On Tuesday June 18th, 2019, the Netherlands Atlantic Association and Netherlands Atlantic Youth organised a public meeting at Press Centre ‘Nieuwspoort’ in The Hague themed “China, the Rest and the West: the return of great power politics and its complications”. The two speakers of the evening, Matt Ferchen (Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy) and Mohammedbagher Forough (Leiden University), elaborated on China’s growing influence on global politics and emerging economies, as well as the rise of concerns,
particularly in the West, about China’s dominant position. The public meeting was moderated by John Jacobs (Royal Netherlands Army). Approximately 60 people attended the event.

The moderator, John Jacobs, started the event by introducing the two speakers of the evening, Matt Ferchen and Mohammedbagher Forough. After the brief introduction of the two scholars, Jacobs gave the floor to Forough.

Forough started by discussing the rise, or more specifically, the return of China, which is now most evident in the Belt and Road Initiative. During his talk, Forough pointed out a number of important global shifts in the area of geo-economics and geopolitics. Firstly, he focussed on geopolitical shifts. These include the move towards a multipolar world, the economic return of China, the geopolitical return of Russia, the rise of regional powers (e.g. India, Brazil, South-Africa, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia), the move from a Transatlantic alliance to more selective partnerships (e.g. the nuclear deal and Paris agreement that divide Transatlantic allies), and multilateralism being increasingly challenged by a number of threats (e.g. the rise of right-wing populism in the West and its scepticism towards international institutions). Forough then elaborated on various ‘ge-oeconomic shifts. An example of such a shift is the ongoing formation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between a number of ASEAN countries and other important regional powers, amongst them, China, Japan and Australia. Besides, plans have been made for an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) that could become a very important partnership between India, Japan and multiple African countries. Other partnerships, such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) remain uncertain.

Forough continued his presentation by explaining the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), which is inspired by the ancient infrastructure of the Chinese old Silk Road. He used an ancient map of the old Silk Road to illustrate the similarities between the ancient infrastructure and the proposed connectivity project of the new Belt & Road. The new Belt & Road Initiative will become the biggest network of engineered trade routes, whereas the ancient Silk Road emerged naturally over time. Forough underlined the importance of the connection between China and Africa for the BRI. China has invested heavily in Africa and is now by far the number one investor on the continent. Forough expressed his belief that Africa will soon be the largest manufacturer in the world. Therefore, he sees the geo-economic shift of current times as the “Afro-Eurasian moment” rather than the “Transatlantic moment”. Forough further stressed that the Belt & Road Initiative is not only about trade, but also about connecting culture and technology. He highlighted the strategy of reorganizing human geography through six different corridors of the BRI, spanning from Pakistan, Central Asia and West-Asia (the Middle East), to Europe, Russia, Indonesia, India and the African continent.

Forough also pointed out that China is the only major power that is landlocked on three sides. Furthermore, the US navy is active on the only seaside of China, in the East, which
makes it difficult for China to access international waters directly. This situation has resulted in the ‘Malacca dilemma’, namely China’s strong dependency on the Malacca strait as an important energy route. China’s dependency on this route makes it a strategic vulnerability. To bypass the Malacca strait, China changed its game from geopolitics to geo-economics and entered into dialogue with neighbours, like Myanmar, to establish corridors to international waters. Moreover, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can also provide an opening to international waters.

After Forough’s presentation, Ferchen set out his ideas about the relationship between China, the rest and the West. From the Transatlantic perspective, a consensus is brewing about China in which China is being portrayed as a systemic rival for both sides on the Atlantic. According to Ferchen, there are five categories of concerns about China’s rise. The first category is related to business communities that show their concerns about market access and technology. China’s industrial policy and limited intellectual property rights are seen as problematic, particularly by the American business community. Another category of concern is national security. China is increasingly viewed as a strategic competitor, because of a switch to great-power thinking about China worldwide. Next to this, there are concerns about China’s influence on critical infrastructure, especially concerning the growing 5G and Huawei discussion. Furthermore, there are geo-economic concerns about the BRI and China’s true intentions with it. Finally, human rights concerns about China’s surveillance state have also grown significantly. The CCP is becoming increasingly suppressive and academic freedom is severely limited. Media amplifies these concerns even more.

Many of these issues are already longstanding, Ferchen argues. Therefore, he posed the question why the West has recently changed its attitude towards China. One of the motivations offered by Ferchen is that China has stopped its process of liberalization, both economically and politically. Next to this, Xi Jinping has changed the nature of politics by increasing his power, which is by many perceived as an alarming development. China also seems to have become more energetic and assertive on the world stage.

Changes in the West have also influenced this new attitude. Especially Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States can be linked to the opening for longstanding rivalry.

Ferchen closed his opening statement with possible change in the consensus on China being a systemic rival for both sides on the Atlantic. Firstly, the results of the 2020 presidential elections in the US could possibly influence the US approach towards China. With the presidential elections in 2020, the US may reassess the issues of environment and climate with China and acknowledge that the US needs partners to solve problems. At a practical level, better risk assessment for many of China’s deals through protocols and laws of investment screenings may also change the relation between China and the West.

**Discussion**

After both speakers finished their talk, the room was open for questions. The first two questions were the following:
What do you see as the weaknesses of China's strategy? Perhaps the relations with Russia or internal stability?

John Mearsheimer adheres to the theory of structural realism, and argues that China cannot rise peacefully. Do you agree with this theory?

Regarding the first question, Forough said that Russia is not a weakness, but a strength for China, as China is the senior partner in the relationship between the two countries. China's main weakness is internal instability. The internal relations are very complicated and the CCP's internal legitimacy depends heavily on economic performance. A struggling economy is therefore China's biggest potential weakness. In response to the second question, Forough answered that he doesn't like the theory's determinism. The Thucydides trap, as described in the work of Graham Allison, is similar to this determinism, as it claims that rising and declining powers almost always end up fighting each other. Forough also noted that conquering is done by every country. China did it internally to form a state. However, internal instability has stopped it from developing an external conquering tradition.

Ferchen answered the first question by identifying president Xi’s increase in power as China’s biggest weakness, as putting this much power in the hands of one person could be risky for a country obsessed with stability. He also warned not to confuse China's economic power with its political power. In Venezuela, China made important investment mistakes, because it has often gone in head-first in new investment situation without considering the possible risks. Russia, on the other hand, has done a more effective job in Venezuela. The situation in Venezuela is a case of real competition between China and Russia. With regards to the second question, Ferchen was similar to Forough in his dislike of the determinism of Mearsheimer’s theory.

There were many questions coming from the audience in the discussion part of the program. A few of these questions focussed on Africa. One of these questions was:

How are Chinese investments in Africa perceived at the level of government officials and at the grass-roots level in Africa?

Forough answered that these investments are perceived differently on a case-to-case basis. Domestic problems, primarily corruption, are more important for a positive outcome at grass-root level than whatever China negotiates. China is also in a learning process and it will often offer better contracts as a result of local protests. Forough also stated in response to an earlier question that it would be good for Europe to get economically involved in Africa, since this competition could bring better investment deals for Africans.

Ferchen agreed that corruption is a major obstacle, because China’s investment deals are negotiated in a state-to-state manner. Most of the regimes in Africa and Latin America suffer from poor decision-making, which makes investing for China in these regions a learning process. However, according to Ferchen, the degree of learning differs. For example, China has not learned a lot from its investments in Venezuela.

The final question of the evening was about technological infrastructure:
What is your opinion about the 5G discussion?

Ferchen said that the 5G power struggle is an important discussion. Especially smaller states will face challenges, because choosing between the US and China, the biggest players in this discussion, is not a nice position to be in. Some decisions are already made, so there is not much time to rethink the situation.

Forough underlined the strong relation between technology and politics. China is a great example of this, as the state has played a major role in the technological growth of the country. Besides, it is already investing in 6G.

As Forough concludes, we all can learn from friends and enemies.