
China's 'new type of security partnership' in Asia and beyond: a challenge to the alliance system and the 'Indo-pacific' strategy

Alice Ekman | Head of China Research, French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) and Associate Professor at Sciences Po, Paris | @alice_ekman 

Theme

This paper analyses China's new regional security architecture, currently promoted by Xi Jinping. So far, the initiative has remained largely unnoticed, in contrast to the 'Indo-pacific' version but may have significant consequences for the regional and world security governance.

Summary

If China has become more active in restructuring economic governance, it is also increasingly investing in security governance. In particular, China's opposition to the alliance system is official and clearer, year after year, since 2013. China is unhappy with the current security governance architecture and has the political determination, under Xi Jinping, to restructure it in a post-alliance direction. It aims to do so step-by-step in the coming decades with the help, first and foremost, of countries who are not part of the US-led alliance system –such as Russia– but also of security allies and partners of the US, who are most welcome to join China's informal 'circle of friends'. A blurred polarisation of security ties may develop as a result..

Analysis¹

Since 2013 China has clearly called for the creation of a new security architecture in Asia. The May 2015 white paper on China's military strategy explicitly advocates promoting 'the establishment of a regional framework for security and cooperation'. This call was reaffirmed in October 2016 and detailed further in China's white paper, published in January 2017, on security cooperation in Asia-Pacific. Since then, Chinese officials have repeatedly declared, one way or another, that the region needs to be restructured. On 16 February 2019, at the 55th Munich Security Conference, Politburo member Yang Jiechi declared that 'China supports security dialogue among the Asia-Pacific countries and efforts to explore a regional security vision and architecture that fits the reality of this region'².

¹ This analysis is a summary of a longer work on the topic to be published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, by mid-2019 (in a collective publication tentatively titled 'Alliances for the Twenty-First Century').

² Full text of Yang Jiechi's keynote speech at the 55th Munich Security Conference, Xinhua, 17/II/2019.

Institutional initiatives

In the same period of time, China launched a series of ad-hoc institutional initiatives, which, if bridged, could progressively contribute to the shaping of the previously mentioned new security architecture. In practical terms, China is investing in the existing regional security institutions and mechanisms in which it has, or could have, a significant influence, and building bridges between them. These institutions include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA),³ and the ASEAN-centred meetings (ARF, ADMM+, etc.). China also considers some regional security forums it has created (such as the Xiangshan Forum)⁴ as essential parts of this network, as well as all the multilateral track 1.5 and track 2 forums, seminars and workshops that China is organizing on security-related issues. China's restructuring of the regional security governance is flexible and does not require the creation of a new, formal, regional security institution per se. It is an institutional 'bridging' process rather than a creation process.

This institutional bridging process is actively promoted by China through significant financial contributions (to the CICA and SCO, among other institutions),⁵ through more cooperation between secretariats of concerned institutions as well as through an active shaping of the agenda, which encourages the alignment of multilateral agendas with China's priorities as much as possible.⁶

China's diplomacy is also increasingly proposing to regional actors the development of security exchanges and dialogues, the training of officials –including PLA/police/custom/law enforcement officials–,⁷ the hosting and organisation of regional security forums and the creation of 'think tank networks' under institutional or cooperation frameworks (SCO, CICA and others), among other initiatives.

³ Beijing has been trying under its presidency to revive the CICA, which includes more than 20 states (but excludes Japan and the US). It was at the CICA summit in Astana in May 2014 that Xi Jinping made his first public announcement of the building of a new Asia-Pacific security architecture.

⁴ In recent years, China has been trying to consolidate the Xiangshan Forum, an annual Beijing-based regional security dialogue, which it promotes as a potential alternative to the Shangri-La Dialogue. Although it did not take place in 2017 due to, according to an official communiqué, the 19th Party Congress, it did take place on a larger scale in 2016, and an even larger edition of the forum was organized in October 2018.

⁵ For instance, Xi had indicated at the June 2017 summit in Astana that China would make an additional contribution of RMB10 million to the SCO.

⁶ This increasingly includes an integration of the Belt and Road label in the multilateral discussions and final communiqués, or at least the inclusion of the 'connectivity'/'infrastructure development' topic, and the signing of a related Memorandum of Understanding.

⁷ For instance, Xi Jinping said at the SCO summit in Astana in June 2018: 'China offers to train 2,000 law enforcement officers for all parties in the next three years through China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation and other platforms to enhance law enforcement capacity building'.

(cont.)

Conceptual initiatives

China's institutional activism has developed in parallel with a strong conceptual activism, which provides clarification on the new regional security architecture announced. Shortly after his accession to power, Xi Jinping unveiled his 'Asia for Asians' security concept ('Asian community of common destiny'), which advocated the establishment of a 'new security concept' that could become a concept of reference beyond the region and should be, according to an official communiqué, a 'common, integrated, cooperative and sustainable security concept'.⁸ Recent official documents⁹ aimed at clarifying the concept emphasised the central role of the UN as well as the need to approach disputes through negotiation, among other principles.¹⁰

Most of all, Chinese officials (from the People's Liberation Army and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, among other institutions) made it clear that the new regional security architecture –re-labelled a 'new type of security partnership' since 2018– should not be based on any alliance system but rather on a network of partnerships.¹¹

Under Xi Jinping, China is officially rejecting the concept of 'alliance'.¹² To be sure, since the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country's diplomacy has never embraced the concept of alliances. But in recent years, the rejection of the alliance system is clearer and appearing on a frequent basis in Chinese official communiqués.¹³ It is noteworthy that China not only opposes the US alliance system, which it considers illegitimate –in particular in its neighbourhood–, but also any alliance system in general.¹⁴ As researchers of Chinese foreign-policy think tanks underline in informal discussions, an alliance is a format that is too binding, with 'too many obligations attached', 'not flexible enough' and 'old-fashioned'.¹⁵ When asked if China has allies today, most

⁸ Spotlight: "China view" helps build a better world', Xinhua, 29/VIII/2017, https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-08/29/c_136565429.htm.

⁹ Such as 'China's position paper on the new security concept', <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/t27742.htm>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* More generally, at the UN, China is opposed to regime change.

¹¹ For instance, this talking point has been heard at the 2016 and 2018 editions of the Xiangshan Forum, the high-level security conference held in Beijing. More recently, Xi Jinping, in his opening speech at the last Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) held in Qingdao on 10/VI/2018, said 'We have forged a constructive partnership featuring non-alliance, nonconfrontation, and not targeting any third party'.

¹² At the 17th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore in June 2018, General He Lei from the People's Liberation Army referred to China's 'new security concept' and 'new security architecture in Asia' that would be based on 'partnership rather than alliance', as did Chinese participants to most security conferences (including the previous Shangri-la Dialogues; author's observations, 2016-17).

¹³ The word 'reject' itself is used in official speeches, such as in a recent speech made by State Councillor and Minister of National Defence Wei Fenghe: 'The Chinese side proposes upholding mutually beneficial cooperation while abandoning the mentality of zero-sum game, being committed to openness and inclusiveness while rejecting alliance and confrontation, seeking extensive consultation and joint contribution while opposing unilateralism, and sticking to mutual respect while never engaging in "the big bullying the small"' (8th Xiangshan Forum, Beijing, 25/X/2018).

¹⁴ Some Chinese officials have informally underlined that, according to them, alliance is a constraining type of system, full of obligations and not suited to China's need and interests (interviews and informal discussions on the topic, Beijing-Paris, 2016-19).

¹⁵ Interviews and conversations in Beijing, Shanghai and Paris in 2016-19.

(cont.)

Chinese officials and think-tank researchers interviewed answered negatively.¹⁶ Some mentioned the treaty signed with North Korea, but were prompt to underline that it was signed 'a long time ago' and may not be considered an indicator that China and the DPRK are formal allies.¹⁷ To be sure, China considers that alliances, in general, are not an option for the country now or for anytime soon in the future. Beijing does not plan to sign any formal alliance treaty with any country in the short or long terms.

All in all, what seems to guide China's approach towards regional governance is the current leadership's willingness to challenge the US-led security architecture in the region. But China's plan in the region is not to replace the US alliance system with its own, but rather a different type of security partnership that would be more flexible and in line with its own interests.

Non-allied partners

China's public announcement of its 'new type of security partnership in Asia', often remains unnoticed.¹⁸ But China is strategically thinking about the ways it can restructure the region, and more specifically about the partners it can rely on to do so. In particular, China hopes to build its new security network with the support of Russia. The two countries share an ambition to build an architecture that becomes an alternative to the US-led alliance system in the greater Eurasian region and beyond. Both countries are increasingly cooperative at the institutional level but also at a more practical, militarily level, which includes the frequent conduct of joint military exercise. In September 2016 Russia and China carried out exercises in the South China Sea –just over a year after exercises were jointly conducted in the Mediterranean–. In July 2017 Russia and China also carried out joint exercises in the Baltic Sea. Most recently however, in September 2018 China participated in the large-scale Vostok military exercise in Siberia. Interestingly, according to an official communiqué, the bilateral relationship itself is increasingly labelled a 'non-alliance'.¹⁹

In addition, China also aims to integrate ASEAN countries as much as possible in its regional governance initiatives, as well as integrating itself in ASEAN-organised forums and summits of various kinds. Beyond the region, China hopes to reinforce its security ties with a diversity of countries, first and foremost developing and emerging countries, in its 'South-South cooperation' framework, which does not hesitate to play on the anti-Western resentment of formerly colonised countries.

¹⁶ Interviews and conversations in Beijing and Paris (Chinese delegations' visit) in January-October 2018.

¹⁷ Interview with a senior Chinese think-tank official, Paris, October 2018.

¹⁸ Author's own observations at several regional security forums, including the Shangri-la Dialogues in 2017 and 2018, the Singapore and Xiangshan Forums in 2015, 2016 and 2018 and at Beijing.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's declaration in July 2017 following Xi Jinping's visit to Russia: 'In the development of bilateral relations, China and Russia have kept deepening their comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination on the basis of non-alliance, non-confrontation and not targeting third countries, which is becoming a paradigm for new-type relations between major countries' (Xinhua, 8/VII/2017).

Of course, this remains a work-in-progress and a diversity of reactions to China's security proposals can be seen from one country to another, whether in South-East Asia or Africa. However, overall, careful observation of the participants at China's security forums show that it is not alone and is able to gather a large number of countries around its security concepts and initiatives: the 2018 edition of China's Xiangshan forum, on 'Building a New Type of Security Partnership of Equality, Mutual Trust and Win-Win Cooperation', gathered high-level representatives from Ministries of Defence (at the Ministerial or Deputy Ministerial levels) from countries as diverse as Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Serbia, Vietnam, Ecuador, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Cambodia, Belarus and Nepal.²⁰ The forum also hosted a high-level delegation from North Korea.

Underlining divergences between allies

A form of cynicism towards the US allies' initiatives is observable among the Chinese policy-making community: 'The West is doing enough mistakes on its own, that we don't even need to point at them',²¹ said informally a Chinese participant to the last Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, referring to the US withdrawal from the Iran deal and other multilateral agreements.

In general terms, to develop its post-alliance restructuring, China is betting on the perceived 'mistakes of the US' as well on differences between allies in the region, in addition to its economic attractiveness. With the on-going development of the 'Indo-Pacific' strategy, Chinese officials and researchers are keen to identify and underline the divergent definitions and approaches among members of this country grouping.²² China is also betting on domestic differences within the political elite of some US allies. China is fully aware that there are divergent approaches to the US from one political party to another in countries such as South Korea and the Philippines.

China is also diversifying its institutional and personal ties with countries of the region and beyond, considering that government-to-government ties are only one channel of bilateral relations to be complemented –or bypassed in the case of bilateral tensions– by other channels. In addition to foreign government representatives, foreign representatives from the private sector, think tanks, or local governments are increasingly approached by Chinese diplomacy to take part in its initiatives. In 2017, Xi Jinping has also called for the reinforcement of party-to-party ties, and indicated that the Communist Party of China will invite '15,000 members of foreign political parties to China for exchanges' in the next five years.²³ Although he is doing so with all types of parties – not just between communist parties– he is focusing on developing countries. The ongoing diversification of the channels of bilateral and multilateral exchanges is

²⁰ Observations and informal exchanges with Xiangshan Forum participants, October 2018, Beijing. Some representatives of these countries were grateful to China for significant speaking time, especially those who are not usual participants at this kind of high-level forum.

²¹ Informal discussion with the author, 17th IISS Shangri-la Dialogue, Singapore, 1-3/VI/2018.

²² For instance, the rare questions asked by Chinese representatives at the 2018 edition of the Shangri-la Dialogue were underlining the potential divergent definitions of the 'Indo-Pacific concept' (between India and Japan, for instance). Author's observation, 17th IISS Shangri-la Dialogue, Singapore, 1-3/VI/2018.

²³ Xinhua, 1/XII/2017.

developed under the framework of what Xi Jinping calls a 'new type of international relations' (新型国际关系, *xinxing guoji guanxi*) – a concept that indicates China's ambition to reconsider the way states interact with each other–.

Conclusion

There is no doubt today that China wishes to restructure the region and the world toward a post-alliance direction. This ambition appears unrealistic today given the central role that the US alliance system continues to play in the region. But Beijing is fully aware that such restructuring can only be a long-term process, and is developing it by enlarging, step by step, its 'circle of friends' (中国的朋友圈 – *zhongguo de pengyou quan*), an expression now used by Xi Jinping.²⁴ China's official launch of the 'new type of security partnership' is only the first step of a long-term action plan that will continue to unfold in the coming years under the mandate of Xi Jinping.

China can already count on the support of various countries, either because such countries are unhappy with the presence and influence of the United States and its allies in the region (such as Russia), or because such countries are already in China's sphere of economic and political influence (such as Cambodia or Laos). China can also count on some countries simply because they themselves do not have a clear-cut position and vision regarding regional governance, or do not have the economic means to support such a vision (which is the case of several Southeast and Central Asian countries). In general terms, the fact that China is promoting an apparently flexible, not fully institutionalised, and constantly evolving regional governance architecture (be it through the 'Belt and Road Initiative' or its 'new type of security partnership') makes it hard for countries to shape a clear-cut position towards it.

The polarisation of both the region and the world has already been heightened in the context of sino-US tensions: some countries can be clearly identified as US allies and partners, while others can be identified, more clearly than before, as China's friends. The competition between security networks, and in particular between the Indo-Pacific grouping on the one hand and China's new type of security partnership on the other, is likely to become more intense. In any case, China will not hesitate in the coming years to further underline the weaknesses of the Indo-Pacific grouping, and, in broader terms, of the alliance system.

More than ever, the concept of 'alliance' will be central to this competition. While some countries still believe in the necessity and centrality of the alliance, others –first and foremost China– are more vocally than before opposing this architecture and working towards the building of a post-alliance security network. In this context, strategic thinking on the future of the alliance system appears timely for countries that still believe in it. Japan and the EU could consider this fundamental issue in the framework of their strategic partnership agreement. More broadly, countries that have embraced the Indo-Pacific concept could reflect on the alliance system from perspectives of both time (how to update it?, how to make it sustainable?) and space (what is the geographical scope of the alliance system?, what areas/countries might it include in the future?). The space perspective appears particularly timely as the competition between US-led alliances and China-led partnerships is already developing far beyond Asia, and as China welcomes

²⁴ See, for instance, Xi's New Year Speech, Xinhua, 31/XII/2018.

countries of all sizes in its new type of security partnerships. The Indo-pacific grouping is following a different approach: it comprises a limited number of countries of significant economic and military size, and outreach to other countries appears so far inexistent.

If competition is an ongoing trend that is likely to consolidate as China further promotes its security partnership, it is also likely to be an ambiguous one. The line between a US-led alliance and a China-led partnership may become unclear, as China welcomes the overlap of security ties. According to official communiqués, all countries are welcome in China's 'new type of security partnership',²⁵ including those who are currently security allies –or strong security partners– of the US. This may lead to a blurred polarisation in the region and the world. In concrete terms, some countries with traditional ties to the US and its allies may become increasingly ambiguous in their security cooperation, responding positively to China's initiatives and becoming progressively part of its 'circle of friends'. For China, ambiguity is no problem; on the contrary, it is encouraged. For the US, however, ambiguity is likely to be a growing issue.

²⁵ According to official communiqués at the 8th edition of the Xiangshan Forum, Beijing, 25/X/2018.