



# The Rise of China and the Future of the Atlantic Alliance

May 2, 2016

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*Abstract: The consequences and implications of China's rise have been analyzed and discussed from a number of perspectives. There has been little analysis that specifically evaluates the implications for the Atlantic Alliance, however, and whether an international system defined by U.S.-China bipolarity would lead to a strengthening or a weakening of the transatlantic relationship. This article argues that China's rise will create security dynamics that likely will lead to a weakening of the Atlantic Alliance. It is unlikely that China's rise will provide NATO with a renewed purpose or give a convincing rationale for alliance cohesion the way the Soviet Union once did. Instead, China's rise will reveal divergent strategic interests and priorities among the members of the Atlantic Alliance, with a real possibility that America's rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific could intensify perceptions on both sides of the Atlantic of NATO's declining geopolitical value and relevance.*



President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping of China arrive for a bilateral meeting in Beijing, China. (White House Photo by Pete Souza)

**H**ow will China's economic, political, and, especially, its military rise affect the Atlantic Alliance and transatlantic relations more broadly? Will China's growing power and influence, combined with the more assertive and expansive foreign policy that it has adopted in recent years, lead to a convergence of

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perspectives among the United States and its main European allies on how to respond to Asia's changing strategic environment? Or will China's rise widen and intensify existing differences in capabilities, outlooks, and priorities between the United States and Europe—perhaps leading to a deeper and longer-lasting rupture in the Atlantic Alliance?

Since its creation in 1949, NATO has served as the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. The NATO alliance was decisive for the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War and essential for Europe's postwar economic and political integration. Instead of dissolving following the Soviet collapse, NATO increased its membership by absorbing the former Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, reinvented itself as a collective security organization from the collective defense role it played during the Cold War, and engaged in missions and operations outside the NATO area—from Bosnia and Kosovo to Afghanistan and Libya.<sup>1</sup>

Europe was America's main strategic focus during the twentieth century. On three separate occasions, the United States intervened in European affairs to prevent a potential hegemon from dominating the continent. America's strategic focus over the coming decades will not be on Europe, however, but rather on East Asia and the western Pacific. It is in that region that the United States will confront China's growing economic and military power, seek to contain Beijing's broadening ambitions, and aim to maintain its own military supremacy in the Pacific.

What role, if any, will America's main European allies play in this effort? Some commentators think that China's rise could strengthen the Atlantic bond. "Ironically," Robert Kaplan says, "the vitality of NATO itself, the Atlantic Alliance, could be revived by the Cold War in the Pacific." Others, such as Stephen Walt, see Europe playing little role in the U.S. rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. As America's attention and energy increasingly turn toward Asia, the bonds holding the NATO alliance together invariably will loosen.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the effect, the rise of China has the potential to transform the Atlantic Alliance, which makes scholarly scrutiny of this question all the more essential.

The consequences and implications of China's rise have been analyzed and discussed from a number of perspectives—from how it will affect the composition and functioning of global economic and financial institutions, to its effect on global energy supplies and markets, the intensification of territorial and maritime disputes, and the appropriate and necessary American global force structures and deployments in response to the changing global distribution of power.<sup>3</sup> However, there has been

<sup>1</sup> NATO's post-Cold War evolution is captured in Mark Webber, James Sperling, and Martin A. Smith, *NATO's Post-Cold War Trajectory: Decline or Regeneration?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kaplan, "How We Would Fight China," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2005, pp. 49-57; Stephen M. Walt, "There's No Partnership in Pivot," *ForeignPolicy.com*, July 8, 2014, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/08/theres-no-partnership-in-pivot>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States, and Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China, Council Special Report*

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