Useful Alignments Or Just Convenient Labels?
Dissecting China’s Strategic Partnerships Since the End of the Cold War

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Jingdong Yuan
Centre for International Security Studies
University of Sydney

China’s last and its second only alliance was concluded with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in July 1961. Given its rather unhappy experience with its alliance with the former Soviet Union (1950), Beijing has for all intents and purposes shunned entering into any alliance relationships with other states over the past five decades. However, since the end of the Cold War, China has developed a particular genre of alignment with over several dozen of states, labelled as strategic partnerships of various substance and characterization. Beginning with Brazil in 1993 and subsequently Russia in the late 1990s, and with the most recent one with Poland being upgraded from strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership, these strategic partnerships (some are just called partnerships) are often taunted as new types of inter-state relationships between two countries sharing important common values or principles, have and/or could develop mutually beneficial economic ties, and holding similar geostrategic views, and most critically, committing the signing partners to not harm each other’s core interests while conducting foreign relations with third parties. What do these partnerships really signify and mean, what purposes do they serve as far as Chinese foreign policy objectives are concerned, and how can we understand them using such conceptual and analytical frameworks as alliances, alignments, and special relationships? This paper will seek to address these issues and present some preliminary findings.

Beijing’s efforts in developing strategic partnerships reflect its objectives of fostering and promoting ties with countries of growing economic, diplomatic and strategic importance for China, as it seeks to dispel perceptions of the ‘China Threat’, exploit potential for economic cooperation, and promote an international order of equality and state-to-state relationships based the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Only very rarely, and of very limited numbers, are these partnerships expected to carry significant weights that can truly be considered strategic, where such relationships help advance Chinese national interests. Within this context, Beijing’s strategic partnerships that really matter are reduced to a few, with Russia, Pakistan, Germany and, to some extent, the European Union (as a group of countries). Some of the most important powers that affect Chinese interests in significant ways, such as Japan and the United States, do not yet have formed strategic partnerships with China, although China and Japan have sought to develop a “strategic mutually beneficial partnership”, which Beijing and Washington in the late 1990s were engaged in efforts to develop a strategic partnership; today, the two countries maintain high-level strategic and economic dialogues, but a strategic partnership remains elusive.
While strategic partnerships appear to have dominated Beijing’s diplomatic activities for the past two decades, the exact meaning of, and objectives for these partnerships remain to be spelled out. Given that China currently maintains such partnerships with 40% of the countries it has diplomatic relations, one is not clear exactly what values, importance, utility these carry. What is more, these partnerships also get tangled, and confused with China’s new concept of major-power relationships, not to mention its memberships in various multilateral groupings from G-20 and P-5 (UN Security Council Permanent Members) that exercise influence of global reach, to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS that are either regionally oriented or represents emerging markets or new economic powers. Thus the question arises: apart from the few truly strategic and important partnerships, are the remainders just feel-good, convenient labels? In what specific ways are they strategic and, more fundamentally what does the modifier “strategic” mean for Beijing, and for what purposes? Indeed, research undertaken for this paper has led to more questions than answers.

The next section reviews Chinese foreign policy priorities and activities, and drivers for its diplomatic activism are presented. The paper then briefly discusses the key features of China’s various strategic partnerships: what they represent, what they seek to accomplish, and the limitations as well as variations among them. Four case studies will then be presented: three of them—Russia, Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), and Australia—have formed (comprehensive) strategic partnerships while a fourth, the China-US relationship, is perhaps the most consequential one in international politics today, and one that has been filled with both promises (remember G-2? Or the Clinton administration’s final two years 1997-98?) and pitfalls, especially considering the ongoing and emerging rivalry between the two powers over a range of issues and occasional military tensions. While Beijing and Washington have not been able to forge a strategic partnership, their bilateral interactions carry significant strategic implications not only for themselves but also for global and regional governance, prosperity, and stability. The paper concludes with some tentative conclusions.

What’s in a Name? China’s Strategic Partnerships (with Almost Everyone)

The concept of strategic partnerships itself is not something new and definitely not of Beijing’s creation. Indeed, in the aftermath of the fall of Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the United States, while keeping the traditional western alliances such as NATO intact (and in fact expanding it since the 1990s), has made efforts to develop different security arrangements in the post-Cold War environment to either assure its former enemy (Russia) and small former Soviet satellite countries, to manage great-power decline, balance against third parties (China-Russia), or to promote cooperation in areas of mutual interests.1 The goals of strategic partnerships can vary from the minimum and defensive (confidence building and no undercutting of partners’ core interests) to the aspirational and maximalist short of alliance formation (coordination of policies at global and regional level; significant military cooperation; support of each other’s key positions at international forums), states pursuing them are driven by normative (supporting democracy), politico-economic, and hedging-balancing needs.

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China’s pursuit of partnership strategy began in the early 1990s and almost by sheer incident. When Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Brazil in 1993, the idea of forging a strategic partnership between the two countries not so much for any strategic objectives per se, but simply because these were two large developing and emerging economies preferring an international system less dominated by great power politics or unipolarity. But equally important was the enormous economic potential between the two. This new aspect of Chinese diplomacy must be placed in the larger international (end of the Cold War and U.S. dominance) and (Chinese) domestic (post-Tiananmen) contexts where Beijing sought to break western sanctions and isolation by stabilizing the periphery and making friends. This would form part of the overall Chinese strategy of maintaining an independent foreign policy of peace, which also was to include the so-called new cooperative security concept, the initiation and conclusion of a series of border negotiations and military CBM agreements with Russia and Central Asian states (the Shanghai Initiative leading to the establishment of SCO in 2001), and Beijing’s conditional multilateralism with its participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Since 1993, China has established partnerships of various types with around 80 countries or regional groups (such as EU). Chinese analyses summarize the nature, conditions and modalities of such partnerships (or partnership diplomacy) as the follows: non-confrontation and non-confrontation as the pre-conditions; common interests as the foundation; non-alliance not directed to third parties; win-win cooperation; consultation and dialogue; all-inclusive bilateral relationships between China and other countries (groupings). There do exist different variations of partnerships, the extent to which they can be truly “strategic” depends really on the degree and depth of shared interests, the level of cooperation and coordination of policies, and the substance and potentials of future expansion of ties in geopolitical, geo-economic, and just simply economic terms. These differentiations set Russia, Pakistan, and Germany (and the EU for that matter) apart from the rest of countries that also have one type or another “partnership” with China. “Strategic” here implies long-term and stable relationships with both sides share common interests to promote them even if they occasionally may disagree on certain issues, and they both have incentives to maintain, strengthen, and further develop relationship in both scope and depth. However, at least for now and accordingly to Beijing, partnership with alliance remains a key defining characteristic of these arrangements, regardless what the outside world perceives them, and despite recent debates within China on the issue of whether China should re-consider its non-alliance diplomatic posture.

The various modifiers/qualifiers/adjectives that go with the term “partnership” reflect how Beijing (and for that matter, its counterpart) views them. Clearly, Sino-Russian comprehensive strategic and coordinative partnership both captures and reflects a unique kind of relationship between these erstwhile allies (1950s) and enemies (1960s-1970s). It conveys a high-level coordination of policies on a range of important global and regional issues, extensive

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cooperation in economic, military and diplomatic arenas, and stable bilateral ties not affected by change of governments in both partner countries (see section below). The second would include those states that are either deemed as important players in their respective regions or are in possession of critical resources the access to which would be imperative for Chinese economy and therefore Beijing considers forming strategic partnerships would greatly advance its interests. A third group, which includes the largest number of countries that China has formed various types of partnerships not so much because they are essential but nonetheless useful in building the broadest united front, winning more friends, or simply securing pledges in the One China principle.5

Only two countries—Russia and Pakistan can be considered as China’s top tier “strategic partners”. Russia is China’s “Comprehensive Strategic Partner of Coordination” while Pakistan is China’s “All-Weather Strategic Partner”. The second-tier strategic partners include Germany (“All-Dimensional Strategic Partnership”) and many OECD countries, including Australia and South Korea, and emerging markets such as South Africa, Indonesia, and India. There are a number of labels for this group of countries, ranging from comprehensive strategic partnership, comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation, etc. The last group is loosely composed of many developing and Eastern European countries such as Romania, Ethiopia, Peru, among others.6 The next section looks at Sino-Russian relations in the context of Chinese partnership diplomacy.

Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership

By any measures, Sino-Russian relations have been at their best in decades. Since the early 1990s when Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin first laid the foundation of a partnership between the former allies (1950s) and foes (1960s-1970s), Beijing and Moscow have gradually elevated the bilateral relationship to its current comprehensive strategic partnership. In 2001, the two countries also signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation. China and Russia have significantly expanded their bilateral ties in many areas over the past twenty years, from Russian sales of advanced weapons systems and military technology transfers to major energy cooperation projects. In 2001, together four other Central Asian states, Beijing and Moscow established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a regional arrangement whose initial priorities were to combat terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism, but have subsequently evolved and expanded to include energy development, economic cooperation, and regional stability. Over the past decade, the Eurasian grouping has staged the bi-annual Peace Mission joint military exercises. Many Western analysts have suggested that SCO may have become a military alignment, if not an alliance.7

The past few years have also witnessed further strengthening of bilateral ties. President Xi Jinping chose Russia as his first foreign country to visit after becoming the head of state. Presidents Putin and Xi have met no less than ten times already and the comprehensive strategic partnership has entered a new phase, with deepening political trust, mutual

5 Dai, “An Analysis of China’s ‘Partnership Diplomacy’.”
7 There is a huge literature on Sino-Russian relations in the West. Likewise, Chinese scholarship on the bilateral relationship is also voluminous. On the latest and official assessment, see Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies,” Foreign Affairs (January/February 2016), pp. 96-105.
diplomatic support of each other’s core interests, and broader strategic consultation on major international and regional issues. Some have suggested that given the security threats that they both face, especially the growing rivalry and, in Russia’s case, open confrontation, with the United States, there are good rationales for Beijing and Moscow to seriously consider forming an alliance.⁸

Indeed, Russia’s deteriorating relationship with the United States over a number of contentious issues ranging from NATO expansion, U.S. deployment of missile defence systems in Europe, to Russian actions against Georgia and Ukraine has resulted in America-led sanctions, causing significant economic difficulties for the former superpower, especially at a time of oil price dipping to its lowest level in years. Moscow now has its own strategic pivot to Asia, and relations with China become ever more critical. China likewise is also facing major security challenges in East Asia. It is embroiled in territorial disputes with a number of Southeast Asian states and with Japan. China’s growing economic power and military might have instilled anxieties and concerns among its neighbours. The U.S. pivot to Asia, spearheaded by strengthened American military presence and basing access in the region, revitalized alliances and security partnerships, and Washington’s more active diplomacy, is viewed by Beijing as concerted efforts to contain China. A Sino-Russian alliance could join forces of two pivotal Eurasian powers to counter American offensive and undermine the U.S.-led order. In geopolitical terms, Eurasia strides across the vast landmass and provides strategic depth against maritime powers such as the United States. Russia has ample resources, advance military technologies, and the market potential that could be met by China’s financial and economic might, huge appetite for energy, and a military still in need of massive upgrading. In short, an elevation of the current comprehensive strategic partnership to an alliance is not completely out of the question.⁹

Attractive as the idea may seem, there are many reasons against China and Russia forming an alliance anytime soon. Rivalry and confrontation with the United States is a necessary but not sufficient condition for Beijing and Moscow to take that step. To begin with, although both Russian and Chinese security interests to some significant extent face U.S. threats, the latter have not become so serious as to threaten both countries’ core interests and each, on its own, still possesses sufficient will and capability to counter such threats. In Russia’s case, while its overall power has declined since the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, its military power, in particular the nuclear arsenal, will remain the guarantor to secure and protect its core interests. China, on the other hand, does face greater challenges in East Asia as the U.S. strengthens alliances, builds up security partnerships and reinforces military presence. However, U.S. pivot has as much to do in reassuring allies and friends as it is to retain its primacy; it is less about directly challenging China’s core interests, Beijing’s protestation notwithstanding. The current frictions between the two countries, from what China perceives as U.S. biased in the maritime territorial disputes, to U.S. charged Chinese obstruction to freedom of navigation, are either third-party related or manageable as both sides are anxious that disputes not escalate to military confrontation and war.

⁸ Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University, for one, is seen as someone who would regard forming alliance with Russia as one diplomatic option that Beijing should consider. On the pros and cons of whether China should form alliances, see Xu Jin, "Dangdai zhongguo jichi tongmeng xinli de youlai [The Sources of Contemporary China’s Rejection of Alliances]," Guoji jingji pinglun [International Economic Review], no. 5 (2015), pp. 143-154.
At the same time, both China and Russia continue to cooperate with the United States in areas where they share common interests with the latter. Russia and the U.S. share common interests in anti-terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, a solution to the civil war in Syria, and implementation of their nuclear disarmament agreement. Beijing and Washington, meanwhile, cooperate on a range of issues from climate change and North Korea, and share common interests in restoring global economic and financial stability. Under such circumstances, alliance formation appears unnecessary as it is counterproductive, for both China and Russia. While sharing and promoting common objectives such as a new multipolar international order, non-interference in domestic affairs, and the important role of the United Nations Security Council, their priorities are different, as are the challenges they face. Alliance would require both to commit to, and therefore entrap in, the other’s security agendas, running the risks of getting dragged into major military conflicts with a third party not of its own choice. While the two countries have expanded and deepened their strategic partnership in recent years, the scope and foundation of that partnership remain limited and the core pillars of true partnership, not to mention an alliance, are lacking. Apart from energy and defence industry transactions, bilateral trade remains minuscule at around $90 billion annually, as is investment level. And some of the Russian elites still harbour suspicions over China’s long-term intentions and worry about China’s continuing economic and military rise.

ROK-China Strategic Partnership

Since China and ROK established diplomatic relations in 1992, bilateral ties have expanded rapidly. Over the years, the terms used by Beijing and Seoul to characterise their relationship is not only indicative of its scope and substance but also reflective of the growing importance of the relationship to the two countries: “Friendship and Cooperative Relationship” (Roh Tae-woo), “Collaborative Partnership for the 21st Century” (Kim Dae-jung), “Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership” (Roh Moo-hyun), “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” (Lee Myung-bak) and “Enrichment of Strategic Cooperative Partnership” (Park Geun-hye). The rise of China poses a particular challenge for South Korea. It requires that Seoul manage and balance its various interests: inter-Korean relations, North Korean security threats, economic interdependence with China, relations with Japan and the alliance with the United States. China’s sheer weight, growing power and geography places South Korea in a position of asymmetry. However, being a middle power and not wanting to be either entrapped in U.S.-China conflicts or submissive to Beijing’s demands have provided incentives for Seoul to pursue a balancing act and promote multilateral diplomacy.

Sino-South Korean relations have developed rapidly since Presidents Xi and Park assumed power in 2012-13. They have already met six times while President Xi has yet to meet North Korean leader Kim Jung-un. Besides Xi, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has also visited South Korea and in June 2015, Zhang Deguang, chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing


12 TongFi Kim, “South Korea’s Middle Power Response to the Rise of China”, in Gilley and O’Neill, eds. pp. 84-103
Committee, made a three-day visit. What is significant in recent years is the development of defence ties where high-ranking military officials have exchanged visits.

That President Park considers ROK-China relations as of critical importance was driven by a number of considerations. First was the need to salvage the strained relationship during the Lee Myung-bak administration, which moved much closer to Washington. Beijing’s handling of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island issues in turn alienated Seoul and bilateral ties subsequently suffered. Second, China’s longstanding ties with North Korea and therefore the need to actively engage Beijing to rein in Pyongyang’s behaviour is critical to President Park’s overall approach to the North. Third, China became and remains an important economic partner for South Korea.

On the military side, ROK Defence Minister Han Min-koo and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Vice-Chief of Staff Sun Jianguo pledged to open a hotline between defence ministers during a meeting on the sideline of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May 2015. A South Korean stealth destroyer made its first port call to Shanghai in August. ROK Army Chief of Staff Kim Yo-hwan and Naval Chief of Staff Admiral Chung Ho-seop visited China and met PRC Defence Minister Chang Wanquan and PLA Naval Commander Admiral Wu Shengli, respectively.\(^\text{13}\)

Most significant has been the extraordinary development of economic ties between the two countries. From around $6.4 bn in 1992, bilateral trade reached $290 bn in 2014 and it is likely that the target of $300 bn could be reached soon. In 2004, China replaced the United States as South Korea’s top trading partner. In the same year, South Korean exports to China totalled $145 bn, or about 25.4% of all South Korean exports (from 1.4% in 1991). China accounted for the largest share of South Korean imports, at 17.1% (from 4.2% in 1991).\(^\text{14}\)

For most of the post-1992 period, South Korea has enjoyed trade surplus with China, at $62 bn in 2013 and $55 bn in 2014. The total accumulated trade surplus for 2010-2014 amounted to $264.6 bn, or 138% of South Korea’s global trade surplus during the five-year period. The close economic ties have received further boost with the signing of the bilateral free trade agreement in November 2014. Ratified by the ROK Parliament in December, the agreement would immediately eliminate tariffs on $8.7 bn of South Korean exports to China and another $45.8 bn over 10 years. It aims to eventually remove tariffs on 90% of traded goods within 20 years.\(^\text{15}\)

Both governments recognise the importance of economic ties. President Park brought 71 business leaders during her first visit to China in 2013 and 159 business leaders were in her entourage during Park’s September 2015 visit. Likewise, when President Xi visited South Korea in July 2014, his delegation included 200 Chinese business leaders. In a recent survey, 86% of South Korean experts selected China as the country’s most important economic partner in 10 years.\(^\text{16}\)

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\(^{14}\) Figures drawn from Ellen Kim and Victor Cha, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: South Korea’s Strategic Dilemmas with China and the United States”, Asia Policy, no. 21, January 2016, p. 107; Asia Times; China Review


\(^{16}\) Kim and Cha, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place”, p. 108.
Despite the rapid growth in bilateral trade, investments have remained relatively low. South Korean foreign direct investment (FDI) to China represents about 10% of its total, or half of what it invests in the United States, while Chinese investments account for less than 1% of its outbound FDI, which stood at $120 bn in 2014. China and South Korea have agreed to open a market in Seoul for direct trading of the two countries’ currencies to facilitate bilateral trade and investment, and to reduce foreign exchange costs.

South Korea’s perceptions of China remain mixed and complicated. On the one hand, it is clear that President Park’s warmer ties with China are for Beijing to play a more constructive role in dealing with Pyongyang and support South’s unification agenda over the long run. On the other hand, Seoul has recognised and become increasingly wary of China’s growing power and more assertive foreign policy; it is facing the dilemma of managing this important relationship while maintaining a strong alliance with the United States.17

While Presidents Park and Xi have held six summits and both sides agree that North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes need to be contained, rolled back and dismantled, there remains a significant gap between expectations and delivery.18 For many South Koreans, President Park has gone extra miles to promote ROK-China relations at the risk of being perceived as becoming too cozy to Beijing and risking alliance solidarity with the United States, but the return has often seemed to be disappointing.

The perception that South Korea has fallen into China’s orbit has been exaggerated and fundamentally inaccurate. In fact, major differences remain between Seoul and Beijing over a range of issues, including, first and foremost, the North Korean nuclear issue and unification.19 Beijing continues to place stability in North Korea over exerting greater pressure on the latter. While in principle supportive of unification, China does not publicly endorse unification premised on regime collapse in the North and its absorption on the South’s terms and one that keeps the alliance with the United States.

Other areas of differences with China include the deployment of U.S. THAAD missile defence system. Sensitive to Chinese concerns and protestation, Seoul has delayed its decision on whether or not to adopt the system even as it rejects Chinese opposition, asking Beijing to keep out of South Korean debates on its security policy.20 However, with North Korea’s unrelenting efforts in its ballistic missiles programme, South Korea faces serious threats that it must find ways to address. There is also U.S. pressure for South Korea to allow deployment, which in turn will cause frictions with China.

The two countries have yet to resolve disputes over their overlapping exclusive economic zones that include the Teodo/Suyan reef. The first meeting on maritime demarcation was held in December 2015, after a seven-year lapse. Fourteen rounds of talks had been conducted between 1996 and 2008 but no agreement was reached.21 While dormant at the moment, 

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21 “S. Korea, China Hold First Talks on EEZs in 7 Years”, Yonhap News, 22 December 2015.
South Korean awareness of Chinese interpretation of history lingers. Seoul has also sought to avoid the impression that South Korea and China are colliding against Japan out of their historical grievances. Even in the area of economic ties, a significant portion of the South Korean public considers China as a future economic threat. There is also growing concern over its trade dependence on China. The benefits of the free trade agreement are also not as extensive as claimed. For instance, the agreement covers only 70% of agricultural products and exclude such items as rice, steel and auto parts from tariff elimination. It would only help raise South Korea’s GDP by 0.98% and create about 53,000 jobs in South Korea in the next 10 years.22

U.S.-China: A New Model of Major-Power Relationship

How the United States and China manage their relationship in the coming years will affect to a significant extent whether peace, stability and prosperity will continue in the Indo-Pacific, or the region will be overshadowed by U.S.-China rivalry for primacy, resulting in tension, conflict, or even military clashes between the two great powers. Despite the growing economic interdependence and a multitude of official dialogues between Beijing and Washington, bilateral ties have been strained in recent years due to major differences over a range of issues even as the two countries continue to cooperate on others. According to power transition theory, U.S.-China confrontation is inevitable.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that China has to operate within the broader confines of a largely unipolar world dominated by the United States, Beijing has maintained a pragmatic, and oftentimes low-profile foreign policy posture focused on economic development and on its core national interests such as the Taiwan issue. China soft balances the U.S. when it perceives its core interests threatened by America’s predatory behavior seen as directly and deliberately to harm Chinese interests.23 Even as Chinese economic power and political influence continue to grow, Beijing remains contented in behaving more like a regional power and in only selected areas on the international arena that give it more profile but impose low costs has China chosen to play a more active role. This pragmatic approach is based on the assessment of the overall shi (structure, trend) in the international system, China’s role in terms of capabilities and responsibilities, and the proper strategy to achieve its national goals.24 Contrary to the predictions of power-transition theorists, China seems to have recognized the costs of assuming leadership role and shouldering more responsibilities and have largely refrained from challenging the reigning power the United States.25

The majority of Chinese analysts have a rather sanguine view of China’s rise and recognize both the limitation and challenges that the country still faces in on its path to great power

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status. Nonetheless, there are some who harbor great ambitions and consider China’s time as a great power has arrived. They want China to stand up against the U.S. hegemonic behavior, especially where it threatens Chinese interests. They conclude that the U.S. decline is clear and present, as is the inevitable rise of other non-western powers such as the BRICS. Some even raise questions as to whether Deng Xiaoping’s Taoguang Yanghui concept should continue to serve as a guide to Chinese foreign policy.26 Global Times, a popular paper associated with the official People’s Daily, regularly runs pieces that pride in Chinese achievements and critical of western, and in particular U.S. policies.

While against openly challenging the U.S. primacy, many Chinese analysts do advocate ways and means that can constrain U.S. power and influence, if not exclude its presence in Asia. These include greater support of international and regional institutions, partnerships with other great powers, and exercise and promotion of Chinese soft power, including affecting seeking to shape the international norms even as it is being socialized into accepting them. Some even suggest that China should re-examine its perspective on alliances, especially on how external balancing could strengthen China’s position vis-à-vis U.S.-led hub-spoke systems.27 Indeed, President Hu has called on the country to make greater efforts in shaping the international environment even as it continues to place economic development on the top of the policy agenda. Here, yousuo zuowei does not contradict taoguang yanghui but requires China to be more active—albeit still selective in its diplomacy.

As a rising power, one that is quite unique in the chronicle of great power cycles, China has remained less developed compared to the major industrialized countries even though it has an aggregated economy second only to the United States. The dilemma and challenge that Beijing faces is that while it still has a long way to go in closing the gap between itself and the industrial north, the fact it has grown so fast it has already stoked fears and concerns among some of its neighbors. Not surprisingly, just as the region’s major powers move closer to China in economic interdependence, they are also moving toward tighter security alignments with the United States. Washington, having lost a decade mired in the Afghan and Iraqi quagmire, is now refocusing on Asia, or the wider Indo-Pacific region as it seeks to retain its primacy. The pivot, or the rebalancing strategy, consists of a combination of military, diplomatic, and economic offensives against the background of China’s rise over the past decade.28

From Beijing’s perspective, U.S. rebalancing is clearly aimed at China. Rhetoric aside, confronting the U.S. could derail China’s strategic objectives and further deteriorate its external environment for economic development. China’s grand strategy, or the key

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components of such a strategy, caution against rash actions that could only worsen the security dilemmas. There are many reasons why China has chosen to not challenge the United States. Costs are a major consideration. China has greatly benefited from the existing international economic system as a recipient of capital and technologies and as one of the major producers of consumer goods that create jobs and wealth. China’s military, despite the progress since the 1990s, remains decades behind the U.S. military in terms of defense spending, weapons systems, and most importantly, real war fighting experience. Despite the significant loss in blood and treasure over a decade of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. remains resilient, still out-spends almost the rest of the world combined; China, on the other hand, has seen its fortune rise in the aftermath of the 9.11 terrorist attacks but its gains over the decade has been outweighed by developments that complicate and potentially could undermine its security. China could exercise more influence but not dominate in East Asia. If anything, it faces potential rivals from Japan to India, which are either U.S. allies, or partners with Washington. Consequently, within East Asia, where China’s rise would have the most impact, Beijing’s approach has been to develop a managed great power relationship with the United States and other key players, rather than seeking regional dominance. Even in areas where China presumably now can exercise more power and hence could challenge or hurt U.S. primacy—its holding of American debt, for instance, it has been deterred as much as it is reluctant in actually exercising such power for fear of consequences that could in turn hurt its own interests.

**Xi Jinping and the New Model of Major-Power Relations**

Ever since the end of the Cold War, Beijing and Washington have been managing an increasingly independent yet deeply distrusting relationship. China and the United States harbor different visions over regional security architecture, prefer different approaches to addressing regional security issues, and are increasingly engaged in open competition for regional primacy. The Obama Administration’s re-balancing to Asia and the strengthening of alliances and partners aim at hedging against China’s rise. It is widely acknowledged that the two great powers have yet to develop mutual strategic trust between them, forty years after the Nixon breakthrough and despite over 90 official and regular channels of dialogues and consultation. Some have argued that given the nature of international politics, it would be futile to develop any serious mutual trust between a rising power and reigning power with vast differences in their respective socio-political systems, historical experiences, geo-strategic

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perceptions, and divergent visions of the international and regional orders. The best that can be accomplished is to recognize these differences and develop mechanisms to manage their relationship, minimize the negative impacts of disputes, and promote and coordinate where they do share common interests. For the Xi administration, an immediate task has been to continue the critical S&ED in the wake of major personnel turnovers in Washington and to a significant extent, in Beijing as well. Next is the military-to-military contacts, which has always been the most vulnerable to any vicissitude in bilateral political relations but one that is never more important, not the least to avoid direct military confrontation given the dearth of clear and reliable communication and crisis management arrangements.

Clearly, how to manage its relationship with the United States, the reigning superpower while continuing its ascendancy to great-power status is the most important foreign policy agenda for Chinese leaders. Beijing has always paid great attention to managing Sino-U.S. relations. From Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, developing a stable and cooperative bilateral relationship featured prominently in Chinese foreign policy agendas. The concept of a new model of major-power relations has been proposed by the Chinese leadership since around 2012, when then Vice-President Xi Jinping visited the United States. This concept was further elaborated when Xi met President Obama at the Sunnyland, California, meeting in early June 2013. Essentially, it is summed up as the follows: no conflict or confrontation; mutual respect; and cooperation for win-win outcomes. The rationale for proposing this new model is to break the historical pattern of rising powers challenging reigning powers, almost all invariably resulting in major power rivalry and wars.

The concept of a new type of great power relationship has been proposed by the Chinese leadership since around 2012, when then Vice-President Xi Jinping visited the United States. This concept was further elaborated when Xi met President Obama at the Sunnyland, California, meeting in early June 2013. Essentially, it is summed up as the follows: no conflict or confrontation; mutual respect; and cooperation for win-win outcomes. The rationale for proposing this new model is to break the historical pattern of rising powers challenging reigning powers, almost all invariably resulting in major power rivalry and wars. The rationale behind the concept of major-power relations to some extent is Beijing’s effort to address the growing concern that a rising China will pose a serious challenge to U.S. primacy in the region, leading to instability and conflict and provide some reassurance to Washington that China recognizes the important role of the United States in the region and has no intention to seek its replacement. Beijing also hopes that its own interests should also be recognized and respected by Washington. There seem to have good reasons to believe that the concept would work and therefore set an example of relations between an emerging power and a reigning one. The two countries have no territorial disputes or ambitions; there is ever growing economic interdependence and expanding socio-cultural ties between the two countries; and there are mutual interests in joining forces to confront traditional and non-traditional challenges ranging from WMD proliferation to illicit trafficking and maritime piracy. At the same time, both countries also recognize the risk of failure to manage differences and disputes between

them; as nuclear powers, neither can afford miscalculations and missteps leading to military confrontation.

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That being said, and despite the multitude of official dialogues and consultation between the two countries, there is deep trust deficit that prevents the two powers from achieving the stated objectives as laid out in this new model. For one thing, while Beijing clearly aims to get Washington to respect China’s core interests, which include sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Obama Administration is concerned that conceding on this request would undercut the credibility of its security commitments to allies and support to friends. Instead, Washington, while not objecting to concept itself, seeks to operationalize it and emphasizes that existing norms and rules need to be respected and the importance of clearly defining what constitutes as status quo. What is more feasible and practical is cooperation on specific issues, where bilateral efforts could achieve concrete results without having to engage in semantics and conceptual wrestling.

Indeed, while the precise definition of what stands for a new model of major-power relations remains a work in progress, Beijing and Washington have turned to areas where common interests exist and consensus can be developed. At the November 2014 summit held in Beijing between Presidents Xi Jinping and Barak Obama, the two countries announced a series of agreements ranging from climate change, information technology, new visa arrangements, to military MOUs that aim at enhancing confidence building and setting rules of behavior for safety of air and maritime encounters. At the summit, President Xi reiterated the importance of building a new model of major-power relations and proposed that the two countries work on six areas: hold high-level exchanges to enhance mutual strategic trust; manage bilateral issues on the basis of mutual respect; deepen comprehensive exchanges in all areas; manage and

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38 王缉思编著，大国关系：中美分道扬镳，还是殊途同归？（北京：中信出版社，2015）。
control sensitive issues and disputes in a constructive manner; strive for mutual accommodation and understanding of each other in the Asia-Pacific region; and jointly address global challenges—terrorism, WMD proliferation, diseases, and climate change.41

While the concept of a new model of major-power relations has yet to be accepted by Washington, a more practical framework is being developed by both countries to better handle bilateral relations. Essentially, it involves: (1) managing relative power shifts (China catching up; the U.S. staying strong but in relative decline) and power diffusion (where U.S. primacy is eclipsed by rising Chinese power); (2) managing strategic perceptions/misperceptions and mutual distrust; (3) managing areas of frictions (Taiwan, military buildup/posture, alliances, maritime/SLOC); (4) managing policy coordination where common interests exist on key issues such as the North Korean nuclear issue, non-traditional security challenges, but priorities, division of responsibilities, and tactics differ; and (5) managing to co-exist and cooperate to address emerging global and regional issues through joint efforts and strive for win-win outcomes. That, in essence, constitutes the core and the ideal of a new model of major-power relations.

Conclusion

China’s partnership diplomacy has been driven by a number of factors. Initially as a way to break the isolation in the wake of Tiananmen, the partnership diplomacy has since evolved to become a multi-purpose approach to secure and advance Chinese interests through a mixture of building solid alignment (not alliance) with key players to hedge and soft/hard balance hostile powers; to form partnerships with pivotal states for economic gains; and to expand China’s circle of friends. While these are all laudable goals and, indeed, with some partners, one can recount success, the concept and practice of partnership diplomacy remains ill-defined, under-researched, and without clear criteria for measuring effectiveness. Fundamentally, the idea of “strategic” is elastic as it is vague, leaving great room for interpretation. In other words, how “strategic” a particular partnership is, what “strategic” really means, and what qualifies for a partnership and its elevation to one of greater import have yet to be clearly spelled out.

The three case studies included in this paper suggest that for the time being, the Sino-Russian partnership is perhaps the most comprehensive, stable, mutually beneficial and reinforcing relationship between any two countries short of being an alliance. Beijing and Moscow have not only engaged in regular and in-depth consultation on a broad range of issues of both global and regional importance, they are also engaged in extensive and expanding cooperation from defense to energy. And they support each other’s positions or, at the minimum, refrain from publicly criticising one’s partner even if there are concerns over certain actions undertaken by the latter. However, even as China and Russia have formed this strong partnership, neither is eager or has shown any interest in transforming the close ties both enjoy to an alliance, which is, in fact, the very raison d’être of pursuing an arrangement not aimed at third parties.

The China-ROK strategic partnership demonstrates that while there are many interests shared by the two countries, and indeed Beijing and Seoul have sought to consult and coordinate on important regional issues, in particular the North Korean nuclear and missile programs, there

remain significant differences and priorities in the two countries’ diplomacy toward, and economic interactions with, North Korea where the “strategic” has not been able to overcome these differences to foster a common approach toward Pyongyang. As a result, the partnership remains largely a showcase of deepening economic interdependence. Each in the other’s eyes has failed to make sufficient adjustments in policy as expected since strategic interests are at stake: Seoul’s about-face on THAAD is viewed in Beijing as a move in disregard of China’s critical national interests; Beijing’s reluctance to deliver “bone-chilling” punishment on Pyongyang in the aftermath of DPRK provocations deeply disappoints ROK.

Finally, while Washington and Beijing sought to develop a strategic relationship in the late 1990s, lack of trust, deeply held differences over a range of issues, and growing disputes and rivalry have so far prevented a strategic partnership from being adopted. In its stead, the two countries have initiated and increasingly institutionalized dialogue and consultation (over 100 of them), with the annual Strategic & Economic Dialogue representing the highest level of bilateral official engagement apart from summit meetings between the U.S.-China heads of state/government. The fact that these differences exist and even intensify makes it almost impossible to forge a strategic partnership between the two; at the same time, exactly because of these differences, and the risk of escalation, regular dialogue is critical to dispel misunderstanding, and to develop the necessary crisis management mechanisms. At the same time, some of their joint actions (e.g., climate) have proven to be highly strategic and both require and reflect a level of agreement and policy coordination that is typically expected in relationships characterized as strategic partnerships.