

# Looking East - NATO, DIANA, US, EU and China

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'The fantasy of an instinctively peaceful world may be comforting, but it is again coming to an end', Alex Karp, CEO of Peter Thiel's CIA-funded Palantir, wrote in an ominous open letter to European leaders a few weeks after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A co-founder of the company - and Thiel's Stanford roommate in the early nineties - Karp warned the continent of the high cost of complacency in the face of the 'aspirations of autocratic rule', and reminded them that for the past two decades Europe 'has stood on the sidelines of the digital revolution, whose principal participants are still essentially all based in the United States'.

The message was straightforward: innovate or die. Adopt Palantir technologies as the US military has done, or risk domination. Elsewhere, Karp has been no less pointed. 'Military AI will determine our lives, the lives of your kids', he said in an interview at Davos in 2020. 'This is a zero-sum thing. The country with the most important AI, the most powerful AI, will determine the rules. That country should either be us or a western country.' At the beginning of June, Karp travelled to Ukraine to make a similar pitch about the role of technology in modern warfare to President Zelensky. The meeting marked the first visit of a CEO to Ukraine since the war began (Karp would later gush that Zelensky was one of the very few heads of state he'd ever met who he could imagine serving as a successful CEO).

A few weeks later, a sprawling transatlantic 'innovation' architecture was announced that will facilitate precisely what Karp and Palantir have been advocating. At NATO's summit in Madrid, the alliance [declared](#) the creation of 'the world's first multi-sovereign venture capital fund' to invest in start-ups and other entities working on technologies 'with great military potential' - including artificial intelligence, autonomy, big-data processing, biotechnology and human enhancement. As Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg explained, 'the NATO Innovation Fund will help bring to life those nascent technologies that have the power to transform our security in the decades to come, strengthening the alliance's innovation ecosystem and bolstering the security of our one billion citizens'.

The fund is described as a complement to NATO's new [Defense Innovation Accelerator of the North Atlantic](#), known by its unsettling anthropoid acronym, DIANA. Modelled on the US Defense Research Projects Agency, DARPA, whose best-known achievement is the creation of the internet, DIANA will encompass sixty innovation sites in twenty NATO member states. With its European headquarters at Imperial College London, the endeavour is said to be a 'joint effort between private sector entities, non-governmental entities, and academia' to ensure the alliance 'can *harness the best of new technology for transatlantic security*'. A further ten accelerator sites will provide financing and mentorship to technology start-ups with potential application in warfare, and there will be more than fifty 'dedicated test centres' spread across the alliance.

The news was met with enthusiasm by those in the habit of issuing grave pronouncements about the West '[falling behind](#)'. An editorial in the *National Interest* even declared that '[innovation could save NATO](#)'. These cyclical efforts to 'save NATO' by finding a new *raison d'être* for it every decade or so brings to mind the [quip](#) about the alliance 'attempting to justify its own existence in ever more

imaginative ways’.

This push for ‘innovation’ is the product of grander developments. Madrid saw the unveiling of NATO’s new [strategic concept](#), its first since 2010. The 16-page document describes a very different world than the last, one in which ‘the Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace’, and – echoing the Biden administration’s rhetoric – ‘authoritarian’ actors are threatening our democracies. The Russian Federation represents ‘the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area’. But in a historic move, China is explicitly described as a ‘systemic challenge’ for the first time. ‘The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values’, the concept states (relatedly, NATO invited the leaders of Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand to the summit – another historic first). While the document says that allies ‘remain open to constructive engagement with China’, the intention is to reconfigure NATO as anti-China military alliance, on belligerent US-UK lines.

That NATO identified China as a systemic challenge at the same time it announced a vast program to accelerate technological innovation is no coincidence. While NATO and companies like Palantir have seized on the invasion of Ukraine to push this agenda, Russia is not the West’s main competitor in the field of new technology. ‘NATO is primarily concerned with Chinese (rather than Russian) innovation in the field of emerging and disruptive technologies’, Simona Soares, a fellow of the International Institute for Strategic Studies wrote in a German Marshall Fund [report](#) last year. ‘China is the main geopolitical driver behind allied innovation plans.’

The reorientation is especially significant for the EU. ‘For the first time since the Mongol invasion of Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, European powers now view an Asian power as a direct threat’, Jo Inge Bekkevold, a former Norwegian intelligence official and fellow at its Institute for Defence Studies, proclaimed in a recent [article](#) for *Foreign Policy*. Bekkevold envisions an emerging division of labour for the alliance, with the US focused on China, the EU on Russia.

Until recently, there had been optimism about the trajectory of EU-China relations. The draft of an [ambitious comprehensive investment agreement](#) was drawn up, after protracted negotiations. In 2018, EU military forces conducted a combined naval exercise with the People’s Liberation Army at a Chinese military base in Djibouti. In 2020, China surpassed the United States to become the EU’s largest trading partner. And while Beijing has repeatedly blamed ‘US-led NATO’ for the war in Ukraine, it has largely refrained from directly criticizing the EU. Editorials in Chinese media assert that ‘a weaker Europe serves US interests’ and describe the heavy price, in soaring food and energy prices, that Europeans are being made to pay for US imperial ambitions. ‘China and the EU should act as two major forces upholding world peace, and offset uncertainties in the international landscape’, Xi Jinping told EU leaders at a summit in April, exhorting them to reject the ‘rival-bloc mentality’ promoted by the US.

Relations however have been deteriorating in recent months, with many European countries abandoning their [tightrope diplomacy](#) with China and lining up decisively behind the United States and NATO. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Beijing’s reticence to criticize Russia for it, has hastened this process. In April, EU chief diplomat Joseph Borrell published a blog post titled ‘On China’s Choices and Responsibilities’ excoriating Beijing for its [pro-Russian neutrality](#). All three Baltic States have [pulled out](#) of the 17+1 China-CEE initiative – established by Beijing a decade ago to strengthen relations with Central and Eastern Europe. Last week, the German ambassador in Beijing used her first public speech in the country last week to [raise concerns](#) about China’s zero-Covid policy and tensions across the Taiwan Strait.

It is little wonder then that developments in Madrid have met with a frosty reception in Beijing. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian condemned the new strategic concept,

lambasting NATO for promoting conflict, confrontation and 'a Cold War mentality'. When Germany subsequently [announced](#) that it would send warplanes to take part in US-led exercises in the Indo-Pacific, the Chinese foreign ministry's response was mockery, saying that this 'will probably lead to some bad memories and associations in many countries in the world'.

NATO member states may be more united behind the US than ever before, but there are likely to be disagreements over some of the technologies in development. Of greatest concern are lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) or 'slaughterbots', which can search for targets and kill entirely independently. Several NATO members, including Belgium and Germany, have been much more reticent about these than the US and UK. The rise of this kind of technology has conjured fears of a new arms race with China. Karp is unapologetic about this: he says that Palantir is working on 'a new Manhattan Project'. The company is certainly prepared to go further than most. In 2019, it took over the Pentagon's Project Maven after Google abandoned it over 'ethical concerns'. The controversial project, which prompted walkouts from Google employees, aims to construct AI-powered surveillance systems for unmanned aerial vehicles.

Dissenting voices have expressed serious concerns, though have been given predictably little space in the media. 'DIANA and the NATO innovation fund will divert researchers and research funding in key civilian areas - e.g AI, big data - thus reducing the potential benefits for health and environment, at a time of increasing poverty, inequality, pandemics, and ecological disasters', Stuart Parkinson, director of Scientists for Global Responsibility, wrote in an email this week. 'Innovation programs like DIANA are most likely to increase and entrench militarism for decades to come, undermining security for all'.

But all of this is welcome news for some. Europe is decisively lining up behind the United States and NATO; talk of 'decoupling from China' abounds. There is little ambiguity about what is happening. With the vast majority of the Global South loathe to impose sanctions on Russia, the current global competition is one of 'the West' against the rest. This serves the interests of the US and Silicon Valley quite well. 'The core mission of our company', Karp said at Davos in 2020, 'always was to make the West, especially America, the strongest in the world, the strongest it's ever been.'

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- "Looking East". New Left Review. Sidecar. 09 SEPTEMBER 2022: <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/looking-east?pc=1469>