



## Policy Brief

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# China's Multidimensional Revisionist Strategies: Implications for NATO

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China's rise in power and distinct approach to foreign policy makes it a unique strategic competitor for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Characterized by scholars to be a revisionist state, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has demonstrated an increasing willingness to pursue its interests, challenging the interests and values of NATO.<sup>1</sup> This issue is of critical importance to the future of NATO and necessitates a more comprehensive analysis. Understanding the strategies China utilizes to challenge NATO and the existing world order is critical to develop an appropriate and cohesive response.

## Background

China's strategic ambitions are first and foremost regional. This is evident from Chinese territorial claims in the region, military developments to back these claims, and economic initiatives to strengthen its influence and with this its stance as the regional hegemon. At the same time, Chinese revisionism has a global nature that cannot be overlooked; Increasing economic interest abroad, for example the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), drives China's strategic interests beyond its close region. China's foreign policies are revisionist in nature and strive to challenge the world order and those who defend it.

China's revisionist strategies include the use of soft power to reshape global perceptions of the country. Tremendous economic growth and deep global financial relationships are key elements. China has surpassed the United States as the largest economy in the world. It accounts for more than one-fifth of global exports of manufactured goods. China has a virtual monopoly on rare earth minerals, crucial for clean growth and defense technologies. Providing financial support to 165 low and middle-income countries and holding significant debt of many wealthy nations, including the United States, underscores its economic influence.<sup>2</sup>

While China attempts to export positive sentiments, the authoritarian motives behind its actions are widely recognized. Public opinion of China has deteriorated in key Western democracies since 2011. Yet the financial support China provides for many countries may ultimately pay off if indebted nations overlook China's authoritarian actions. Dependence upon China for foreign assistance, debt funding and the provision of rare earth minerals increases the PRC's global influence. This growing influence could affect the NATO alliance soon, particularly in how allies position themselves on potential Article 5 action involving China.

The revisionist strategies employed by China often target the hybrid domain, remaining just below the threshold of war. Such tactics exploit the openness of democracies, targeting the information space, democratic institutions and processes, and critical infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> Such tactics challenge the values and interests of NATO, attempting to destabilize and undermine member nations from within. China's attempts at electoral interference, coercive trade restrictions, and corporate espionage are demonstrative of these efforts, allowing China to expand its global influence in more covert and manipulative ways.

Chinese ambitions also play out through military power, and China has been modernizing its military forces for decades. Funds are being strategically invested in new and improved capabilities that can support power-projection both regionally and globally, expanding its potential area of operations. One example is the Chinese aircraft carrier programmes, another is building a blue water navy and its first overseas maritime base in Djibouti. Chinese military forces are also increasingly conducting military exercises close to NATO's core areas of interest: In the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 and the Baltic Sea in 2017. In 2024, Chinese and Belarussian round forces are jointly exercising close to the border of Poland. These developments demonstrate a China increasingly prepared and willing to fight and defend its interests far away from its own borders, if necessary.

## Conclusion

NATO faces increasingly diverse challenges from China's revisionist ambitions. China's increasing economic power, combined with technological development provide the PRC with the ability to develop military and non-military capabilities, conferring global reach to China's revisionist strategies. The comprehensiveness of the Chinese incremental revisionist strategy makes it challenging for NATO to fully understand, and even more challenging to effectively respond across domains. The strategy poses challenges to NATO's cohesion, since several NATO allies have significant dependencies and relations with China, creating internal challenges for NATO to address. As a status-quo defender, NATO's interests are significantly challenged by Chinese revisionist ambitions. It is therefore imperative that NATO takes steps to better understand it, and then develop a unified strategy to address and counter this emergent issue across the alliance.

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriele Natalizia and Lorenzo Termine, "Tracing the modes of China's revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: a comparison with pre-1941 Showa Japan." *Italian Political Science Review* 51, no 1 (2021): 83–99.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2020.28>; Gabriele Natalizia and Lorenzo Termine, "The return of Prometheus. Dominant powers and the management of careful revisionists" *Italian Political Science Review* 54, no 1 (2024): 84–100.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2023.26>.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Goodman et al., "AidData's Geospatial Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset," *Scientific Data*, 11, no. 1 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-024-03341-w>

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 9–23.

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