

Divergence and Fractures within NATO: A Perspective on Allies' Attitudes

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Abstract: *With the strategic competition between China and the United States as the pivotal international issue nowadays, the disagreement between allies reliant, equidistance-seeking, and relatively detached countries on diverse issues, especially China's issues, has emerged. Despite their desire for China's huge market, the allies still worry and fear different degrees of China's influence on ideology, and have hesitation on issues like the Hong Kong and Taiwan issues. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages, different countries have made different choices. Under the current background of the Pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War, this incompatibility of ally attitudes could further intensify the divergence and fractures within NATO. If not successfully revolutionized and thus pivoted from a Post-Cold War mechanism to a new one, NATO will face a division of interests and thus an even greater danger inside.*

Keywords: *Divergence within NATO, China, US, Allies' Attitudes*

1. Introduction

The strategic competition between China and the United States has become a pivotal international issue. Within NATO, to what extent are the allies of the United States willing to follow it by balancing against China?

For a long time, to maintain its dominant position and promote its global strategy, the United States urges its allies, formal or informal ones, to adopt specific stances, policies, and actions by not only the traditional methods of persuasion, inducement, coercion but also through the exchange of interests. The United States uses the strategy of "both carrots and sticks." The concession in trade negotiations and the restriction of vital military information to let its allies fall in line with Washington's preferences against Beijing. By coordinating and strengthening the management of its alliance, the United States aims firmly at achieving its overall goal of global hegemony and prevention of potential opponents. Therefore, the United States unsurprisingly implemented the alliance management, faced with the rise of China with its military and economic growing power and its regional influence in the Asia Pacific. Furthermore, this, to a certain extent, did restrict China's peripheral security environment, the development of bilateral relations between China and other related countries, and the leading role in the regional economy of China.

Many executive orders were signed during the Trump administration to withdraw from the institutions and break the former contract, which irritated numerous allies. However, since Joe Biden took office, more and more allies have turned to repairing their diplomatic relationships by actions such as supporting the United States on China's sensitive issues of Hongkong and Xinjiang. Although there is still some space for cooperation in fields like global public health security under the background of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Biden administration has set the tone for the relations between China and the United States with the central theme of "competition." Apart from its attempts to promote the flexible supply chain to reduce dependence on China, to repair the alliance relations drastically damaged during the Trump administration, the Biden government also intended to curb China's development through the high-tech blockade and maintain its dominance in high-technology fields, especially the controversial 5G network, and the cutting-edge quantum technology, by forming a "technology alliance." through the alliance.

Despite its top-level strategic design and superior mobilization force, the doubt concerning the continuity of the United States government raised by the former president Donald Trump and the difference in interests between the United States and the alliance still pose challenges. Moreover, to what extent do the ally countries disagree with the United States? To better understand the divergence and

fractures in NATO, allies should be divided into three major categories, the reliant countries, the equidistance-seeking countries, and the relatively detached countries.

2. Reliant Countries

Lithuania and the Czech Republic are typical examples of the reliant countries in NATO. Due to their urgent need to get military assistance from the United States to counter Russia upon joining NATO, these two countries converted their attitudes abruptly toward China to act in line with the United States. In May 2021, Lithuania withdrew from the then "17+1" China CEEC cooperation mechanism. Then under the support of the United States, the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it was allowed to open a so-called "Representative Office in Taiwan" on July 20, which is undoubtedly an act of blatant disregard for the one-China principle. On May 20, the Czech Republic Foreign Ministry said that it was planning to withdraw from this cooperation mechanism due to the increasing U.S. intervention, and it claimed Taiwan as a country to take a stand. Besides, it decided to terminate the sister-city agreement signed between Prague and Beijing. Their anti-China attitude shown by mentioning the Taiwan issue is deemed an essential political credential to contain Russia under the aid of the United States, which moved beyond China's bottom line, dissatisfying China further.

3. Equidistance-Seeking Countries

Nevertheless, things differ regarding equidistance-seeking countries such as Germany and France. "Even as German power has risen and U.S. power is challenged in the emerging global disorder, Germany has retained the habits of a country living in the shelter of a superpower." Admittedly, they still have some military reliance on the United States in security; they would still opt for free space in fields like commerce and economy. With the popular foreign policy ideal of "strategic autonomy," Germany and France would like to increase their autonomy with measures like the European troops instead of being total "vassals" of the United States. As the President of France Emmanuel Macron said, "NATO is becoming braindead." To reduce their dependence on the United States and better satisfy their national interests and long-term strategy. Equidistance-seeking countries like Germany and France would cooperate with countries like China in fields like the economy. During the Merkel period, the relationship between Germany and Russia kept approaching, followed by France, who resumed issuing visas to Russians without nucleic-acid certificates. Besides, the commerce between Germany and China has boomed. "Germany began to base its foreign policy largely on its economic interests and, in particular, on the needs of exporters." With a trade volume proportion of less than 1% in 1991 and that of 9.5% in 2021, a proportion of 45% of Germany's rare earth imported from China, and a 2.7% added value relying on China's external demand through exports. The relationship between Germany and China, driven by shared interests, is inevitably improving. The U.S. leaving a vacuum in the region by abandoning the TPP helped ameliorate this relationship. As for France, in the first ten months of 2021, the bilateral trade volume between China and France had reached the U.S. \$68.961 billion, with a year-on-year increase of 32%, which had exceeded the annual trade volume between China and France in 2020.

It has been more than six months since the Scholz government in December 2021. As a pragmatist of the Social Democratic Party, Chancellor Scholz is more willing to inherit Merkel's political heritage and adopt a pragmatic foreign policy of dealing with conflicts based on interests and compromise in China's relations. The new German government held a relatively ambiguous attitude towards China in its early stage, for the three parties in joint governance, Social Democratic Party, the Green Party, and the Liberal Democratic Party, were equipped with dispersed powers and different ideologies. However, on November 24, 2021, the three parties reached an agreement on joint governance in the officially released agreement regarding the guideline for the next four years. This document demonstrates that the new German government will adhere to Merkel's definition of China's roles as "partner, competitor, and institutional competitor." Besides, the three parties expressed their willingness to continue the "government consultation mechanism between China and Germany," which is the most important legacy of Merkel's China policy.

Regarding France, the re-election of Emmanuel Macron in 2022 has been an excellent guarantee for the stability of the relations. In his second term, the President of France may continue to pursue an independent, pragmatic, and balanced policy toward China to maintain the strategic partnership healthily and stably. The two sides shall further concerted efforts to consolidate the economic foundation of China and France relations.

Due to the demand of the Chinese market and economic cooperation, equidistance-seeking countries like Germany and France did not take a clear stance on sensitive issues like the Taiwan issue that is perceived as crucial by Beijing. Moreover, Germany even issued a joint statement with China over the former issue to express its respect for China's sovereignty in May 2022, for they know how to avoid challenging China's bottom line. However, that does not mean they would align with China instead of the United States. As a matter of fact, under the same criteria of universal democracy, they are still unsatisfied with China in its human rights cause and the COVID-19 pandemic traceability issue. Besides, they always have to consider the United States' attitude.

Furthermore, these two concerns explain why Germany promoted restrictions on Chinese investment in the dialogues between the United States and German leaders during the 55th Munich Security Conference. In the field of ideology, German and French officials also criticized China over Hong Kong and Xinjiang Cotton issues in recent years, with human rights organizations discrediting the "forced labor" in Xinjiang, which resulted in postponing the EU-China Investment Agreement. In addition, "European leaders are becoming increasingly concerned about China's ability to wield influence in Europe across the unconventional axis of threat." It is evident that the dissension with China over ideology which takes the form of an intrinsic mistrust in a communist country still gained its place.

Therefore, those equidistance-seeking countries have to politically seek a neutral status in the increasingly violent game between China and the U.S., which entails exceedingly balanced policies.

4. Relatively Detached Countries

As for the relatively detached countries, Italy and Portugal can be typical representatives of this category, with a more political preference for China. Both countries signed the MoU on the "Belt and Road" initiative advocated by China, increasing their emphasis on cooperation in various fields with China. Admittedly, due to their intrinsic national interests and the pressure from the United States, some reluctance and adverse remarks still exist. However, in general, their attitudes toward China are incredibly positive. Concerning the controversial 5G issue, Italy decided to lift sanctions against Huawei with permission for domestic enterprises to use Huawei's equipment if necessary. As for Portugal, in 2019, it has already made clear to the secretary of the United States, Mike Pompeo, that Portugal would not rule out Chinese enterprises providing technology with the 5G wireless network. Besides, in 2020, Portugal insisted on handing over the project to Chinese enterprises on the construction of Port of Sines, despite the warnings and threats from the United States. During the pandemic crisis, the Chinese government's generous aid of medical resources and experience-sharing also helped gain further friendliness from these countries. For instance, in the dilemma of assistance deficiency, Italy has greatly appreciated China's help to make the highest mortality rate in Italy dive from 9%. In Portugal, tons of medical supplies were delivered in an emergency to Portugal to help combat the Pandemic.

Furthermore, two primary reasons could explain their moving closer to China. For one thing, belonging to the "PIGS" (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain) countries, these countries serve as debt-burden countries after the European debt crisis. Italy has a governmental debt that accounted for 150.3 % of the country's Nominal GDP in Dec 2021 and an unemployment rate of 8.4% in 2022 at the basis of 9.4% in December 2021, while Portugal has respectively a governmental debt accounted for 105.849 % in 2022 and an unemployment rate of 5.9% at the basis of 8% in 2020. As it turned out, both countries have significantly benefited from their accession to the Chinese "Belt and Road" Initiative in 2018. Moreover, with Germany and France reluctant to allocate funds to them, they certainly are more willing to connect with China through its initiative. Moreover, more job opportunities can be created domestically through China's infrastructure project and the 5G project.

5. Conclusions

It turned out that after members of NATO issued a declaration in the report NATO 2030: United for a New Era, China was identified as "both an economic competitor and significant trade partner." Besides, China is deemed to "present both opportunities and challenges that must be addressed together as an Alliance." Therefore, it is beyond dispute that the U.S.'s efforts to steer its allies to define China as a rising threat have come to naught.

Nevertheless, judging by the current crisis of the Russia-Ukraine War, this benign definition of China may be changed in the short term, leading to further prevention and mistrust against China. "European leaders are becoming increasingly concerned about China's ability to wield influence in Europe across

the non-conventional axis of threat." In the future, NATO allies may become more assertive in their interference in China's internal affairs like Taiwan and the South China Sea issues. Because, in essence, what Ukraine is to Russia is similar to what Taiwan is to China. With Putin adopting extreme and violent methods of waging war to achieve unification, NATO allies naturally fear that China would imitate Russia in the long term. Besides, they hold more concerns about China's blockade of the coastline, for the route interruption of goods transmission would be lethal to these countries.

Furthermore, ideologically, intrinsic bias against the "communist waves" invasion would also intensify with the worry of another falling of the "Iron Curtain." In the western context, Taiwan and Hong Kong have long been part of the western democratic spheres of influence. It is no wonder these countries are so alert to China's strengthened management of Hong Kong that they have deeper concerns about the "shadow" of communism in these areas. The Biden government of the United States would implicitly support Ukraine to join NATO to contain further and weaken Russia. At the same time, the allies are reluctant to send national troops to fight on the battlefield after their assistance in weapons and guiding the international public opinion. Considering the current international situation, another round of dispute evoked by the war by NATO allies taking different stances would intensify the divergence and fractures within NATO. Concerning this ongoing war, there are also new problems emerging. For instance, on the issue of whether to ratify Ukraine's accession to NATO, allies, majorly the EU, stuck to their refusal despite the hint of the United States. Besides, these countries again hold distinctive opinions over the energy and food sanctions on Russia.

In conclusion, the divergence and fractures in NATO mainly derive from the disagreement between allies, respectively reliant, equidistance-seeking, and relatively detached countries on diverse issues. Despite their desire for China's huge market, the allies still worry and fear different degrees about China's influence on ideology and their hesitance on issues like the Hong Kong and Taiwan issues. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages, different countries have made different choices. Under the current background of the Pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War, this incompatibility of ally attitudes could further risk abrading NATO as a military alliance. Besides, this phenomenon also indicates that NATO, if not successfully revolutionized and thus pivoted from a Post-Cold War mechanism to a new one, will face a division of interests and thus an even greater danger inside.

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