**[Cold war II](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630984/cold-war-ii)**

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THE North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the People’s Republic of China share a year of inception — 1949 — but beyond that have hitherto largely stayed out of each other’s way. Until this month, when China was singled out as a potential strategic threat at the latest Nato summit in Brussels.

Given that Nato was set up essentially as a means of intimidating the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it may have been wise to fold it up and reimagine collective European military mechanisms when the Warsaw Pact — the Soviet-dominated eastern European bloc’s 1955 response to West Germany’s induction into Nato — went out of business 30 years ago.

But the determination to demonstrate the West’s ascendancy as the Cold War victor entailed not only Nato’s survival but its eastwards expansion, notwithstanding Washington’s promises to Moscow that no such thing would occur. If anything, Nato’s military adventurism has spiralled since the demise of the Soviet Union, albeit with unimpressive or grim consequences, from the Balkans to Afghanistan and Libya.

China and the West must find a better way.

China, though, was ostensibly not on its radar until recently. European nations, by and large, were prepared to make the most of their economic relations with China. It was the US — the dominant power in Nato and the broader Western alliance — that threw a spanner in the works, with the presidential candidate who claimed in 2016 that China was economically “raping” his country being voted into power.

Donald Trump’s charge was unfair. If China’s gain has been America’s loss in terms of corporate investment and jobs, it’s largely because all too many US corporations were eager to avail of profit maximisation opportunities. Considerably lower wages and the lack of labour unionisation made production in China an irresistible prospect.

The realisation has been seeping in for some years, though, that the boons of globalised capitalism are restricted to the privileged few. China’s overworked and underpaid labourers are hardly a concern, but the vote-wielding Western working class is a different matter, not least in the US — especially when jobs are scarce and all too many consumer goods are stamped ‘made in China’.

That helps to explain why the US approach to China has barely shifted this year, even as Joe Biden parades his ‘America is back’ mantra across European cities — including Geneva, where he traded both niceties and barbs with Vladimir Putin. As the main Soviet successor state, Russia is a direct descendant of the chief adversary of the first Cold War, and has never dropped off the Nato radar.

In fact, from the vantage point of Nato’s headquarters in Brussels, it is probably still seen as a more alarming adversary than faraway China. But in the US, it no longer registers all that highly on the Richter scale, barring occasional tremors involving cyberattacks and virtual interference in electoral affairs. Although Russia remains the second largest repository of nuclear weaponry (after the US), it rarely figures anymore as an ‘existential threat’.

Unlike China, a considerably smaller nuclear power, which (much like the US) throws its weight around in its backyard, but whose occasionally belligerent rhetoric does not extend to the folly of risking a military confrontation with America.

What the West probably sees as more worrisome is Beijing’s economic outreach. At their summit in Cornwall earlier this month, the Group of Seven powers even came up with a riposte to China’s sporadically successful Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The G7’s version bears the awkward title Build Back Better World (B3W), and may well turn out to be yet another box-ticking exercise with little or no follow-through.

B3W is supposed to be friendlier to both human rights and the environment than the BRI, which often entails cosy deals with unpalatable regimes and debts that many of the supposed beneficiaries will be unable to repay. If these are neocolonial ambitions, it’s a concept the Western powers are thoroughly familiar with; loans from the likes of the IMF still come with usually neoliberal conditions attached.

China understandably bristles at being urged to play the trade game by the ‘rules-based system’, given its minimal involvement in the evolution of those rules.

None of the foregoing is intended to suggest that China is always, or even usually, in the right, in the economic or any other sphere. But its flaws do not automatically elevate its would-be adversaries to the status of angels.

Opinions differ on whether a second cold war is already underway or merely an increasingly likely prospect. Either way, it would be unwise to forget the grievous harm wreaked by the first one. It tends to be recalled mainly in European terms as an ultimate triumph for the West, although even that was a pyrrhic victory. It’s vital to remember, though, that for many countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America, it was an experience no one should wish to repeat.

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