

Towards a Global Partnership Network: Implications, Evolution and Prospects of China's Partnership Diplomacy

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Abstract

In the past 25 years, partnership diplomacy has gradually become an indispensable component in China's grand diplomacy strategy. Between 1993 and the end of 2017, China established more than 100 partnerships with the outside world. To better understand the evolution of China's strategy for diplomacy we need to know how these partnerships are formed and what motivates China to foster its partnership network. Although the importance of this strategy has been identified, the current literature does not yet include significant study of China's partnership network. This article attempts to fill this gap by assessing existing literature on partnership and government documents, interpreting the diversified labels and grades of partnerships, and analysing the network's evolution. It also attempts to estimate possible challenges facing China in the future expansion of its global partnership network. It argues that, although China intends to further extend its global influence and explore potential benefits through its partnerships, because of the challenges ahead its partnership network is still an aspiration rather than a realistic blueprint.

Keywords: partnership, Chinese foreign policy, grand diplomatic strategy

Introduction

Since 1993, when China established its first strategic partnership with Brazil, partnership diplomacy has gradually become a major component of China's grand diplomacy strategy. According to statistics from the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC), by the end of 2017 more than 100 partnerships at various levels had been created. That includes countries and regional groups as well as international organizations.¹ China's initiative to cultivate a partnership network started with its attempt to seek partnerships and linkage with major

powers, such as the USA, Russia, Japan and the European Union (EU). As Avery Goldstein (2001: 846–858) stated in an article published in 2001, China's goal was to cope with the constraints of American power in the post-Cold War era and hasten the advent of an international system in which the USA would no longer be so dominant.

To fulfil its desire to establish a new international order, China sought to build a new type of relationship with other countries as an alternative to the post-Second World War American-based alliance system. In 1999, the then Chinese president Jiang Zemin put forward the 'new security concept' featuring 'mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation' (FMPRC 1999). Two years later, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a multilateral security organization, was established.² Its focus has expanded over time to include military security, economic development, trade and cultural exchanges (United States Congress 2008). This marks the first rudimentary step of China's partnership network.

However, it is true that the context of China's partnership network construction has changed dramatically. Its economic and military capabilities have been greatly improved in the past two decades. International influence is expanding at an unprecedented scale. Intensified cooperation and exchanges, largely economic, have already started worldwide. China is also much more willing to be a 'stakeholder' than ever before (Etzioni 2011: 539–553). It is performing actively in global governance and hence seeks to reform the prevailing international order by establishing new institutions. We can see this in the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) and the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). Even if China keeps emphasizing that these initiatives are complementary to the existing international institutions, the USA still takes them as hard evidence that China is a 'revisionist power' (Trump 2018).

These initiatives proposed by China could not be realized under any circumstances without the support and participation of other countries. As a result, China has to actively improve its relations, especially with potential partners. This is the most direct method through which China can develop its partnerships. Maintaining a stabilized external environment meets China's strategic interests. As an emerging regional or even global power, China's rise has created anxiety for many countries, particularly its neighbours. Through constructing a framework of partnerships, China offers its strategic reassurance to its counterparts, promising neighbours long-term and harmoniously bilateral relations with mutual economic benefits, in exchange for more collegial relations

with China. The result should be understanding and support for China's goal of a 'peaceful rise', participation in China's international proposals and, in an ideal state, the formation of mutual trust and valuing recognition, which will better facilitate China's aspiration of reshaping the international order toward a more 'democratic' and 'multi-polarized' one (Ni and Wang 2003: 4–30).

Defining China's Partnership Mechanism

The concept of building state-to-state partnerships was not invented by China. Because of the harsh days of the Cold War, many countries came to realize that the pursuit of security through alignment could be costly, risky and ineffective. Instead, given its flexible and non-binding nature, partnership allows them to reap certain rewards – namely economic and security assistance without the attendant risks of loss of autonomy (Ciorciari 2010: 9). As a result, during the post-Cold War period the concept of partnership vastly proliferated, with a large number of partnerships being established between countries. This involved both developing nations and also major powers such as the USA: early in 2004, it forged a strategic partnership with India (Zhang 2005: 277–293), and more recently during the Obama administration, along with its 'rebalancing' strategy in Asia, the USA signed partnerships agreements with Asia-Pacific countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and New Zealand (Parameswaran 2014: 262–289), as a complementary strategy to its Asian alliance system.

There is no doubt that China's partnership formation draws important inspiration from some characteristics in Chinese civilization. This can be difficult to convey to outsiders but is critically necessary if we are to better understand its unique nature (Bolewski and Rietig 2008: 85–86). The Chinese phrase *Huoban Guanxi* (partner relationship) has a more extensive meaning than 'partnership': *Huoban* (partner) originates from ancient China's military regulation, referring to a comrade in arms. Only those loyal friends who are willing to help whenever necessary, even at the risk of their own lives, are qualified to be taken as *Huoban* (Men and Liu 2015: 65–95). *Guanxi* (relationship) is a concept embedded in the ancient Chinese social philosophy of Confucianism. It describes the relationships individuals cultivate with others. It stresses the importance of implicit mutual obligations, reciprocity and trust. These serve as the fundamental principle in associating oneself with others in a hierarchical manner to maintain a certain social order (Zhuang 2012: 18–29).

The conception of *Guanxi* reflects the fact that in view of international relations, Chinese are prone to have a mental world view as an entity solely composed of various types of relationships. More succinctly, *Guanxi* is formed by individuals through their interactions with each other (Qin 2016: 19–28). Thus, states should also be considered as individuals with subjective initiatives: states interact with each other in different ways, not only because of their self-interests, but because of the restraints of the *Guanxi* between them.

China maintains several types of *Guanxi* with other countries: diplomatic relations at heart, guided by principles and provisions that have been clearly stipulated in official documents; by contrast, partnership is another type of *Guanxi*, which exceeds the purely diplomatic relations and is more complicated. Except for explicit rules, a sound and stable partnership requires that the two parties possess certain levels of trust. China views its partners not only as sole 'partners' in a commercial sense but also as 'friends' and expects the other side to have similarly amicable feelings. Such bilateral ties could increase China's leverage over its partners by highlighting the advantages of mutually beneficial relations. If its partners attempt to take actions that might undermine the partnership, they pose immediate harm to the friendship: the cost would not only be the tangible loss of economic benefits and cooperation on managing strategic matters, but also a 'loss of face'. The betrayal of shared moral values could cause the decline of credibility and reputation, because friends are presumed to support each other.

Although China is fully aware that the power of moral constraints brought by the partnership can be minimal under many circumstances, it is still convinced that the cultivation of a partnership requires a certain period of time. During that time it can offer rewards for both sides when fully activated; as long as practical interactions can be carried out fluently under the framework of partnership, interests for both sides will become further intertwined. This in turn further solidifies *Guanxi*. China hopes that *Guanxi* will become habit-forming. Therefore, countries have to take at least some consideration of the partnership while dealing with China. If they make the wrong decision, they risk jeopardizing the balance between their long-term and short-term interests with China (Medeiros 2009: 82).

It is understandable that there are some fundamental principles that have long been enshrined by China in partnership formation. They are an integral component of the grand diplomatic strategy. The first, and foremost, is the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. This rests on

mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (FMPRC 2000).

Second, partnership diplomacy requires fully representing the 'friendship' essence in the major conceptions of Chinese foreign policy. As Xi Jinping highlighted in many of his speeches, China should foster 'good-neighbourliness and partnership', follow the principles of 'amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness' and build a 'community of shared interests and common destiny' in conducting its neighbourhood diplomacy.³ While managing its relations with African countries, China should adhere to the principles of 'sincerity, practical results, affinity and good faith' (Xinhua News Agency 2015a).

Third, China should 'uphold justice and pursue shared interests by giving priority to justice and refrain from seeking interests at the expense of justice' while seeking its partnerships with other countries (FMPRC 2018). Although China still has not officially stipulated a clear definition of partnerships, and their specific content has varied from case to case, we can look to the official documents for guidance. Some general commitments can still be found in most of the partnership agreements: above all, China's partnership features 'equality, peace and inclusiveness' (FMPRC 2014a). This shows that the nature of the partnership is non-military alliance and not targeting any third party; countries involved in partnerships should be committed to building stable bilateral relations; promoting extensive economic intercourse and gradually widening the scope of cooperation; seeking common ground while shelving differences by scrupulously taking dialogue as the chief option of managing disputes and building mutual trust; working together on matters of common concern in international affairs; making official contacts routine, especially military exchanges and regular meetings including high-level dialogue and summits between top government leaders; and enhancing cultural and people-to-people exchanges (Dai 2016: 101–116).

On the basis of these principles and commitments, China uses several labels to distinguish the various grades of partnerships. So far, there are up to 20 or more of these in China's official partnership lexicon. For most observers, what can really be confusing in the nomenclature is that there are some key words common to most of the names. Examples are 'strategic', 'comprehensive' and 'cooperative'; some of the names look similar or even identical, with only minor changes in word order, or new words being added to an old name. The usage and manner in which words are organized and combined in the names of partnerships can be

viewed as a manifestation of China's political discourse – the creation of *Tifa*, or 'watchword' (Qian 2012) – in which each name is formulated after extensive deliberations and internal debates (Bang 2017: 380–397). In this article, the author takes the most widely accepted classification method adopted in China's partnerships by Chinese scholars as important references, and sorts out the three major categories of China's partnership, namely, *strategic partnership*, *partnership* and *potential partnership*.

There are 80 *strategic partnerships* in the first category. They are central to the entire network. By emphasizing the feature of 'strategic', China wants to indicate that these partnerships should be long-term and forward-looking and reflect its strategic concerns. These include, but are not limited to, China's core national interests – its sovereignty and territorial integrity – especially the 'One-China' principle concerning Taiwan, its anti-separatist insistence on Xinjiang and Tibet, and the territorial disputes it has with its neighbours; security issues, including national security, regional stability and global peace; economic issues and international affairs in general. Countries with strategic partnerships are expected to have a certain degree of shared strategic necessities, interests and consensus, and to be willing to cooperate with China within certain limits. Evaluating their varied depth and breadth, strategic partnerships can be further classified into six specific levels. These are: *comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination*, *comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership*, *strategic cooperative partnership*, *comprehensive strategic partnership*, *strategic partnership* and *strategic cooperative relationship*. The hierarchical differences among these partnerships can be very difficult to identify simply by judging them linguistically. Instead, one must analyse relevant government documents along with observing the reality of the countries concerned and their relations with China.

The *comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination*, regarding China and Russia, ranks at the highest level. As described in the joint declarations, this partnership features frequent mutual visits of government leaders, institutionalized high-level communication mechanisms at all levels concerning energy, trade and investment, regional cooperation, law enforcement, strategic security and cultural exchanges; deepening political mutual trust represented by firmly supporting each other on issues of sovereignty, security, territorial integrity and national development; active interaction regarding the connections of each other's national development strategy and participation in international initiatives such as BRI and AIIB; close coordination in major international and regional issues, and cooperation under multilateral frameworks

such as the United Nations, G20, Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) among others (Xinhua News Agency 2014a). The top priority for this partnership, which is also what China really relies on, is the high-level consensus it has with Russia. Because of the changing global order, and even more important the view of the United States, both countries are not comfortable with the American hegemonic posture and the unilateralism it insists upon in international affairs. They are willing to work together to confront it (Smith 2012: 131–180).

By comparison, *comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership* and *strategic cooperative partnership* are one level lower. Generally, 'comprehensive' indicates the scope of cooperation. 'Strategic cooperative' refers to a high-level strategic consensus between the two sides. Countries are expected to support China. They must work closely in the same direction and keep frequent communications and negotiations over major international and regional issues with China.⁴ Among the 18 partners at this level, 11 of them are Asian countries that are neighbours of or geographically close to China. China shows clear intentions of shaping a positive environment with its neighbours that favours its own interests. The remaining seven partners are all least developed countries (LDCs) in Africa, for which China has much less strategic need: their domestic development relies heavily upon China's assistance. In the author's opinion, the main reason that China is willing to become a high-level partner with these countries, from which it has little to benefit, is to further expand its influence in Africa. China seeks to portray itself as a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international community. As depicted in official agreements, China highly values its 'traditional friendship with its African brothers' (Xinhua News Agency 2015b). China terms itself as a 'developing country', the same as its African counterparts, and is prepared to offer 'the most sincere and selfless assistance'.⁵

By observing these partnerships, we can also see that some countries may not completely agree with China. In fact, their relations with China can be problematic owing to certain strategic issues. The description of strategic cooperative partnership highlights that some strategic problems exist, and that both sides are committed to solve them through cooperation; two examples are China's partnerships with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and India. Many of the agreements use the same boiler-plate language. The reader is advised to be wary of putting too much emphasis

on this language as indicative of policy. Language uniquely tailored to specific agreements carries greater weight. In the joint declarations with ROK and India, large sections are devoted to stressing specific strategic matters: between China and the ROK, the stability and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula as well as the China-Japan-ROK trilateral relations are highlighted (The Central Government PRC 2013). Territorial issues concern China and India. These issues are unlikely to be resolved within a short period of time, but are highly sensitive and easily cause confrontation if not handled skilfully. It is in China's interests to shape a framework of partnership with relevant countries so that they are addressed in a peaceful manner and the likelihood of escalating disputes is minimized.

On the next level, in order of importance, there are *comprehensive strategic partnership*, *strategic partnership* and *strategic cooperative relationship*. Countries that maintain such partnerships with China are much more diverse in type and are located around the world. They reflect the different strategic considerations that China takes in shaping these partnerships: Europe in general is a major focus – with the All-Round Strategic Partnership with Germany, Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century with the UK and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with France, Italy, Spain and the EU as a whole. What China values is not just improved economic cooperation with these countries – even though that is very important (Smith 2014: 35–48) – but more their geopolitical importance and regional influence (Rees 2010: 31–47). As China evaluates its strategic partnership with the EU and most European countries, it highlights that the China-Europe partnership marks the most sought relations between a newly emerged marketing country and the most successful group of developed countries in the world. The two sides share 'critical strategic consensus on the construction of a multi-polarized world' and are 'major forces for maintaining global peace and stability' (FMPRC 2014b). However, owing to the huge ideological gap, there are some strategic disagreements that hinder the future improvement of such relations. Some examples are human rights issues, the granting of market economy status and the lifting of the EU weapon embargo imposed on China in 1989 (Berkofsky 2006: 185–191).

Some partnerships involve China's neighbours, with whom China has always aspired to have good relations. Some are energy-abundant countries that China looks forward to cooperating with in the future. Especially in the field of energy, these countries are essential to better

fulfil the demands of China's domestic industrialization. Some countries are geographically essential to China's international development initiatives, particularly countries located along the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. If those countries don't allow land or maritime transportation access, China's vision of infrastructure connectivity will fail. Other countries are less directly strategically connected to China, as indicated in the special modifiers of their partnership labels. For example, the China-Ireland Strategic Partnership of Mutual Benefit emphasizes the mutual beneficial trade ties.⁶ The China-Switzerland Innovative Strategic Partnership (FMPCR 2016) features a special focus on bilateral cooperation with regard to high-tech industries. This meets the urgent technological demands of the 'made in China 2025' plan.⁷ In addition, besides the EU, other major regional groups of countries such as the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the League of Arab States have been included as strategic partners. China believes that a closer connection with these multilateral mechanisms helps to stabilize its relations with the entire region. It also extends its influence through deepening cooperation with the countries involved and better exhibits its effort to advance a 'multi-polarized international order' (The State Council PRC 2016).

Under the second category of 'partnership' and third category of 'take over potential partnership', there are 35 in total. These range from *comprehensive cooperative partnership*, *cooperative partnership* and *friendly cooperative relationship* to *traditional friendly relationship*. For all these labels, the word 'strategic' is deliberately left out. Needless to say, these relations are much weaker and less significant. We can judge this by the realities of these countries' relations with China. Either they are not strong enough or they are less influential in the global arena; thus they don't have much to offer China. In this sense, China's efforts to maintain harmonious relations with them can be simply interpreted as a way of demonstrating that China is a 'responsible power' in the international community that is always willing to share its development opportunities with others on the basis of equality. It is also considered as a proof of China's fulfilment of its own foreign policy values, which is to make friends with as many countries as it can. Such bilateral relations still heavily rely on economic ties without elevating their status; or China may have misgivings about granting higher status to them (Strüver 2017: 31–65). However, since China's partnership network is a dynamic regulation mechanism, these lower level partnerships and relationships don't necessarily have to be static for long. Instead, they can be further

upgraded so long as there are improvements in bilateral relations or new convergence of interests develop, which can be identified by China as evidence to justify renewal of the partnerships.

Dynamics and Evolution of China's Partnerships

In the past 25 years, China has made concrete efforts in the construction of its partnerships. But those efforts failed to establish a strategic partnership with the USA during the Clinton administration. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination with Russia, though, has constantly been consolidated and strengthened. China cultivated high-level strategic partnerships with most major powers, influential regional groups of countries and international organizations. Some 17 out of its twenty neighbours have had certain kinds of partnerships with China.⁸ Among all China's partnerships, nearly 40 have been upgraded, some of which have been renewed more than once. In addition, China has been much more willing to accept partners of smaller and medium-sized countries, developing countries and LDCs. Examples of these are found in Asia, Africa or South America. China has not limited its partners to major powers as previously, which is the most noticeable change in China's partnership network building.

China's global partnership network now emerges. We can see the systematic manner in which different types of partnerships are defined, graded and managed. Xi Jinping has frequently said that China strongly values its friendship with other countries and will continue to expand its partnership circle. The final goal is to shape a global partnership network (Xinhua News Agency 2014b).

Although the partnership concept first appeared as early as 1993, we could not discern a grand foreign policy. This changed in 2002. At the 16th CPC National Congress, China's diplomatic strategy was defined as the 'independent foreign policy of peace'.⁹ It adjusted the top priority of foreign relations from the Third World to developed counties (Men 2009: 205–206). Because China had been isolated since 1989, it realized that the only way to become re-engaged in the international community was to take the initiative. It sought to repair its relations with Western countries.

In this context, China's partnership diplomacy has experienced an explosive growth between 2003 and 2006. Thirty-three partnerships have been established. This is three times the number in the previous decade. China has greatly extended its network by including several

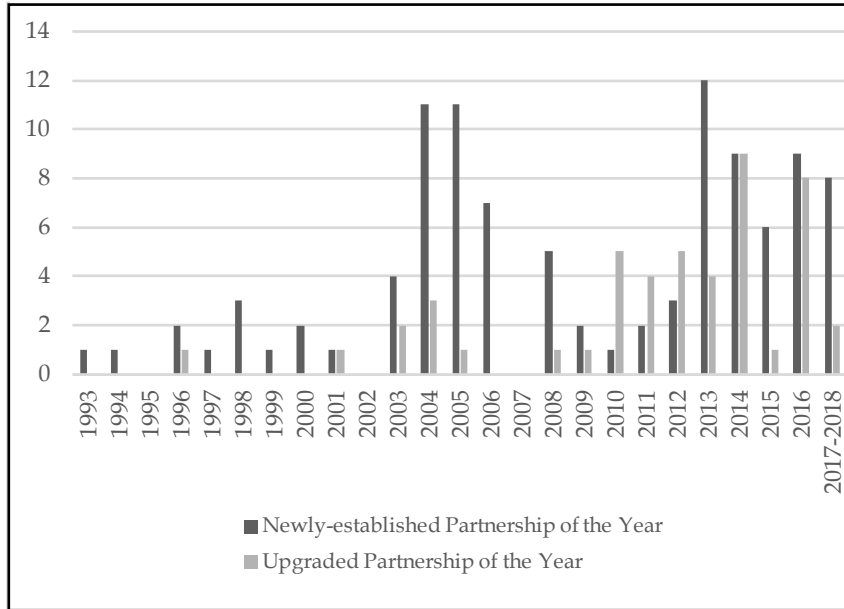
European countries, neighbouring countries, African countries, together with the EU, African Union and ASEAN. This marks the first stage of the enlargement of China's partnership network.

In 2005, China issued a white paper entitled *China's Path of Peaceful Development*, in which the concept of 'harmonious world' was introduced (The State Council Information Office PRC 2005). Since then, it has been emphasized repeatedly by the then-president Hu Jintao. This suggests that 'China would develop peacefully based on its national circumstances, historical and cultural tradition and world development trends', 'multilateralism, mutually beneficial cooperation and the spirit of inclusiveness should be upheld to realize common security, prosperity, and to build a world where all civilizations coexist harmoniously and accommodate each other' (FMPRC 2005). The tone has been set for a decade-long stable development of China's partnership construction.

The second benchmark for China's partnership diplomacy appeared in 2013, and continues to this day. After Xi Jinping took office, dramatic changes were seen in his announcements of Chinese diplomacy. These amount to the 'Chinese Dream'. The goal is to rejuvenate the nation into a wealthy and powerful one. A more proactive foreign policy will be required, to better match China's international status. As a major power, China expects to connect with the outside world more closely, for countries are all members of 'the community of common destiny' (Xinhua News Agency 2014c). This requires China to take the lead in shaping the international order towards a multilateral and democratic one which favours the majority. To meet this end, a series of international cooperation initiatives have been launched, topped by BRI and AIIB.

Propelled by this, China's partnership network has expanded. Between 2013 and 2018, 46 partnerships were established. Several existing ones were upgraded. Most of the BRI-related countries and AIIB members have established certain types of partnerships with China.¹⁰ Over 80 state-to-state cooperation agreements have also been signed.¹¹

In the report of the 19th CPC National Congress, 'partnership' was for the first time officially stipulated as an important component of China's diplomatic strategy. It emphasized that China will 'take a new approach to developing state-to-state relations with communication'. It will prioritize partnership over confrontation. It also seeks to 'actively develop global partnerships and expand the convergence of interests with other countries'. Partnership diplomacy will serve as an incentive in China's endeavour to engage with the international community in the foreseeable future.

TABLE 1. Chinese established and upgraded partnerships, 1993–2018

Source: Archives includes Communiqués, Announcements and Declarations etc. from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/.

We still seek evidence regarding the threshold and criteria of China's partnerships. What kind of countries are qualified to be accepted as partners? On what grounds will China upgrade its partnerships with certain countries? These are still mysteries to be solved. Owing to the lack of an elaborately stipulated code of conduct, new labels for partnerships outside the general categories have to be tailored to specific countries in order to meet the varied contexts. This makes the entire mechanism even more complicated. There are no defined rules indicating that a partnership should start at a lower level, for example a cooperative partnership, as a pilot project through which both sides can gradually seek to widen the scope of cooperation, intensify their shared interests and mutual trust, and expand the partnership to a higher level in a more natural manner – even if this is exactly the way in which many of China's partnerships are formed.

But there are several exceptions. During the second high-tide period, many countries skipped the fundamental stage and became strategic partners directly. It is true that China may have considered some criteria in enrolling countries into its strategic partners' community where there was urgency. China's sudden announcement in 2017 of its strategic partnership with Djibouti, where China has its first overseas military

base built, is one such example. But it is still hard to understand the criteria used for many new countries that have recently been converted into China's strategic partners.

Furthermore, upgrades of existing partnerships can be puzzling. There is no fixed term for an upgrade; reasons may vary from case to case. The upgrade of a partnership can take as short as one year (e.g. as for Australia) or as long as 20 years (e.g. as for Brazil). Some partnerships have been renewed up to three times while others never had a chance (Sun and Ding 2017: 54–76). As China's subjective perception of its relations with different countries varies, the upgrades of certain partnerships would appear to be a reflection of stronger bilateral relations. However, it is also true that not all of them are likely to be easily upgraded.

Consider the controversial but mutually beneficial China–Japan strategic relationship and the China–ROK strategic cooperative partnership. Japan and China have had a tense relationship owing to historical issues since the Second World War. The outbreak of territorial disputes in 2010 exacerbated the tensions of this fragile bilateral relationship and undermined the strategic relations that the two sides had built in 2008. Between China and the ROK, the worsening situation of the Korean peninsula, along with the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), appear to have damaged the foundations of the partnership. There is no precedent yet for China 'degrading' any of its partnerships. But those it has with Japan and ROK have already become merely symbolic: China simply decided to delete any official mention of partnerships. However, there are signs of a revival in China's relations with both Japan and ROK. Recently, 'partnership' reappeared as a keyword in the relevant governmental discourse.

Bumpy Road Ahead

China's partnership construction has yielded significant achievements both in quantity and quality. Its role in China's grand diplomatic strategy is becoming increasingly important. As a major country that holds diplomatic relations with almost all countries in the world, it is impossible for China to treat all countries equally. On the contrary, creating a 'rating system' to evaluate its relations with other countries clarifies the differences between countries. Using this criterion, China's partnership network is indeed a successful one. However, China's ambitious goal of expanding its global influence and exploring potential benefits through cooperation will still prove to be fraught with challenges.

TABLE 2. Overview of China's partnership network (by May 2018)

| General Category of Partnership | Latest Partnership & Ranking | No. | Country & Latest Partnership (since) | Upgrading History of its Partnership with China (Duration) |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| | Level 1 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination | 1 | Russia: (2011) | New Type of Constructive Partnership (1994–1996) Strategic Partnership of Coordination (1996–2011) |
| | Level 2 Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership | 2 | Pakistan: All-weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2010) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (1996–2005) Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2005–2010) |
| | | 3 | Vietnam: (2008) | |
| | | 4 | Cambodia: (2010) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2006–2010) |
| | | 5 | Myanmar: (2011) | |
| | | 6 | Laos: (2009) | |
| | | 7 | Thailand: (2012) | |
| | | 8 | Mozambique: (2016) | |
| | | 9 | Republic of Congo: (2016) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2013–2016) |
| | | 10 | Sierra Leone: (2016) | |
| | | 11 | Senegal: (2016) | |
| | | 12 | Ethiopia: (2017) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2003–2017) |
| | | 13 | Namibia: (2018) | |
| | | 14 | Zimbabwe: (2018) | |
| | | Level 3 Strategic Cooperative Partnership | 15 | ROK: (2008) |
| | 16 | | India: (2005) | |
| | 17 | | Sri Lanka: (2013) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2005–2013) |
| | 18 | | Afghanistan: (2012) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2006–2012) |
| | 19 | | Bangladesh: (2016) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2005–2016) |
| | | 20 | Germany: All-Round Strategic Partnership (2014) | Partnership with Global Responsibilities under the Framework of China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2004–2010); Strategic Partnership (2010–2014); |
| | | 21 | UK: Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century (2014) | Comprehensive Partnership (1998–2004); Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2004–2014) |

I.
Strategic
Partnership

Level 4
Comprehensive
Strategic
Partnership

| | | |
|----|-----------------------------|---|
| 22 | France: (2004) | Comprehensive Partnership (1997-2004) |
| 23 | Brazil: (2012) | Strategic Partnership (1993-2012) |
| 24 | Denmark: (2008) | |
| 25 | Spain: (2005) | |
| 26 | Italy: (2004) | |
| 27 | Portugal: (2005) | |
| 28 | Kazakhstan: (2011) | |
| 29 | Mexico: (2013) | Strategic Partnership (2003-2013) |
| 30 | South Africa: (2010) | Partnership (2000-2004); Strategic Partnership (2004-2010) |
| 31 | Greece: (2006) | |
| 32 | Belarus: (2013) | |
| 33 | Indonesia: (2013) | Strategic Partnership (2005-2013) |
| 34 | Peru: (2013) | Strategic Partnership (2008-2013) |
| 35 | Argentina: (2014) | Strategic Partnership (2004-2014) |
| 36 | Venezuela: (2014) | Strategic Partnership (2001-2014) |
| 37 | Malaysia: (2013) | |
| 38 | Australia: (2014) | Strategic Partnership (2013-2014) |
| 39 | Algeria: (2014) | Strategic Cooperative Relations (2004-2014) |
| 40 | New Zealand: (2014) | |
| 41 | Mongolia: (2014) | Good Neighborly Partnership of Mutual Trust (2003-2011); Strategic Partnership (2011-2014) |
| 42 | Egypt: (2014) | Strategic Cooperative Relations (1999-2014) |
| 43 | Tajikistan: (2017) | Strategic Partnership (2013-2017) |
| 44 | Serbia: (2016) | Strategic Partnership (2009-2016) |
| 45 | Iran: (2016) | |
| 46 | Chile: (2016) | Comprehensive Partnership (2004-2012); Strategic Partnership (2012-2016) |
| 47 | Poland: (2016) | Friendly Cooperative Partnership (2004-2011); Strategic Partnership (2011-2016) |
| 48 | Saudi Arabia: (2016) | Strategic Cooperative Relations (2006-2016) |
| 49 | Ecuador: (2016) | |
| 50 | Hungary: (2017) | Friendly Cooperative Partnership (2004-2017) |
| 51 | Uzbekistan: (2016) | Friendly Cooperative Partnership (2004-2012); Strategic Partnership (2012-2016) |
| 52 | European Union (EU): (2003) | Long-Term Stable Constructive Partnership (1998-2001); Comprehensive Partnership (2001-2003) |

| | | | | |
|--|----|---|---|---|
| | | 53 | African Union (AU): (2015) | New Type of Strategic Partnership (2006-2015) |
| | | 54 | UAE: (2012) | |
| Level 5 Strategic Partnership | | 55 | Angola: (2010) | |
| | | 56 | Turkmenistan: (2013) | |
| | | 57 | Nigeria: (2005) | |
| | | 58 | Canada: (2005) | |
| | | 59 | Ukraine: (2011) | |
| | | 60 | Qatar: (2014) | |
| | | 61 | Kyrgyzstan: (2013) | |
| | | 62 | Tonga: (2014) | |
| | | 63 | Uruguay: (2016) | |
| | | 64 | Jordan: (2015) | |
| | | 65 | Costa Rica: (2015) | |
| | | 66 | Sudan: (2015) | |
| | | 67 | Iraq: (2015) | |
| | | 68 | Czech Republic: (2016) | |
| | | 69 | Djibouti: (2017) | |
| | | 70 | Morocco: (2016) | |
| | | 71 | Ireland: Strategic Partnership of Mutual Benefit (2012) | |
| | | 72 | Switzerland: Innovative Strategic Partnership (2016) | |
| | | 73 | Austria: Friendly Strategic Partnership (2018) | |
| | | 74 | Fiji: (2014) | Key Cooperative Relations 2006-2014 |
| | 75 | ASEAN: (2003) | | |
| | 76 | Pacific Islands (including Fiji, Samoa, Micronesia, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Cook Islands, Niue): (2014) | | |
| Level 6 Strategic Cooperative Relations | | 77 | Philippines: (2005) | |
| | | 78 | Turkey: (2010) | Partnership (2000-2010) |
| | | 79 | Brunei: (2013) | |
| | | 80 | League of Arab States: (2004) | |

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|---|---|--|---|---|
| II. Partnership | Level 7 Comprehensive/ All-Round Friendly Cooperative Partnership | 81 | Belgium: All-Round Friendly Cooperative Partnership (2014) | |
| | | 82 | Romania: Comprehensive Friendly Cooperative Partnership (2004) | |
| | | 83 | Bulgaria: (2014) | Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership 2006–2014 |
| | | 84 | Maldives: (2014) | |
| | Level 8 Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership | 85 | Singapore: All-Round Cooperative Partnership (2015) | |
| | | 86 | China, Japan and ROK: All-Round Cooperative Partnership (2012) | Partnership (2008–2012) |
| | | 87 | Israel: Innovative Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (2017) | |
| | | 88 | Tanzania: (2013) | |
| | | 89 | Kenya: (2013) | |
| | | 90 | Netherlands: (2014) | |
| | | 91 | Nepal: (2009) | Good Neighborly Partnership (1996–2009) |
| | | 92 | Croatia: (2005) | |
| | | 93 | São Tomé and Príncipe: (2017) | |
| | | 94 | Liberia: (2015) | |
| | | 95 | East Timor-Leste: (2014) | |
| | 96 | Community of Latin American and Caribbean States: (2014) | | |
| | 97 | Madagascar: (2017) | | |
| Level 9 Cooperative/ Friendly Partnership | 98 | Finland: New Type of Cooperative Partnership (2017) | | |
| | 99 | Trinidad and Tobago: (2013) | | |
| | 100 | Antigua and Barbuda: (2013) | | |
| | 101 | Jamaica: Friendly Partnership (2005) | | |

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|----------------------------------|--|-------------|---|--|
| III. Potential Partnership | Friendly Cooperative Relationship | 102- 111 | Uganda; Colombia; Togo; Kuwait; Armenia; Gabon; Trinidad and Tobago; Montenegro; Azerbaijan; Macedonia | |
| | Traditional Friendly Relationship | 112- 114 | Albania; Samoa; Georgia | |
| | Strategic Relationship of Mutual Benefit | 115 | Japan: (2008) | |

Source: Archives includes Communiqués and Declarations etc. from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_764909/.

The principal problem is that China is not clear about how it intends to conduct its partnership network. In David Shambaugh's opinion (2000: 97–115), a true strategic partnership should be characterized by 'an essential similarity of world-view, strategic interests, political systems, and institutionalized intelligence-sharing and military relations'. For China, it can hardly pick out even one among all the partnerships it has that meets all these standards. This is so even with Russia.

China's expected outcomes of the partnership network are paradoxical: the economic benefits on the one hand and the ideological consensus on the other. Its pursuit of expanding economic benefits worldwide reflects the 'interest-driven' nature of the partnership, which still serves as the major driving force. At the same time, China also wants to exert certain ideological influence on its partners. A danger persists, however, that this is wishful thinking: in the reality of international relations, the closeness of an economic relationship won't transfer itself automatically into an ideological consensus. Under most circumstances, ideological recognition only rests among allies. Since China remains far apart ideologically from most of its partners, it may prove extremely difficult to advance partnership network along ideological grounds. It could even prove counterproductive. If China maintains pressure on ideological matters, it risks antipathy among its partners. It also risks jeopardizing its own global image, which China has invested quite a lot in establishing and maintaining.

Another major problem for China's partnership is the absence of a well-designed system with standardized norms. This has hindered the mechanism from being as effective as it could be. Despite certain commitments and principles adaptable for most partnerships, the defining features for each type still haven't been clearly stipulated. Most countries

that have such partnerships with China are still confused about what 'strategic' even means. They are puzzled about the proper response.¹² Without adequate practical actions, many partnerships remain symbolic.

Owing to the acceleration of China's partnership construction in recent years, the concept of 'strategic partnership' has been vastly abused. This risks devaluing its essence. It sends out a misleading signal to those countries that are strategically important. As more countries have become China's strategic partners, their strategic value to China is comparatively declining. From this point of view, it is critical for China to realize that the hasty expansion of its partnership network is not conducive to its long-term development. This requires a thorough review of all existing partnerships. China can thus even more effectively convert words into action. The result will be greater fulfilment of its commitments as a 'responsible partner'.

Another unavoidable challenge for China is the role of the USA. Admittedly, the USA still dominates the existing global order. It possesses a peerless global alliance system. This overlaps China's partnership network to a large extent. However, for those countries which maintain both a partnership with China and an alignment with the USA, the treaty-bound relationship is still much stronger than a non-binding partnership – this is still true to a large extent during the Trump administration. For most US allies, they may not be satisfied with how they are being treated by the Trump administration, but they still wish to stabilize their relationships with the USA. As the competition between China and the USA gets more and more fierce, most countries choose to stay away from being directly involved in the competition. Therefore, they have no choice but to cautiously adopt a balancing strategy – to get on well with both. On the one hand, even though some of them may be suspicious about or even oppose the new international institutions or initiatives created by China, most of them are willing to maintain or even further improve their economic ties with China in order to benefit from China's huge domestic market. On the other hand, they are still counting on the USA in many fields, military and security aspects in particular, which China is still unable to provide.

In addition, it is undeniable that there are still many more countries sharing an ideology with the USA than with China, which puts China in a much weaker position. As can be seen, most of the American allies embrace democracy and free-market policies, which are highlighted by the USA as the lifestyle and core values that should be cherished.

However, it seems that the USA is losing its advantage: before China's rise, the 'Washington Consensus' was widely recognized and practised as the most effective route to national economic development. As China emerges as a global power in its own way, the 'Beijing Consensus' has been put forward as an alternative, and it is continuously gaining influence. As China's partnership network continues to grow worldwide, the USA is getting worried that its ideological attractiveness will gradually become less popular, or in the worst case be finally replaced by China's. With this point in mind, it is no more difficult to understand the current hardline US policy towards China: the USA will do whatever it takes to defend its own ideology, thus the 'strategic competition' between the two countries will continue, or grow, in a predicable future. This may make it more difficult for China to conduct its partnership programme.

Besides, since the failure of China's initial attempts to establish a 'strategic partnership' with the USA, China has sought the formation of a new type of major power relationship. The USA is suspicious of this and appears unlikely to agree. Nevertheless, without the inclusion, or at least the support, of the USA, China's global partnership network is incomplete in any global sense. Therefore, there has to be an appropriate arrangement for the USA in China's partnership network if it really deserves to be considered 'global'.

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NOTES

- 1 http://www.china.com.cn/news/2017-01/03/content_40030834.htm. Accessed 15 January 2018.
- 2 About the official introduction of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, see <http://eng.sectsc.org>.
- 3 <http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0810/c385474-27435843.htm>. Accessed 15 January 2018.
- 4 <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2017-04/10453941.html>. Accessed 1 April 2018.

- 5 <http://opinion.haiwainet.cn/n/2018/0404/c353596-31292769.htm>. Accessed 25 May 2018.
- 6 <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/03-28/3780997.shtml>. Accessed 25 May 2018.
- 7 <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0313/c1002-29142693.htm>. Accessed 25 May 2018.
- 8 By 2017, only the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Bhutan (Bhutan hasn't established a diplomatic relationship with China yet) haven't established any kind of partnership with China. There has been a debate about whether Japan's Strategic Relationship of Mutual Benefit with China should be taken as a type of partnership; however, the author believes that regarding the actual relations between the two countries, plus China's trilateral All-Round Cooperative Partnership with Japan and ROK, even though there is no clear indication of partnership between the two countries, China-Japan relations should at least be considered as a special type of potential partnership. It is even more meaningful and important than some existing strategic partnerships that China has established with other countries. However, owing to historical and territorial disputes that China and Japan have, it is still very difficult for the two countries to build an in-depth mutual trust and take each other as partners.
- 9 http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/19thpcnationalcongress/2017-10/16/content_32684821.html. Accessed 25 May 2018.
- 10 <https://www.aiib.org/en/about-aiib/index.html>. Accessed 25 May 2018.
- 11 As for the bilateral documents signed between China and other countries under the framework of the 'One Belt One Road' initiative, see the official website of the Belt & Road. <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn>.
- 12 <http://china.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2013/1104/296155.shtml>. Accessed 25 May 2018.

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