery, are supposed to be won, even by using nuclear weapons as a means to de-escalate the war in favour of Russia's objectives.

Regional wars have a special role in Russian strategic military thinking. The Russian military is aware of the fact that it would not be able to win a long-running conventional war with the West and a strategic confrontation with NATO, and in particular the US. However, the Russian leadership assumes that a regionally limited armed conflict could occur in Europe, which would provide Russia with the

opportunity to undermine NATO's cohesion as an alliance, in particular its willingness to defend itself.[3] Russia's military doctrine stipulates that regional wars assume an important role of 'pre-emptive neutralisation of threats' as part of the Russian 'strategy of active defence' (Johnson, 2019). Unlike Western military thinking, the Russian approach to using military force in a conflict is not characterised by the primacy of avoiding or rapidly terminating such a conflict and limiting the associated damage. Rather, Moscow looks to win it—by exploiting the weaknesses of the adversary while preventing the opponent from exploiting Russian weaknesses.

Regional wars, however, can be considered as the upper end of the spectrum of Russia's options to manage the persistent confrontation with the West. Moscow's approach to this effect is known to the West as 'hybrid warfare'. Already in what the West would identify as peacetime, Moscow's hostile activities encompass a broad spectrum of military and non-military instruments ranging from disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and subversive actions as well as interfering in national elections, weaponising energy supplies, and supporting extremist political movements. It also contains intimidating military actions, such as large-scale military exercises, a military build-up in critical regions involving even nuclear means, both in peacetime and in crises. Such activities remain below the threshold of direct military conflict, but aim to destabilise neighbours and opponents, intimidate NATO and the EU, compromise NATO's decision-making and deny it effective military options (Adamsky, 2015; Brauss et al., 2020; Covington, 2016; Johnson, 2018). If a crisis escalates into a military conflict, the hybrid spectrum would nevertheless continue to be applied: disinformation, propaganda, malicious cyber activities and so forth would all be integral elements of a comprehensive military campaign. In the event of such a conflict, Russia's objective would be to gain a decisive military advantage, wage a short war and achieve strategic success. In this context, Russia's efforts also have to be seen against the backdrop of two decades of systematic military reform and armaments efforts (Baev, 2020; Hackett, 2020; Stoner, 2021).

Where could such regional wars occur? They could happen in areas where Russia believes it needs to re-establish its influence or where it sees an opportunity to radically alter the strategic *status quo* in Europe by weakening NATO decisively. Such a situation could arise if the economic situation in Russia further deteriorates and the population's support for the regime decreases—even more so if the strategic developments on a global scale would be favourable, such as the United States being occupied militarily in the Indo-Pacific region. Putin could be tempted to consolidate his rule with a decisive military operation and the associated mobilisation of nationalistic emotions. Such a scenario is consistent with Russia's strategic and military doctrine.

Currently, essentially two regional theatres come into consideration: first, the expansion of military operations in Ukraine with the aim of either further destabilising it or even destroying its viability as an independent state; or second,

[3] See chapter "What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO" by Rainer Meyer zum Felde.

a limited attack against one or more of the Baltic States and parts of Poland with the aim of undermining NATO's credibility as a security provider. In both cases, Russia would try to create military *faits accomplis* using quick assaults before the West, that is the United States, or NATO as a whole could intervene militarily. In both cases, Russia's dual-capability (i.e., conventional or nuclear armed) intermediate-range missiles threatening or striking European capitals as well as critical military and civilian infrastructure that would be crucial for NATO's effective response and collective defence would play a significant role (Brauss & Krause, 2021).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which was still going on while this article was finalised, has demonstrated the way Russia is pursuing a regional war. Moscow has tried to achieve two aims: (1) to decapitate the Ukrainian leadership and substitute it by a puppet regime, and (2) to conquer and eventually annex major parts of Ukraine, in particular the Southern and Eastern areas. While the first goal could not have been achieved, Russia was quite successful in conquering most of the Donbass, the Southern parts of Ukraine and is still trying to take the Southern harbour city of Odessa. The Russian way of warfare in Ukraine has a very traditional character. Russia used the army, the air force and the navy to destroy Ukrainian military forces in all three dimensions. When it turned out that the Ukrainian defence was better than expected, the Russian campaign degenerated into brutal war against civilians and a war of total destruction against Ukrainian infrastructure and industry. The hybrid element – cyber war, information war etc. – remained relatively small.

If Russia were to succeed, the entire strategic situation in South-eastern Europe and across the entire Black Sea region, including Turkey, and the disposition of military forces in the region, would fundamentally change. Romania would face a direct military threat and NATO's entire deterrence and defence posture would have to be adjusted. The setup of a strong, permanent military alliance presence along its entire eastern flank would be the order of the day.

An analogous course of action in the Baltic Sea region by the Russian leadership would be much riskier but could not be ruled out, in particular after the issuing of Russia's ultimatum of December 2021. The Baltic States, Poland, Germany and Denmark are NATO members, and for them, the collective defence guarantee of the Washington Treaty would apply. Sweden and Finland are NATO partners and are closely linked to NATO, *inter alia*, by co-ordinated exercises and operational planning. The United States has strong ground, air, and naval forces stationed in Europe, above all in Germany and Poland. They are also regularly involved in exercises of ground, air, and naval forces in the Baltic States and the Baltic Sea region.

If the Russian leadership, however, concluded that the overall strategic situation would permit or even favour a military attack with limited objectives, it could decide to launch a rapid push with conventional armed forces into the Baltic States and parts of Poland. With far-reaching conventional strikes, Moscow could attempt to eliminate targets essential for the deployment of NATO forces in Europe and across the Atlantic to reinforce allies. Threatening the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear weapons equipped with conventional or even nuclear warheads would aim to discourage European governments from living up to their collective defence

commitments and deploying their forces to reinforce their Eastern Allies for fear of nuclear escalation. If Russian armed forces succeeded in occupying the Baltic States or parts thereof before NATO reinforcements could intervene decisively, Moscow could pause and confront NATO with the choice of either running the risk of a major war with incalculable risks of escalation or standing down and agreeing that the Baltic States—in the best case scenario—should leave NATO and become 'neutral'. The political consequences for NATO and the security of Europe would be dramatic. It could herald the end of the alliance (see Brauss & Krause, 2021).

China, too, has plans for regional wars that would mainly take aim at the United States and its allies. For China, three different theatres of war seem to be the focus:

1. the occupation of the island of Taiwan (which was a colonial domain of the Chinese Empire for just 200 years, ending in 1895, but is claimed by Beijing as an integral part of China);
2. the South China Sea and the East China Sea, where Beijing wants to put huge maritime areas under its exclusive control; and
3. the possibility of a war on the Korean Peninsula.

In all three cases, China's war planners have to deal with the United States or with states allied with the United States. Due to the different geography of Asia-Pacific, regional war planning by China is mainly directed towards maritime contingencies or combined maritime, air and land theatres. Whilst the aim of Russia's regional war planning is a rapid land grab to confront the North Atlantic Alliance with a strategic dilemma, the Chinese armaments efforts and activities point towards more ambitious goals. At their core are strategies to deny US forces access to the whole area in a systematic way by using a range of multi-layered weapon systems. In military-technical terms, such an approach is called *anti-access/area denial,* or *A2/AD*. In looking at the Chinese armament efforts over the past 20 years, there is one dominant feature: China intends to put the whole US military posture in East Asia—be it on land or at sea—under the threat of a massive annihilation strike. It is what the Chinese call *active strategic counterattack on exterior lines* (ASCEL). The A2/AD threat is mainly brought about by the Chinese deployment of reconnaissance-strike complexes to threaten the US fixed military installations in the region (and also US naval ships, in particular carrier groups). China has acquired these capabilities by investing in modern satellite as well as anti-satellite and missile technology, and by improving its submarine technology. China is meanwhile able to threaten US naval bases and ships within a range of more than 2000 km from the Chinese coastline with quite effective kinetic strikes. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) was able to acquire these capabilities by making huge investments in modern technology (Friedberg, 2011, 2014; Heginbotham et al., 2015; Jones, 2019; Kagan, 2018; Krepinevich et al., 2003; Mearsheimer, 2010; Montgomery, 2014; Wright, 2017).

In the not-too-distant future, the Chinese A2/AD capabilities might allow for a decisive blow against the US military presence in East Asia, or at least they could make the Chinese leadership assume that this would be a real option available to them. Some observers see the possibility that within the next decade the PLA might be able to inflict significant damage on all fixed installations that the US is using to

sustain its military forces in the region. It might, by the same token, be in a position to blind the main instruments of strategic intelligence and reconnaissance in the area and sink US naval ships, including aircraft carriers within 2000 km of the Chinese coast.

The Chinese armament efforts are of such a huge dimension that they are going to shake up US defence planning to a considerable degree. Some observers see similarities with Japan's efforts to push the US out of the Pacific in 1941 (van Tol et al., 2010, pp. 20 f.). China's armaments efforts and strategic intentions are forming the backdrop against which a fundamental change in US defence policy and military strategy has to be considered. The US government in Washington, DC is anticipating the possibility of a major war of high intensity in the West Pacific started by a Chinese leadership who wants to assert its dominance over the Western Pacific region. Moreover, there is no certainty that this war will be easily won by the US and its allies in the region. Consequently, the US has actually begun shifting its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific. For Europe, this change in US strategic orientation will entail that the number and quality of US forces earmarked for European contingencies will decrease to a considerable degree.

This leads to the most dangerous contingency resulting from a Russian-Chinese military alliance: the possibility that China may start a regional war in the West Pacific by attacking and invading Taiwan with Russia following suit with an invasion of the Ukraine or an occupation of the Baltic States. In this case, the US President will have to decide where to send US forces stationed in the continental United States: either to help NATO in deterring or, in the worst case, fighting off a Russian invasion, or to support US forces in the West Pacific involved in a heavy fight against China. Most observers today agree that the priority will be the defence of US positions and allies in East Asia or the West Pacific (Colby & Grygiel, 2021), since Washington considers China the US's main strategic competitor, and China's regional and global aspirations are the most demanding risk to the US as well as to the Western democracies as a whole.[4]

The salient fact is that the US is no longer prepared to intervene simultaneously in two different theatres of war. The notion of being ready to successfully fight two different wars at the same time was valid in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, due to the immense growth of the Chinese military and technology, as well as the quite effective military reform and rearmament of Russia, and in light of the drawdown of US military capabilities during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation has changed fundamentally. This fact is well known both in Russia and in China. If both governments agreed on simultaneously launching a 'regional war' in their respective neighbourhoods, this could spell the military defeat of the Western alliances in both theatres—perhaps ultimately leading to a new international order in which Russia would dominate large parts of continental Europe, China would rule Asia and the US might rule the Western hemisphere

[4] See also chapter "Options for Dealing with Russia and China—A US Perspective" by Andrew A. Michta.

consisting of North America only. This would be a world with an international 'order' as it was sketched out at the onset of World War II by the German jurist, political theorist, and member of the National-Socialist Party, Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 1939), and which by and large was in conformity with plans established and pursued by Adolf Hitler—of course with Greater Germany in lieu of Russia.

5 What Is the Role of 'Europe'?

It is too early to present a list of concrete policy options for coping with the risks and threats posed by the emerging Chinese-Russian strategic partnership. However, it is necessary for the European governments—in particular in London, Paris, and Berlin as well as in Brussels—to review their policies vis-à-vis Russia and China with a view towards adapting to the changed regional and global strategic circumstances. This involves three important steps.

5.1 Acknowledging the Existence and Relevance of a Russian Military Threat

First of all, it is high time for European political leaders to publicly acknowledge that the military threat posed by Russia is a political reality and reason for concern that can no longer be put aside. This is, in particular, true for the German government. Under former Chancellor Angela Merkel there was a significant discrepancy between what she signed off on as a participant in NATO Summit meetings on the one hand, and what she stated about Russia on the other. While the NATO communiqués were devoid of references to the military threat Russia poses to its allies, at home she never spoke about anything that resembled the language of the NATO documents she, too, had approved in Brussels. Talking about and addressing military threats was not part of former Chancellor Merkel's political agenda. She never held important institutions in the field of security and defence policy in high esteem. She used to mistrust the German Intelligence Agency (BND) and she remained unfamiliar with the *Bundeswehr* and Germany's defence policy at large. In her 16-year tenure, she never gave a programmatic speech on Germany's security and defence policy. Whenever she talked about these issues, her statements remained vague and were open to different interpretations. She had no affinity for and no sense of strategic thinking about, in particular, whether military instruments were involved. One of her famous sentences was: 'You cannot solve political problems by military means'.

For the same reason, her coalition's Russia policy remained ambivalent at best. She was definitely no 'Putin whisperer', as some have suggested. She knows Putin

very well and she had many unfriendly encounters with him, in particular during the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Putin flatly lied to her time and again. Nevertheless, former Chancellor Merkel deeply believed in the possibility of keeping the peace through direct dialogue with Putin. Keeping the peace through deterrence or defence seemed to be alien to her. Many representatives and observers from Central and Eastern European states, in particular from the Baltic States, criticized her for this policy of benign neglect. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline became a focal point of frustration both in Central and Eastern European States as well as in Washington regarding the ambivalent German policy towards Russia in particular and its negligent defence policy. The outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, however, changed everything in Germany. Despite the fact that the Social Democrats and the Greens were in charge of foreign and defence policy, they overcame their pacifist illusions and decided to not only increase Germany's regular defence budget by more than 50 percent, but also to launch an additional financial effort at the size of 100 billion Euro to re-build the German armed forces after they had been neglected for 20 years. Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called it a "Zeitenwende", a turn in history. In addition, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project was scuttled and the German Government began with a historic effort to redirect its energy imports away from Russia. In contrast to former assertions not to fuel the conflict, Germany has also delivered weapons to the Ukraine.

Nevertheless, Germany was not alone in her illusionary policy towards Russia. A similar attitude could be found in France, where President Emanuel Macron for many years held the opinion that relations with Russia could be improved through sustained high-level diplomacy. Understanding what the Russian concerns are and trying to carve a way out of the conundrum was his policy. Yet, after the outbreak of the Russian war against Ukraine, a more sober assessment is gaining traction in Paris. In London, the Russian problem, however, has always been viewed somewhat more realistically.

This discrepancy between what politicians like Merkel and Macron have signed off on in NATO documents and their respective national Russia policy has led to the slowing down of those armaments efforts that the NATO heads of state and government have decided upon since 2014. In particular, Germany is still far from implementing its obligations and commitments (see chapter "What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO" by Rainer Meyer zum Felde in this book).

5.2 Rethinking: What Might be the Worst Case?

At least until recently, in German government circles, the Russian military threat against the Baltic States and Poland was conceived as a politically highly unlikely contingency. The offensive Russian military posture was understood as being guided

by Moscow's defensive strategic concerns and its desire to re-establish a buffer zone in its 'near abroad'. Regime survival being pivotal would imply that the regime was rather risk-averse. Hence, if the West continued to pursue a policy towards Russia guided by composure and dialogue, the worst could be avoided. This reasoning had its merits under normal conditions. It was based on the (silent) assumption that in view of existing mutual interests and interdependencies, a major catalytic event was needed to alter this calculation.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine was such a catalytic event. It might have come worse if China had initiated a full-fledged military invasion of Taiwan at the same time. This would have put Russia in a position where it had a realistic chance to fundamentally change the political landscape in Europe. The similarities with 1939, by the way, are striking: when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was concluded in August 1939, it gave Hitler the opportunity to continue his revisionist agenda and invade Poland. It provided Stalin with an opportunity to regain former parts of the Russian Empire: Finland and the Baltic States as well as the eastern parts of Poland. Taiwan is for China today what Czechoslovakia and Poland were for Nazi Germany in the 1930s: the main target of a nationalistic and revisionist policy driven by military annexation. Fortunately, the Chinese did not attack Taiwan. Given the many difficulties the Russian armed forces have met with the highly motivated defenders and in light of the considerable problems inside (failing logistics, lack of coordination and strategic leadership, losses of tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, poor performance of the Air Force etc.), the Chinese armed forces must have started a rethinking of their invasion plans for Taiwan, since they might meet the same problems Russia had in invading Ukraine. This, hopefully, gives the Western community and the Taiwanese some more breathing space in the near future.

5.3 Rethinking Europe's Relationship with China

Currently, the European Union heads of state and government have agreed that China is at the same time a partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. This formula will have to be the subject of a critical review, if reports on China's military armaments efforts and its huge build-up against the US and its allies in the West-Pacific turn out to be correct. In particular, an overall policy change would be needed if the existence of a military alliance with Russia was established. Under such circumstances, China would be a strategic threat to Europe, too. The threat would be rather of an indirect nature, but such an alliance would definitely increase the danger of war in Europe and entail a higher probability of a war that might involve an East Asian and a European theatre.

Changing the attitudes of political leaders in Berlin or Paris with regard to their China policy seems to be a much harder effort in comparison to acknowledging that a military threat from Russia has existed since 2014. Over the past decade, the

German government has been one of the most arduous supporters of China. Due to her positive experience with China during her handling of the international financial crisis, Chancellor Merkel always displayed a benign view of China. During her chancellorship, the economies of Germany and China have become tightly intertwined. The volume of trade between China and Germany today almost equals the volume of Germany's trade with the US and France. Consequently, former Chancellor Merkel repeatedly stated that Germany does not want to be drawn into any major power competition between China and the USA. Again, these statements demonstrate that she refuses to think in terms of geopolitical strategy and strategic military competition. However, China is building up a formidable military presence against the US and its democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific region, and this fundamentally changes the coordinates of German and European security, too. The USA is Europe's and Germany's main security provider. If the US is being militarily challenged by China, this cannot leave European democracies unimpressed.

Hopefully, this uncritical, pro-Chinese attitude might end. The new coalition Government has not yet made up its mind, but a change might come. In this regard, it is incumbent upon other European powers to permanently call into question the German position and to urge a reframing of Germany's China policy. In any case, it would be imperative to have a transatlantic dialogue over policies towards China (Binnendijk & Kirchberger, 2021; Huotari et al., 2020; Kramer, 2020; Kroenig & Cimmino, 2020; Laskowski, 2020). In this regard, the implementation of NATO's 2030 agenda approved by the Alliance's leader at their Summit in Brussels in June 2021 as well as the development of NATO's Strategic Concept 2022 offer the opportunity to establish a common realistic position vis-a-vis both Russia and China. This is an opportunity that must be seized.

6 Conclusions

To conclude, it is imperative for Europeans, in particular for Berlin, London, Paris and Brussels, to re-learn the business of strategic thinking and to develop a European sense of what is actually threatening both the transatlantic community and the European Union, and under which conditions such a threat might become a reality. This necessity is particularly huge for Germany, which has indulged in an 'end-of-history mode' for more than 20 years (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2020). The strategic documents published by the EU External Action Service have been instrumental in sharpening the awareness of strategic challenges and even threats, but given the fact that a Russian-Chinese alliance relationship has emerged or is emerging, many of these assessments have to be reviewed. The challenge this alliance is posing to Europe is of a fundamental nature and it could spell the difference between war and peace.

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