

China's strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world

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THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS GRID SERIES

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The Global Partnerships Grid

Partnerships are an important vector of engagement in a polycentric world. Across the globe, many governments have devised a number of 'special relationships' in the framing of their foreign policy, with neighbouring and distant countries, as well as with some multilateral organisations. Whereas the European Union (EU) has established 10 so-called strategic partnerships, India has more than 20 and China close to 50. The proliferation of partnerships over the last two decades exposes both the relevance of this trend and the great heterogeneity, and uneven value, of these relationships.

The European Strategic Partnerships Observatory (ESPO) was set up in 2012 to provide information, analysis and debate on the EU's relations with a selected range of key global and regional partners.

With the Global Partnerships Grid series, ESPO aims to contribute to a better understanding of the practice of partnerships in current international politics. How do partnerships fit the foreign policy of major countries? What are the goals of these partnerships and what is their output? What are the main features of strategic partnerships?

With a view to addressing these questions, we asked senior scholars and analysts to explore the making of strategic partnerships in their respective countries, in what is in most cases the first analysis of this topic. They outline the objectives and functioning of these partnerships, based on official documents, interviews, and existing scholarly work.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
China's strategic partnership network	7
An overview	7
The mechanisms	9
Why does China establish strategic partnerships?	10
Multidimensional diplomacy in a globalised world	11
The defensive and assertive logics	12
China-style strategic partnerships	14
Do strategic partnerships work?	15
Conclusion	17
Appendix 1. A list of China's strategic partners	18

» China has established strategic partnerships with 47 countries and three international organisations, mostly since the early 2000s.

The country's partnership diplomacy underlines broader developments both within and outside China. This paper outlines how China perceives the concept of strategic partnership and reports on the expansion of these partnerships during the past 20 years. It argues that the strategic partnership boom is a product of China's embrace of globalisation and multidimensional diplomacy. This process reflects China's adaptation to the world and its efforts to shape a favourable world order. Beijing has been largely successful in employing strategic partnerships, a prominent instrument in its limited diplomatic toolkit, in order to guarantee a benign environment for its rise. As China rises, and as part of the international community becomes increasingly suspicious of this ascent, Beijing's strategic partnership diplomacy will face unprecedented challenges and is likely to become more and more proactive and creative.

China's strategic partnership network

An overview

The concept of 'partnership' emerged within Chinese diplomacy after the end of the Cold War. China established its first strategic partnership with Brazil in 1993. Since then, building strategic partnerships has become one of the most notable dimensions of Chinese diplomacy. For example, China built a 'strategic partnership of equality, mutual confidence and mutual co-ordination in the 21st century' with Russia in 1996; a 'collaborative partnership for the 21st century' with South Korea in 1998; and a 'strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity' with India in 2005.

Yet, these partnerships remain largely unexplored in academic literature and policy debates, and the concept is still ill-defined. According to the Chinese dictionary *Cihai*,¹ the word *huoban* [partnership] refers to those who have joined the same organisation or are engaged in the same activities. The word *Zhanlue* [strategy], when used in the field of economy and politics, normally refers to a plan, policy or tactic with overarching, comprehensive, and decisive implications.

Chinese leaders have expressed rather clear views on the key features of an ideal partnership. In 2004, during his first European trip as Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao defined the Sino-EU comprehensive strategic partnership as follows:

By 'comprehensive', it means that the cooperation should be all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered. It covers economic, scientific, technological, political and cultural fields, contains both bilateral and multilateral levels, and is conducted by both governments and non-governmental

¹ Z. Xia and Z. Chen, *Cihai [Seas of Word]* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Publisher, 2009), 6th edition, p.987 and p.2871.

groups. By 'strategic', it means that the cooperation should be long-term and stable, bearing on the larger picture of China-EU relations. It transcends the differences in ideology and social system and is not subjected to the impacts of individual events that occur from time to time. By 'partnership', it means that the cooperation should be equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win. The two sides should base themselves on mutual respect and mutual trust, endeavour to expand converging interests and seek common ground on the major issues while shelving differences on the minor ones.²

In contrast with this clear-cut ideal-type of partnership, the practice of strategic partnerships has escaped tight criteria or definitions. First, it is hard to argue that all strategic partners are of equal or vital importance to China. Angola, an African country that joined the long list of China's strategic partners in 2010, does not have the same clout as Russia or the European Union (EU). Second, strategic partnerships often appear irrelevant when describing China's relations with its close 'friends'. Neither Nepal nor North Korea is a strategic partner. Pakistan, widely regarded as a 'long-time friend' of China, only became a strategic partner in 2005. Third, the precise meaning of partnership usually differs from one association to another, is subject to different interpretations, and can change over time.

In 1997, the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the United States and issued a joint statement with the then US President Bill Clinton in which both leaders vowed to boost cooperation and build a constructive strategic partnership. However, when George W. Bush took office in 2001, Sino-US relations took a step back. At a meeting with the press in Shanghai in 2001, Jiang and Bush expressed only the intention to build a 'constructive relationship of cooperation'. The word 'strategic' has not been included in official documents ever since. In 2013, Chinese and US leaders agreed to build a 'New Type of Major-Power Relationship' to guide the Sino-US relationship. Analyses of Sino-US relations are not unanimous as to whether China and the US have a strategic partnership, given the ambiguity of the relationship. While this paper still counts the Sino-US relationship as a strategic partnership in the making, it holds that so far the relationship has largely failed to deliver.

To take another example, China and Russia established a 'strategic partnership of coordination' in 1997. But it is not clear why the word 'coordination' is exclusively reserved for describing the China-Russia strategic partnership. Besides the label of 'strategic partnerships', various definitions are used to describe other important relationships. Beijing has launched a 'Joint Action Plan for Strategic Cooperation' with the Philippines, a 'strategic relationship of mutual benefit in an all-round way' with Japan, 'strategic friendly relations' and an 'energy strategic partnership' with Saudi Arabia, and a 'partnership of global responsibility within the framework of the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership'³ with Germany. Nevertheless, among these countries, only Germany has been widely regarded as China's strategic partner.

There is no official list of China's strategic partners. Reportedly, an attempt by a government-sponsored newspaper to produce such a list was halted by foreign ministry officials due to fears that it could lead to confusion and unnecessary discontent on behalf of important countries which are not labelled as China's strategic partners.⁴ Following a review of official, academic and media resources available,⁵ the authors estimate that China has built strategic partnerships with 47 countries and three international organisations – namely the EU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the African Union (AU).

² Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Speech by H.E. Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, at the China-EU Investment and Trade Forum, 6 May 2004, available at: <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zt/t101949.htm> [Accessed 23 October 2012].

³ The expression was used in the 1996 joint declaration. The 2010 joint declaration officially used the word 'strategic partnership'.

⁴ Interview with Chinese diplomats, April 2012, Beijing.

⁵ All data in this paper are based on multiple sources: the official website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xinhua Database, search engines google.com and baidu.com, and China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (CNKI). The authors would like to thank Wang Kai for helping collect the data.

All strategic partnerships are publicly announced by the president or the premier. In only two occasions was this not the case: Vice-President Zeng Qinghong launched the strategic partnership with South Africa during his visit to the country in 2004; and Vice-President Xi Jinping that with Angola during his visit in 2010. Most strategic partnerships are established by well-prepared joint statements during top leaders' state visits and only a few have been the result of impromptu decisions, such as the upgrading of the Sino-Canadian partnership to a strategic one after President Hu Jintao's arrival in Canada in 2005.⁶

The joint declarations establishing these partnerships vary in form and content. Out of 20 examples reviewed by the authors, all of them mention trade, investment and economic cooperation. All but three (Egypt, Angola and Turkey) mention the 'One China' policy or Taiwan. Two of them (India and Mongolia) mention Tibet and one (Mongolia) mentions Xinjiang. All but two declarations (United Arab Emirates and Turkey) mention respect for, reform of, or cooperation in the United Nations. Global issues such as anti-terrorism and non-proliferation, as well as cultural or people-to-people exchanges, are also frequently included. Some topics are more specific to distinct sets of countries. Border issues are raised with neighbours, human rights with Western countries, and military cooperation with politically close or important countries.

Building a strategic partnership is not a one-off deal. Most such accords are built upon existing 'friendly relationships', 'cooperative relationships', or 'partnerships'. It is also commonplace to upgrade the strategic partnership to a comprehensive one a few years after its launch. Usually, a solid record of cooperation can be widely seen as a blessing for further upgrading the partnership, or a good omen for initiating similar partnerships.

The mechanisms

Some strategic partnerships are established at the request of other countries, such as those with Russia and the US.⁷ As China rises, in recent years more and more countries have begun to request strategic partnerships with China. As a good-will move, China accepts most requests.⁸

Along with the 'partnership boom', China has institutionalised its relations with many important players in the world. New bilateral mechanisms have been designed to strengthen mutual trust and to achieve the purposes of the strategic partnerships, in particular regional stability and economic development. For economic affairs, committees or dialogues have been developed with nearly every strategic partner. For political and military affairs, hotlines and strategic dialogues are the most common mechanisms. For social and cultural matters, festivals, education exchanges, or track-two conferences have been conducted, among other initiatives.

Strategic partnerships are institutionalised in different ways. The mechanisms established with Russia are the most comprehensive and effective. China and Russia established diplomatic relations after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 1996, the two sides established a partnership of strategic coordination, but bilateral consultation mechanisms were almost inexistent, as Russian foreign policy had been focused mainly on the West. By the end of 2013, however, China and Russia had developed unparalleled measures to strengthen their ties. Chinese and Russian presidents meet with each other every year and there is a hotline for direct communication between them. The premiers as well as the heads of parliament of both countries also meet annually. A Sino-Russia Prime Ministers' Regular Meeting Mechanism has been created, which includes the Prime Ministers' Regular Meeting Committee, the Energy Negotiators' Meeting, and the People-

⁶ P. Evans, 'A Strategic Partnership with China: What's in a Name', Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, Vancouver, BC, 29 September 2005, available at: <http://www.asiapacific.ca/editorials/canada-asia-viewpoints/editorials/strategic-partnership-china-whats-name> [Accessed 8 May 2012].

⁷ J.Y.S. Cheng and W. Zhang, 'Patterns and Dynamics of China's International Strategic Behaviour', *Journal of Contemporary China*, XI(31): 51-67, 2001.

⁸ Interview with Chinese diplomats, April 2012, Beijing.

to-People Cooperation Committee. The China-Russia Strategic Security Consultation and the China-Russia Friendship, Peace and Development Commission also play important roles.

The mechanisms of the China-EU and China-ASEAN partnerships also stand out. China had established annual summits with both the EU and the ASEAN in the late 1990s before the respective strategic partnerships were launched. Since the upgrade of their relationship in 2003, China and the EU gradually established a cooperation mechanism that now covers over 50 areas and includes a High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue (2008), a High-Level Strategic Dialogue (2010), and a High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (2011). China and ASEAN hold 12 ministerial meetings and over 40 inter-governmental special committees.

The rest of China's strategic partnerships are not equipped with such high-level and extensive mechanisms. Diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, a very important neighbour, are still on a relatively low level of institutionalisation. In their joint statement in 2013, China and South Korea stated that, in order to deepen their strategic partnership established in 2008, they would promote regular communication among their top leaders through more visits, meetings and envoys. The two also agreed to work towards the 'institutionalisation of foreign ministers' mutual visits', to build a foreign minister hotline, and to hold a high-level foreign ministry strategic dialogue twice a year. As regards Saudi Arabia, both partners only vaguely suggested that they would strengthen high-level mutual visits and political consultations in their strategic partnership joint statement in 2012.

The institutional framework usually reflects the characteristics of the strategic partnership. The overarching Sino-Russian mechanism demonstrates the importance of this partnership. The special stress on party-to-party communications between China and Vietnam, Cambodia, and Lao PDR reflects the historical and ideological connections between the Chinese Communist Party and the ruling parties in these countries. The human rights dialogue is a signature mechanism between China and Western countries, but it has never been introduced between China and developing countries. When strategic partnerships are built with member states of important regional organisations such as the EU, ASEAN or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), cooperation is usually framed with reference to cooperation with these organisations.

Building strategic partnership mechanisms can take time. China and Brazil launched their strategic partnership in 1993, but it was not until 2006 and 2008, respectively, that the High-Level Committee on Coordination and the Strategic Dialogue started to work.

It is worth noting that China has established high-level and sophisticated mechanisms for dialogue with countries that are not strategic partners or whose status as strategic partners is debated. For example, the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which started in 2009, is held annually and is co-chaired by the Chinese vice-premier for economics, the Chinese state councillor of foreign affairs, the US secretary of state and the US treasury secretary. China and Japan also hold various annual dialogues, including a High-Level Economic Dialogue and a Strategic Dialogue.

Why does China establish strategic partnerships?

Initially, strategic partnerships were used by Beijing to regulate relations with great powers. In the 1990s, China had envisaged only three strategic partnerships: with Brazil, with Russia and with the US. The Sino-Brazilian strategic partnership, which was launched in a rush and remained dormant for over a decade, can be interpreted as an attempt to restore China's image after Tiananmen in 1989. Beijing's real attention was focused on Russia and the US. China wished to maintain stable and amicable relations with the global powers as the new world order was taking shape.

In the early twenty-first century, China expanded the scope of its strategic partnerships. At the beginning of the 2000s, European countries constituted the bulk of Beijing's new strategic partners. China welcomed European capital and technology and Europe's role in a multipolar world. Since then, more and more developing countries and neighbours have become strategic partners. As China powers ahead, it has begun to worry about resource security, the protection of overseas interests and a stable regional order. The evolving considerations behind the conclusion of strategic partnerships reflect the changing requirements of sustaining China's growth and its evolving global role.

To understand China's strategic partnership policy, it is first necessary to look into the changes in China and its interactions with the world. As a diplomatic instrument, the strategic partnership policy reflects a broader shift in China's development path and diplomacy paradigm.

Multidimensional diplomacy in a globalised world

The founding fathers of the People's Republic of China (PRC) decided to join the Socialist Camp in 1949. However, when Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1960s, Beijing chose to improve relations with the US and become a strategic pole in the Sino-Soviet-US triangle. This move contributed to the enhancement of China's global clout. However, it did not address domestic economic paralysis. When the havoc of the Cultural Revolution finally came to an end in the late 1970s, China decided to make another U-turn towards 'Reform and Opening-up'. This policy not only asserted the legitimacy of market mechanisms in China, but also transformed the country into a vibrant part of the world economic system.

Alongside progressive economic liberalisation, Chinese foreign policy shifted from being largely ideology-driven to a more pragmatic focus on the specific features of each international player. The Chinese view of national security became more nuanced and balanced, taking comprehensive and mutual security into consideration. Comprehensive security means that security should be considered not only in military terms, but also in terms of ensuring economic prosperity and people's well-being. Mutual security means that stable relationships should be built on a win-win basis. This new thinking proved so resilient that it resisted even the collapse of the Soviet Union and the domestic turbulences in 1989.

Both the end of the Soviet Union, which changed the structure of global power, and the domestic Reform and Opening-up policy, required of China the establishment of stable relations with more countries worldwide. China no longer focused on great powers alone, but tried to improve relations with a broader range of states. Accordingly, in the early 1990s China initiated a new diplomatic approach that has been termed 'multidimensional diplomacy'.⁹ The essence of strategic partnerships – win-win thinking while not targeting the partnership against a third party – fits well within the multidimensional approach.

A new diplomatic paradigm required new diplomatic instruments. According to Chinese researcher Chen Zhimin,¹⁰ China had five policy options: unilateralism, balance of power, partnership diplomacy, multilateralism and bandwagoning. In a 1999 article, he argued for mainly using partnership diplomacy, while complementing it with elements of balance of power and multilateralism. Indeed, in comparison to the partnership policy all the other instruments presented considerable limits or defects. First, China was not powerful enough to effectively assert unilateralism. Second, there was no imminent threat that forced China to build alliances against the US superpower, although the pursuit of balance of power without building alliances against a

⁹ B. Zhang, 'Overview: The Evolution of China's Diplomacy and Foreign Relations in the Era of Reforms, 1976-2005', in Y. Hao, et al. (ed.) *Challenges to Chinese Foreign Policy: Diplomacy, Globalization, and the Next World Power* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), pp.15-30.

¹⁰ Z. Chen, 'Huoban Zhanlue: Shiji zhijiao Zhongguo de Xianshi Lixiang Zhuyi Waijiao Zhanlue [Partnership Diplomacy: China's Realistic Idealistic Diplomacy Strategy at the Turing of the Century]', *Taipingyang Xuebao [Pacific Journal]*, 1999(3): 12-20.

third party was still a viable option. Third, multilateralism –although on the rise – was not perceived as the sole or main guiding principle for international behaviour. Moreover, China had not yet joined several major international organisations (e.g. the World Trade Organisation, WTO), while most international organisations were seen as serving Western interests. Fourth, bandwagoning was not an appropriate choice for a big country such as China which had long sought independence and equal rights in the world system.

The defensive and assertive logics

China's role in the world has been a central topic of many scholarly debates. In general, the 'status quo school' holds that China is adapting to the existing world order, while the 'revisionist school' believes that China wants to challenge this order.¹¹ Recently, a third school has emerged. It argues that although China has been socialised by the international community, at the same time it is trying to change the international system from within. For example, Zhu Liquan¹² considers China's international engagement as a seamless set of practices, which have engendered new Chinese identities and at the same time influenced the evolution of the international order. Pu Xiaoyu¹³ and Schweller,¹⁴ on the other hand, maintain that China is both rising within the existing international order and contesting it.

China's strategic partnership diplomacy is an embodiment of the third school. Although the calculations behind each strategic partnership vary and can change over time, in general there are two main logics underlining these calculations: one defensive and one assertive.

According to the defensive logic, China will continue to merge into the world peacefully so long as its core interests are protected. In a white paper entitled 'China's Peaceful Development in 2011', Beijing identified these 'core interests' as: 'state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development'.¹⁵ In other words, Beijing pursues economic and social development, but not at the cost of undermining sovereign integrity and state security. Countries that are considered to be crucial for the protection of such core interests are likely to become China's strategic partners.

Quite a few strategic partnerships touch upon issues of sovereignty and security. In the 1997 China-US joint statement that vowed to 'build toward a constructive strategic partnership', China highlighted Taiwan as the most important and sensitive question, while the US reiterated that it adheres to the 'One China' policy. The China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001 specified that neither China nor Russia would resort to the use of force, or use nuclear weapons against each other. In the China-India common statement in 2005, which established the strategic partnership, India promised not to allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India. In the 2008 China-Vietnam joint statement creating the comprehensive strategic partnership, both sides insisted on the need to seek solutions to the

¹¹ A.I. Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, XXVII (4): 5-56, 2003; and L.H. Yin, 'Discrepancies, Political Discourses, and Implications of China's Multidimensional Diplomacy', in S. Shen and J.E. Blanchard (eds.), *Multidimensional Diplomacy of Contemporary China* (MD: Lexington Books, 2010), pp.47-69.

¹² L. Zhu, 'Zhongguo Canyu Guoji Tixi de Shijian Jieshi Moshi [An Explanation Model for China's Participation in the International System]', *Waijiao Pinglun [Foreign Affairs Review]*, XXVIII(1): 19-33, 2011; and L. Zhu, 'Zhongguo yu Guoji Tixi: Shuangxiang Shehuihua de Shijian Luoji [China and the International System: The Two-way Socialization Logic of Practice]', *Waijiao Pinglun [Foreign Affairs Review]*, XXIX(1): 13-29, 2012.

¹³ X. Pu, 'Zhongguo yu Guoji Zhixu de Zai Sikao: Yizhong Zhengzhi Shehui Xue de Shijiao [Rethinking China and the International Order: A Political Sociology Perspective]', *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi [World Economics and Politics]*, 2010(1): 23-36.

¹⁴ R.L. Schweller and X. Pu, 'After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of US Decline', *International Security*, XXXVI(1): 41-72, 2011.

¹⁵ Information Office of the State Council of China, *China's Peaceful Development*, 2011, available at: http://english.gov.cn/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354.htm [Accessed 23 October 2013].

South China Sea dispute via peaceful negotiation – a commitment that has been tested by serious tensions between the two countries in 2013 and 2014. China and Mongolia (2011), Uzbekistan (2012), Tajikistan (2013) and Kyrgyzstan (2013) have stated in their joint statements that neither side should join any military or political alliance against each other, or allow a third party to use its territory against the other.

State security is a top concern for China's ruling elites. Although threats to national security in the traditional sense have been declining since the end of the Cold War, threats to the Chinese regime have been on the rise. The diffusion of markets and democracy worldwide has made the Chinese model – 'the Socialist market economy' – an exception, and for the West, an eyesore. Strategic partnerships have thus become a leading diplomatic tool for Beijing in defence of its political system. In nearly every strategic partnership document, concepts such as non-interference in domestic affairs, different understandings of democracy and human rights, or different development paths have been asserted.

Aside from protecting core Chinese interests, China's strategic partnership diplomacy also seeks to create a better environment for China's continuous rise. In other words, even though China's rise is largely due to its integration into the world order, the latter is not necessarily benign to a rising China. Therefore, Beijing must help shape a world order more in line with its long-term interests. This is China's assertive logic.

When building strategic partnerships with Russia and the EU, Chinese leaders were not shy of making clear that such partnerships would promote multipolarity and impede hegemonism. As David Scott observes: '[...] a recurrent theme for Chinese strategists has been to foster a multipolar balance-of-power situation, [in order] to safeguard its position and interests within an international system dominated in the post-Cold War period by American pre-eminence'.¹⁶ In fact, China's strategic partnership diplomacy has always been focused on building a more favourable world order, in line with its so-called multi-dimensional diplomacy. Concepts such as multipolarity, new world order, democratisation of international relations, diversity and harmonious world have repeatedly appeared in strategic partnerships documents. The 2006 China-Africa joint declaration establishing the China-African Union strategic partnership stated:

*We declare that the development of our friendly relations and cooperation are in accordance with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as well as all the international principles that promote multilateralism and democracy in international relations. We urge that diversity of the world should be respected and upheld, that all countries in the world, big or small, rich or poor, strong or weak, should respect each other, treat each other as equals and live in peace and amity with each other, and that different civilizations and modes of development should draw on each other's experience, promote each other and coexist in harmony.*¹⁷

In recent years, the assertive logic has grown stronger as China's rise has gathered pace. A combination of strategic partnerships can be leveraged to help shape a more favourable political environment for China. China's 'European strategic partnership fever' in 2004 (four out of five new strategic partnerships built that year were with European countries) boosted Sino-European relations and reinforced the emergence of a multipolar system following strong criticism of the US Iraq war by many European countries.

Strategic partnerships have also been employed to enhance China's economic presence in the world, especially in developing countries. All of the recent strategic partnerships between China and Central Asian countries have focused on the construction and maintenance of gas pipelines, which are essential to China's

¹⁶ D. Scott, 'China and the EU: A Strategic Axis for the Twenty-First Century?', *International Relations*, XXI(1): 23-45, 2007.

¹⁷ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Declaration of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2006, available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t279852.htm> [Accessed 23 October 2013].

energy security. Similarly, the guarantee of a good environment for Chinese investments has been mentioned in strategic partnership documents between China and countries such as South Africa, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Cambodia, where these investments are measuring rapid growth.

Strategic partners are often actively involved in major initiatives related to China's rising international profile. For instance, the development of three out of four large overseas ports – Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) and Chittagong (Bangladesh) – called China's 'string of pearls' by the media, involved three of China's strategic partners (the port in Bangladesh being the exception). Among nearly 20 currency swap agreements that China has signed since 2008 in an effort to internationalise its currency, an overwhelming majority have been signed with strategic partners (except for Belarus, Iceland and Singapore).

In practice, all strategic partnerships expose aspects of both the defensive and the assertive logics. The distinction between the two is not clear-cut, since shaping a favourable environment for China's rise is an important dimension of the preservation of the domestic political regime. Generally speaking, partnerships with stronger countries reflect more of the defensive logic, while partnerships with weaker countries reflect more of the assertive logic. In 2012, China established a strategic partnership with Afghanistan, which mostly follows the assertive logic. Were it not for concerns with regional stability, China would not have considered building a strategic partnership with such a fragile and turbulent country. An enlarging and more diversified group of strategic partners has in this sense demonstrated Beijing's growing ability to both protect its core interests and shape the world order.

China-style strategic partnerships

The defensive and assertive logics form the substance of China's strategic partnerships. However, there are other motivations driving the establishment and management of these partnerships. These reflect the Chinese mental map and behaviour patterns.

First, Chinese diplomacy is known for its emphasis on formalities. The strategic partnerships have been employed for such diplomatic conveniences. They are used as an exercise in media and diplomatic spin in order to stress the importance of key diplomatic occasions.¹⁸ In fact, almost all strategic partnerships are established or upgraded during top leaders' state visits.

Second, the Chinese do not see society as a static set of rules, but as a process where relations form and change. Likewise, the Chinese see international society as an open process of complex social relations in motion. Rules, regimes, and institutions are not established to govern or restrain the behaviour of individual actors in society, but to harmonise relations among members of society.¹⁹ The strategic partnership regime has been used to some extent to regulate or assuage China's relations with other international actors. In 2010, China-French relations finally stabilised after being afflicted by serious disputes over Tibet and the Beijing Olympics, and the two sides signed a statement to build 'a new, mature and stable comprehensive strategic partnership', opening a new chapter in Sino-French relations. In May 2008, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak visited China three months after taking office. He was depicted by Chinese media as a pro-US and anti-North Korea hardliner. During the visit, the two countries upgraded their comprehensive partnership to a strategic one, in an effort to dispel the uncertainties in bilateral relations. Since society is made up of relations and relations take time to form and change, the Chinese show great strategic patience. They value

¹⁸ Interview with Chinese diplomats, April 2012, Beijing.

¹⁹ Y. Qin, 'International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2010(3):138–41.

incremental efforts and are tolerant of temporary setbacks. China's strategic partnership diplomacy is not designed to achieve spectacular outcomes in one stroke.

Third, the Chinese see the world not only in terms of relations, but also as a set of concentric circles. Personal relations in Chinese society are self-centred: everyone regards his/herself as the centre of social relations, and the people closer to oneself are more important than the rest. It is 'like the ripples formed from a stone thrown into a lake, each circle spreading out from the centre becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant'.²⁰ In the past, China had created a China-centred international system in the region –the Tribute System or the All-under-Heaven System. In this system, foreign nations were judged according to their 'closeness' to China in the hierarchical international structure.

The world has changed, but the remnant of this worldview lingers. Strategic partners are regarded as 'closer friends' than other countries, and among the strategic partners, there is also an implicit hierarchical structure. The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership of Coordination and the Sino-Pakistani All-weather Strategic Partnership are unique and unparalleled. These two partnerships stand out from the rest. And among the rest, 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' seem to be given more importance than 'strategic partnerships'. The Chinese do not expect every strategic partnership to carry the same weight. They accept that some partnerships are going to be less substantial than others.

Do strategic partnerships work?

As Fareed Zakaria observed, China has been 'remarkably adept at using its political and economic muscle in a patient, low-key, and highly effective manner'.²¹ As the main instrument to manage China's most important bilateral relations, the strategic partnership diplomacy has contributed to this largely successful story.

China has avoided war or serious confrontation with major powers and has successfully steered into a new multipolar world. China's relations with Russia and India, with whom China fought border wars in the 1950s and 1960s, have stabilised, partly thanks to the strategic partnerships. China has also obtained enormous economic benefits from the partnerships. Both the EU and ASEAN are top trade partners and investors in China. Oil and gas projects in cooperation with Russia, as well as strategic partners in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) and Latin America (Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina), have greatly alleviated the pressure of China's roaring energy demand. By framing and prioritising agendas with its strategic partners, China has spread concepts such as multipolarity, non-interference and different development models.

While various specific objectives (such as the EU lifting its arms embargo) have not been achieved, the strategic partnership policy is considered to have mostly fulfilled its objective of helping China grow into a major power in a globalised world.

The biggest deficiency of China's strategic partnership policy is that it has not prepared China to become a great power in the future. Building strategic partnerships is almost the only method China employs in managing important bilateral relations. However, its strategic partnership diplomacy has fallen short of framing some of the most important and conflict-prone relations, such as the Sino-Japanese or the Sino-US relationships, despite attempts to move towards a strategic partnership with the US. In addition, despite the fact that strategic

²⁰ X. Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), trans. G.G. Hamilton and W. Zheng, p.65.

²¹ F. Zakaria, *The Post American World* (New York: Norton, 2008).

partnerships have helped solve inland border disputes, they have not proved very promising in solving maritime disputes. Due to the complex nature and background of such disputes, strategic partnerships, which are mainly embodied in bilateral diplomatic declarations, have shown their limits.

The cumbersome strategic partnership list has also detracted from a focus on the distinct characteristics and value of different partnerships. To shore up its rise, China needs to pay special attention to some of its strategic partnerships. In other words, the strategic partnership policy needs be more 'customised'.

The strategic partnership policy has been mainly used as a bilateral diplomatic instrument. As China rises, a more sophisticated use of its diplomatic toolkit is required. The strategic partnership network needs to be upgraded and this can only be accomplished as part of a broader design that goes beyond strategic partnerships themselves. There are already a few attempts on the horizon.

First, China has proposed a new concept – New Type of Major-Power Relationship [*xinxing daguo guanxi*] – to address Sino-US relations. It was first proposed by the then Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping (now the president) during his visit to the US in February 2012. Although the concept was also used to describe Sino-Russian relations during President Xi's visit to Russia in 2013, it is first and foremost intended to regulate relations with the US, China's most important bilateral partner, and to accompany a peaceful power transition. According to President Xi, it implies no conflict or confrontation; mutual respect; and win-win cooperation. In 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi offered some guidelines for this New Type of Major-Power Relationship: to enhance strategic trust; promote practical cooperation; enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges; strengthen cooperation in international and regional hotspots and global issues; and prioritise cooperation on Asia-Pacific affairs.²²

Second, Chinese scholars and think-tankers have been debating whether China should have quasi-allies, or 'strategic pivots', to protect its interests worldwide. Some argue that as China's presence in the world grows, Beijing needs to build special relationships which lie somewhere in-between partnership and alliance.²³ The discussion is still limited to academic circles. But, in practice, there are signs that Beijing might be moving beyond strategic partnership diplomacy (although it still clearly sticks to the strategic partnership format). China's relations with Russia and ASEAN are two examples. Sino-Russian cooperation has accelerated since President Xi's visit to Russia in March 2013. Officials from both sides often say that bilateral relations are 'at their best' or are 'an example of major-power relations'. A major Sino-Russian natural gas deal against the backdrop of the Ukraine crisis in late May 2014 has caught international attention. Around the same time, Presidents Xi and Putin signed in Shanghai during their seventh meeting in 14 months, a joint statement to expand cooperation in all fields and coordinate diplomatic efforts to cement the China-Russia all-round strategic partnership of cooperation. However, it is worth noting that Beijing does not want to go as far as forming an alliance with Russia or engaging with Russia at the cost of its relations with other major powers.

When it comes to ASEAN, on 3 October 2013, in a speech entitled 'Jointly Build[ing] a Closer China-ASEAN Community of Common Destiny' to Indonesian lawmakers during his visit to the country, President Xi said: 'This year marks the tenth anniversary of the China-ASEAN strategic partnership. Our relationship now stands at a new historical starting point'.²⁴ Compared to strategic partnerships, a concept drawing from the

²² Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Toward a New Model of Major-Country Relations Between China and the United States', Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Brookings Institution, 21 September 2013b, available at: http://www.china.org.cn/world/2013-09/21/content_30086631.htm [Accessed 10 October 2013].

²³ D. Sun, 'Lun Xinshiqi Zhongguo de Zhun Jiemeng Waijiao [On China's Semi-Alliance Diplomacy in a New Era]', *Shijie jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], 2012(3), 57-158, 2012; and Y. Wang, 'Guanyu Zhongguo Waijiao Zhanlue Yixie Wenti de Tanta [On China's Diplomacy Strategy]', *Dangdai Shijie* [Contemporary World], 2012(9), 15-17, 2012.

²⁴ China Daily, 'President Xi gives speech to Indonesia's parliament', 2 February 2013, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xiapec/2013-10/02/content_17007915.htm [Accessed 10 October 2013].

Western notion of equality and individualism, the concept of 'Community of Common Destiny' is more akin to Asian culture and touches on profound bonds. However, it remains to be seen whether the concept, which to a large extent still lacks substance, can survive the region's complex politics.

Third, China has been trying to combine its strategic partnerships with forms of multilateralism. So far, one of the few successful combinations of the two is Sino-Russian cooperation in the United Nations. In recent years, as China has become more active in various international organisations and has increased its cooperation with such organs, China's partnership and multilateral diplomacies have begun to reinforce each other. In order to promote the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the most successful regional security organisation of which China is a driving force, Beijing has established strategic partnerships with all SCO members – Russia, Kazakhstan (2005), Uzbekistan (2012), Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (2013). The latest partnerships have especially enhanced the effectiveness of the SCO as well as China's clout in the organisation. China is also using strategic partnership diplomacy to promote new multilateral arrangements such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Group of 20 (G20). All BRICS countries are China's strategic partners. China has also consulted and coordinated with its strategic partners that are G20 members such as France, Germany, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, India, Indonesia and South Korea on G20 issues.

Strategic partnerships will continue to be an important instrument in China's foreign policy in the years ahead. At the same time, China's presence in the world will require a more overarching strategic design and more sophisticated diplomatic tactics. China will therefore need to be more proactive and creative in mobilising strategic partnerships as a policy instrument together with other diplomatic tools.

Conclusion

Among major powers, China is the only one that claims to uphold a non-alliance policy. This is a lesson learned from the unsuccessful alliance with the Soviet Union. This has turned strategic partnerships into an especially significant policy instrument for China. China's strategic partnership diplomacy emerged after the end of the Cold War and continues to flourish. It is a product of China's embrace of multidimensional diplomacy in a multipolar, globalised world. So far, almost a quarter of the countries in the world have become China's strategic partners.

China has developed various titles and mechanisms for different strategic partnerships that reflect the distinct characteristics of each partnership and which can change over time. Though the calculations behind each strategic partnership vary, as a whole they are designed to protect China's core interests (the defensive logic) and to construct a better environment for China's rise (the assertive logic). China has also employed strategic partnerships to meet diplomatic contingencies and to regulate bilateral relations. Despite some shortcomings, strategic partnerships have helped China constructively engage with the world and rise peacefully.

Nevertheless, as China rises, a cumbersome list of strategic partnerships will be increasingly less relevant in addressing Chinese foreign policy priorities. Some signs indicate that Beijing is taking initiative to regulate important relations not included in the strategic partnership framework, to forge closer relations with certain strategic partners, and to combine the strategic partnership framework with other diplomatic instruments such as multilateral engagement and initiatives. In the future, China will be even more proactive and creative in strategic partnership diplomacy.

Appendix 1. A list of China's strategic partners

REGIONS	PARTNERS	YEAR OF ESTABLISHMENT	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (YEAR AND NAME OF RELATED PARTNERSHIPS)
America (8)	Brazil	1993	1993 strategic partnership
	USA	1997	1997 constructive strategic partnership; 2011 a cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefit
	Venezuela	2001	2001 strategic partnership for common development
	Mexico	2003	1997 comprehensive partnership; 2003 strategic partnership of cooperation; 2013 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Argentina	2004	2001 comprehensive partnership; 2004 strategic partnership
	Canada	2005	1997 comprehensive partnership; 2005 strategic partnership
	Peru	2008	2004 comprehensive partnership; 2008 strategic partnership; 2013 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Chile	2012	2004 comprehensive partnership; 2012 strategic partnership
Oceania (1)	Australia	2013	2013 strategic partnership of mutual trust and mutual benefit
Africa (5)	South Africa	2004	2004 strategic partnership featuring equality, mutual benefit and common development; 2010 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Nigeria	2005	2005 strategic partnership
	Angola	2010	2010 strategic partnership
	Algeria	2014	2014 comprehensive strategic partnership
	African Union (AU)	2006	2006 a new type of strategic partnership
Europe (15)	Russia	1996	1994 constructive partnership featuring good neighbourliness and mutually beneficial cooperation; 1996 partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and mutual benefit and oriented toward the 21st century; 2011 comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination
	France	2004	1997 comprehensive partnership; 2004 comprehensive strategic partnership; 2010 new, mature and stable comprehensive strategic partnership based on mutual trust and mutual benefit and with a global perspective; 2014 close and lasting comprehensive strategic partnership
	Germany	2004	2004 a partnership of global responsibility within the framework of Sino-European comprehensive strategic partnership; 2014 all-dimensional strategic partnership
	Italy	2004	1998 comprehensive partnership; 2004 stable, friendly, long-term and sustainable strategic partnership
	UK	2004	1998 comprehensive partnership; 2004 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Spain	2005	2005 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Portugal	2005	2005 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Greece	2006	2006 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Denmark	2008	2008 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Serbia	2009	2009 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Ukraine	2011	2011 strategic partnership
	Poland	2011	2004 friendly cooperative partnership; 2011 strategic partnership
	Ireland	2012	2012 strategic partnership of mutual benefit
	Belarus	2013	2013 comprehensive strategic partnership
	European Union (EU)	2003	1998 long-term and stable constructive partnership facing the 21st Century; 2001 comprehensive partnership; 2003 comprehensive strategic partnership

Asia (21)	Pakistan	2005	1999 partnership of comprehensive cooperation; 2005 all-weather strategic partnership
	Kazakhstan	2005	2005 strategic partnership; 2011 comprehensive strategic partnership
	India	2005	2003 constructive partnership; 2005 strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity
	Indonesia	2005	2005 strategic partnership; 2013 comprehensive strategic partnership
	South Korea	2008	1998 collaborative partnership for the 21st century; 2003 comprehensive partnership; 2008 strategic partnership
	Vietnam	2008	2008 comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership
	Laos	2009	2009 comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation
	Cambodia	2010	2006 comprehensive partnership; 2010 strategic partnership
	Turkey	2010	2002 partnership; 2010 strategic partnership
	Mongolia	2011	2003 good-neighbour partnership of mutual trust; 2011 strategic partnership
	Myanmar	2011	2011 Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership
	Thailand	2012	2012 comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership
	Uzbekistan	2012	2005 friendly and cooperative partnership; 2012 strategic partnership
	United Arab Emirates	2012	2012 strategic partnership
	Afghanistan	2012	2012 strategic and cooperative partnership
	Tajikistan	2013	2013 strategic partnership
	Sri Lanka	2013	2005 comprehensive partnership; 2013 strategic cooperative partnership
	Turkmenistan	2013	2013 strategic partnership
	Kyrgyzstan	2013	2013 strategic partnership
	Malaysia	2013	2013 comprehensive strategic partnership
	Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	2003	1997 partnership facing the 21st century based on good neighbourliness and mutual trust; 2003 strategic partnership for peace and prosperity

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