

China's Search for Allies

Is Beijing Building a Rival Alliance System?

By Patricia M. Kim

The United States' network of alliances has long been a central pillar of its foreign policy—and, as competition with China has intensified in recent years, held up as a major U.S. advantage. The administration of President Joe Biden has put a particular emphasis on allies in its Asia strategy. In its first year, the administration has both strengthened long-standing alliances such as those with Japan and South Korea and put considerable energy into bolstering multilateral partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (with Australia, India, and Japan) and the newly formed AUKUS pact (with Australia and the United Kingdom).

China, by contrast, has shied away from formal alliances, based on its supposedly distinct view of international relations and a pragmatic desire to avoid the risks of entanglement. But there are signs that Beijing's resistance is starting to erode. In more recent years, it has upgraded its strategic partnerships and expanded military exchanges and joint exercises with countries including Russia, Pakistan, and Iran. These partnerships are still a far cry from U.S. alliances (which involve mutual defense clauses, extensive troop-basing agreements, and joint military capabilities). But they could in time form the basis of China's own alliance network if Chinese leaders come to believe that one is necessary for both its deterrent effect and its operational value to prevail in a long-term competition with the United States and its allies. Such a development would mark a true turning point in this era of U.S.-Chinese competition and pave the way to an alarming new world with lower thresholds for regional and great power conflict.

CHINA CREATES A NETWORK OF ITS OWN

Today, China has only one formal ally—North Korea, with whom it shares a mutual defense treaty. But it has dozens of official partnerships with states around the world. At the top of the pyramid are Russia and Pakistan (whose extra-special ties with Beijing are denoted by long and exclusive monikers, “China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era” and “China-Pakistan All Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership”). Then come several Southeast Asian states—Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos—as well as states farther afield, such as Egypt, Brazil, and New Zealand. Beijing has also invested great energy into building Chinese-led multilateral mechanisms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.

China has avoided building a traditional network of allies thus far for reasons ranging from long-standing ideological inclinations to hardheaded strategic calculations. Since the early days of the People's Republic, Beijing has sought to portray itself as a leader of the developing world and a proponent of Non-Aligned Movement principles of noninterference and anti-imperialism. In more recent years, Chinese leaders have begun to insist that they practice a “new type of international relations,” eschewing traditional power politics in favor of “win-win cooperation.” Such language is meant to bolster the narrative that China's rise should not be feared but be welcomed as a boon for global development and prosperity—and to distinguish Beijing from

Washington, which Chinese leaders frequently criticize for maintaining an outdated “Cold War mentality.”

In addition to such public diplomacy efforts, Beijing’s alliance-shy posture reflects a strategic decision to build relationships centered around economic ties in its quest for power and global influence. This is not to say that China uses only economic statecraft to advance its objectives. In fact, China has rapidly expanded its military capabilities over the last two decades and used its newfound might to intimidate Taiwan, jostle with India along a disputed border, and press its sovereignty claims in the East China and South China Seas. Nonetheless, while Chinese leaders consider military power essential for protecting their homeland, core national interests, and citizens and investments abroad, they have demonstrated little desire to take on external security commitments that could drag their country into far-flung conflicts.

Beijing has bet instead that offering loans, investments, and trade opportunities, and doing business with any sovereign entity, regardless of its character and track record at home, will win China friends and influence. And this strategy has paid off. Many of China’s partners, particularly in the developing world, have welcomed its engagement and supported its core interests in exchange. This support tends to be primarily diplomatic in nature—for instance, affirming Beijing’s “one China” principle; staying silent or even praising its repressive policies in Xinjiang; and endorsing its agenda in multilateral forums such as the United Nations. And along with economic inducements, Beijing has increasingly turned to economic coercion to punish states that defy its demands—as in the case of Australia, which saw stiff Chinese tariffs slapped on its exports after it banned the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from its networks and supported an international investigation into the origin of COVID-19.

BELJING’S CHANGING CALCULATIONS

In the near term, China is unlikely to abandon its geo-economic strategy for dominance altogether. But there are two possible scenarios that could drive it to build a bona fide network of allies: if Beijing perceives a sharp enough deterioration in its security environment that overturns its cost-benefit analysis on pursuing formal military pacts; or if it decides to displace the United States as the predominant *military* power, not just in the Indo-Pacific region, but globally. (These two scenarios are not, of course, mutually exclusive.)

Chinese leaders may come to such conclusions if they assess that the Communist Party’s core interests, such as its hold on power at home, authority over Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and claims of sovereignty over Taiwan would be untenable without striking formal defense pacts with key partners such as Russia, Pakistan, or Iran. In fact, Chinese assessments have already begun to move in this direction. For instance, Chinese commentary on the significant deepening of Sino-Russian ties in recent years often points to growing “encirclement” by the West as the primary driver of this development and emphasizes the need for Beijing and Moscow to work jointly to push back on U.S.-led coalitions. Although Beijing continues to insist that China and Russia are “not allies,” it has begun to assert in the same breath that there are “no restricted areas” and “no upper limit” to their partnership.

Since 2012, China and Russia have conducted increasingly expansive military drills, including regular naval exercises in the East China and South China Sea, and at times in conjunction with third parties such as Iran and South Africa. Just last month, the two made headlines for holding their first ever joint patrol in the western Pacific, which the *Global Times*—a Chinese state-run tabloid—said was aimed at the United States as it “gangs up with its allies like Japan and

Australia.” To be sure, Beijing and Moscow’s tenuous history of friendship and rivalry and the value both states place on strategic autonomy may limit the extent of their partnership. Still, the two states could conceivably strike a deal on rendering mutual aid, from logistical support up to direct assistance, including in grey zone or conventional military operations, if either government comes to believe it faces an existential threat.

Another example of China’s shifting posture is its embrace of “rogue states.” For instance, Chinese leaders have begun to characterize China-North Korea relations in strikingly different tones from just a few years ago when Beijing took pains to distance itself from Pyongyang. This past July, the two allies renewed their mutual defense treaty and vowed to elevate their alliance to “new levels.” Earlier this year, China also signed a 25-year cooperation agreement with Iran, providing economic projects and investment in exchange for access to Iranian oil. The two countries also pledged to deepen cooperation through joint military exchanges, intelligence sharing, and weapons development. China soon after endorsed Iran’s bid for full membership in the SCO, 15 years after Tehran’s initial application. According to Chinese analysts, Beijing had sidestepped the issue for more than a decade to avoid upsetting Washington and creating the impression that the SCO is aimed at countering the United States. But it decided to move ahead upon concluding that Washington’s “containment policy” toward China was here to stay.

Although it remains to be seen just how much actual “upgrading” these partnerships will undergo, such developments suggest that Beijing’s desires not to entangle itself too deeply with actors such as Iran and North Korea for both strategic and image-driven reasons may be gradually eroding as it perceives an increasingly hostile external environment and, thus, greater urgency in enlisting allies. (This is notwithstanding questions about the reliability of these actors and their own suspicions of China, among other complicating factors.) Chinese leaders could very well decide in the foreseeable future that the best way to protect their interests and withstand pressure from Washington and its allies is for China to become an indispensable military power with its own network of allies—just as the United States did more than 70 years ago.

To be sure, emulating the U.S. historical playbook won’t be easy. Most of the world’s advanced economies, after all, are already official allies of the United States. Beijing also faces deep skepticism around the globe about its long-term intentions and hegemonic tendencies. That’s true even of its closest Belt and Road Initiative partners. And many states have made clear that they do not want to exclusively align with either Beijing or Washington. But the status quo is not immutable. China is swiftly cultivating ties with advanced economies and developing states, and it is attempting to drive wedges between the United States and its allies and partners. Even if it is unable to bring some players to its side, it could push for the “Finlandization” of key strategic areas such as the Korean Peninsula and parts of Southeast Asia, forcing states to renounce their strategic ties with the United States.

ALLIANCES HAVE CONSEQUENCES

The great strides the Biden administration has made to revitalize U.S. alliances and increase U.S. allies’ contributions to security in the Indo-Pacific region are essential in this era of shifting power balances and strategic competition. But Biden should be aware that when U.S. leaders vow to reimagine Washington’s alliances and work toward “a new 21st century vision” of “integrated deterrence,” Beijing could very well pursue the same with its own strategic partners.

This is not to say that Washington should distance itself from its allies in hopes of moderating China's behavior. After all, Beijing's choices will be chiefly informed by its own strategic vision and ambitions. Nevertheless, the Biden administration would do well to consider how its successes in rallying friends could impact Beijing's threat perceptions and unwittingly spur the creation of a rival Chinese-led alliance network.

Serious thought should be given now on how to live with, and better yet prevent, such an outcome. Efforts along these lines should include considering ways to keep China invested in stable relations with the United States and its allies and making sure to engage with a broad array of states, not just like-minded democracies, so that those outside the United States' traditional circle of friends do not conclude that their best or only option is to align with Beijing. Strategic foresight and planning will be essential to prevent the drift toward a truly divided world, with an opposing bloc helmed by a more entangled and interventionist China.

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