
THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY ASSESSED BY NATO MEMBER STATES: THE CHINESE FACTOR

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Abstract

The role of China as a key factor in assessing threats to national security, carried out by the special services of NATO member states, is investigated. NATO's activities on threats are analysed, mainly through increased intelligence activities, ensuring cybersecurity, investment control and cooperation with partner countries. Recommendations are proposed for forming a single NATO strategy to respond to threats related to China effectively.

Key words: PRC, NATO, national security, international security, international relations, national interests, intelligence activities, armed aggression.

Introduction

China is gradually increasing its influence in the economic, military, technological, political, information and other spheres. The economic expansion of the PRC creates problems for NATO in classifying threats and developing effective countermeasure strategies. The special services of the Alliance countries face the problem of determining priorities in responding to such multidimensional challenges.

NATO member states have varying economic, political, and military engagement levels with China. Some countries (e.g., Germany and Italy) are actively cooperating with China in the economic sphere, which makes it difficult for the Alliance to form a unified position on threat assessment and countermeasures.

Unlike localised threats such as armed aggression by the Russian Federation, the challenges from China are global in nature. The country's targeted militarisation, control of critical sea lanes, economic expansion, and interference by the Chinese state in NATO's traditional areas of influence are forcing the Alliance to reconsider its strategies.

NATO countries do not have a unified policy for responding to China's actions. The lack of coordination and a clear strategy creates a risk of inconsistency, which may reduce the effectiveness of the Alliance in countering Chinese challenges. The study of geopolitical events related to the national security of NATO member states is currently relevant for Ukraine, which supports the Euro-Atlantic course and is a shield of international security in the armed aggression of the Russian Federation.

Theoretical background

Analysis of recent research and publications. The source of research on the issues of the Chinese factor in assessing threats to NATO is various official documents (NATO Strategic Concept 2022, reports of the North Atlantic Council and special committees, communiqués after NATO summits), intelligence reports of the CIA (USA), MI6 (United Kingdom), DGSE (France), scientific works, media materials and analytical articles.

They are the basis for NATO policymaking and coordination among member states. Intelligence reports provide NATO with the information necessary for strategic decision-making, and through scientific work, they not only expand the theoretical basis but also offer practical approaches for the Alliance to develop a more flexible line of conduct in relations with the PRC.

At the same time, there is limited access to internal Chinese documents, which makes it difficult to obtain reliable information from official sources. Beijing actively spreads propaganda, which complicates the analysis of its actual intentions. There is also a difference in the approaches of NATO countries to threats from China, which is reflected in the heterogeneity of research.

Given this, to fully understand the issues, it is necessary to compare information and overcome the difficulties associated with disinformation from China and limited access to information.

Purpose of the article – to analyse and summarise the assessment of threats to national security by the special services of NATO member states related to the activities of the PRC, to determine how Chinese initiatives, investments, technologies and intelligence operations affect the national security of the Alliance countries.

Result and Discussion

Assessing threats to national security is one of the key tasks of NATO member states' special services. The Chinese factor has begun to influence the Alliance's strategic decisions with the changing global geopolitical landscape. In the context of rapid economic growth, military modernisation, and active geopolitical expansion, the PRC raises concerns about threats to the national interests of NATO member states.

China has gradually transformed itself from a regional player into a major actor in global politics. Its ambitions go beyond the economic sphere and encompass strategic areas such as military, technological, political, and information. This poses new challenges for NATO, as most of its members have been focused on the Russian threat.

The NATO Strategic Concept 2022, adopted by Heads of State and Government at the Madrid Summit on 29 June 2022, recognises China for the first time as a threat to Euro-Atlantic security. It focuses on cyber threats, economic pressure and the militarisation of the Chinese state (NATO Strategic Concept – 2022).

As NATO faces its most challenging situation since the Cold War, with Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, cyber and hybrid threats, and instability in the Middle East and North Africa, the Alliance is adapting its approaches to intelligence, contributing to effective strategic planning and decision-making.

The new U.S. National Security Strategy, presented by the Biden administration on 12 October 2022, confirmed the U.S. strategic course supporting NATO partners and Ukraine. The document identifies two key challenges: intensifying competition between great powers to shape the future international order and transnational threats, such as climate change, food and energy crises, inflation, terrorism, and pandemics. The strategy emphasises the need for global cooperation to counter these challenges (National Security Strategy 2022).

The most significant geopolitical challenge for the United States, according to this strategy, remains the PRC. China is characterised as the only country with the intention and the ability to change the international order, using both economic and technological influence. The strategy focuses on a competitive policy of the United States towards China, which is aimed at containing its expansionist ambitions and protecting the key interests of NATO and allied countries.

According to the annual threat assessment of the U.S. intelligence community, the PRC remains the most significant strategic challenge to the U.S. due to its regional and global ambitions, as well as military, economic and technological activity (Annual threat assessment of the U.S.). The documents generally emphasise that the PRC uses a hybrid approach to influence, combining

economic, information and military methods to advance its interests in the world, creating multi-vector challenges for the U.S. and other democratic countries.

In July 2023, the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) of the British Parliament published the open part of the report on threats to national security from China. The report focuses on the intelligence activities of Beijing's secret services. Countering their activities is a priority task for British intelligence services (Palivoda V. O., 2023). This report emphasises the importance of actively confronting the intelligence activities of the PRC and strengthening security measures in key sectors, such as science, technology and energy.

China, in its strategic planning, is actively promoting the concept of the "Chinese Dream" (Nasadiuk S. A., 2020), which involves strengthening its influence in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond through projects such as "One Belt, One Road", BRICS and SCO. In turn, NATO special services are forced to adapt their approaches to threat analysis, particularly based on increased intelligence activities, cyber defence, and economic analysis. Let us consider the main threats to NATO that affect member states' national interests and general international security.

The "One Belt, One Road" initiative is China's global economic strategy, which consists of building infrastructure, providing financial assistance, and creating a network of economic dependence worldwide (Goldstein J., Kozyrev V., 2020). Also, it contributes to expanding China's influence in the geopolitical dimension while at the same time provoking criticism from the West due to the possibility of creating debt dependence on partner countries.

Through this initiative, China also controls strategic transport routes that connect Asia, Africa and Europe. For example, China's acquisition of the port of Piraeus in Greece has strengthened its presence in Europe (Heath T., 2021). Thus, for NATO, the "One Belt, One Road" initiative is a challenge, as it weakens the economic resilience of member states and affects their ability to make independent decisions within the Alliance.

China is actively expanding its military capabilities and influence in key regions of the world. The militarisation of the South China Sea, including the creation artificial islands with military bases, threatens global sea routes, through which up to 30% of world trade passes (Lewis J., 2021). These actions by China pose challenges for NATO in ensuring stability.

China's militarisation of islands in the South China Sea directly impacts global stability. Although the region is geographically distant from NATO, China's control of sea lanes challenges the freedom of navigation critical to Europe's economic security.

In addition, China is investing heavily in advanced weapons, including hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, space systems, and drones. These activities demonstrate China's desire to dominate modern conflicts through advanced military solutions aimed at weakening the traditional military advantage of the United States and its allies.

The Chinese government aims to become a world leader in space by 2045, aiming to match or surpass the United States. China is expected to be competitive in most areas of space technology by 2030. Its space program aims to increase global influence and weaken the United States' position in the military, technological, economic, and diplomatic spheres (Annual threat assessment of the U.S.).

Overall, China's space activities are a strategic tool for strengthening global influence, supported by both civilian and military technologies. This changes the traditional military balance, forcing NATO to reconsider its defence strategies.

Technology is also a key tool for China to gain global influence. Chinese companies such as Huawei are actively building telecommunications infrastructure around the world. This raises concerns among NATO member states about potential espionage and control of information flows.

NATO intelligence agencies increasingly point to China as the primary initiator of cyberattacks. Key aspects of cyber threats include intelligence gathering through hacking of government and commercial databases, impact on infrastructure through interference in strategic

facilities, particularly energy networks and transport, and manipulation of information to create social tension in NATO countries.

China's technological dominance threatens the security of NATO countries, as dependence on Chinese technology can create numerous vulnerabilities and hinder the achievement of national interests by Alliance countries.

Participation in international institutions such as the UN allows China to change the current world order to advance its interests, which often conflict with NATO's democratic values (China and the transatlantic relationship, 2022).

China is establishing partnerships with other authoritarian regimes (such as Russia and Iran), creating an alternative geopolitical order. This complicates NATO's activities at the global level, as the Alliance has to operate in a context of transformation of the international system.

The PRC actively uses soft power tools to influence the policies of NATO countries. These include support for political parties or groups that advocate easing sanctions against China, information propaganda through Chinese media and social networks, and cultural expansion, mainly through Confucius Institutes.

According to the U.S. intelligence agency, Chinese intelligence agencies are actively recruiting international students through organisations such as the Association of Chinese Students and Scholars, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the China Institute of International Relations, the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, the Center for China and Globalization, the Harbin Institute of Technology, and the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

All these organizations are closely linked to the Ministry of State Security of China (MSC), actively utilizing Chinese scientists and foreign students to collect strategically important information. At the same time, students from China studying in NATO countries contribute to the expansion of China's influence and represent a significant source of financial income for the universities of Alliance countries.

To effectively counter China as a strategic challenge to NATO, in our view, it is necessary to strengthen unity among Alliance members, expand cooperation with other regional partners such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea, develop technological self-sufficiency to reduce the influence of Chinese technologies, and actively counter Chinese propaganda through joint media initiatives.

Conclusions

China's strategic goals, including economic expansion, military modernisation, technological dominance, and influence in international institutions, pose multidimensional challenges for NATO.

The China factor has become integral to NATO's strategic national security assessments. The Allies' intelligence services increasingly view China not only as an economic competitor but also as a source of strategic threats. To ensure resilience to the challenges posed by China, a coordinated strategy is needed, consisting of enhanced cooperation, intelligence sharing and increased cyber defence.

Prospects for further research – Geopolitical analysis of the influence of the PRC on the course of the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine.

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