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November 14, 2023

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## Pursuing Geopolitical Advantage? China's Search for Military Allies

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China's leaders apparently see their partnership-focused foreign policy strategy as adequate, but that view may not hold indefinitely. Strategic competition with the United States and its allies, even now, is beginning to expose the limitations of Beijing's partnerships. If, as many theorize, China were to attack Taiwan, would it not be best prepared for success by seeking military alliances beyond its sole current ally, North Korea? This *Research Short* provides theory-driven indicators to raise awareness among decisionmakers in Washington and elsewhere about the conditions that could lead China to seek new military allies—for military adventurism focused on Taiwan, or something else. Understanding these alliance formation conditions offers opportunities to counter China's efforts to expand its hard power.

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## Why China and Alliances?

As China's strategic competition with the United States intensifies—just one among many potential reasons for Beijing to seek alliances—China has yet to forge additional traditional military alliances beyond its single formal military ally, North Korea. If, as many observers surmise, China is preparing to attack Taiwan within the next decade, why has it done so little to secure alliances with other countries? What might such efforts look like?

Until now, China has instead relied on many suballiance partnerships of various designs. Although these relationships have addressed China's primarily economic wants and needs, such bonds may not be enough during war. Academic literature suggests alliances are vital in warfare; for example, the “bar fight theory of international conflict” asserts that regime type is crucial to wartime coalition formation, noting that democracies fight in larger coalitions and so tend to win more wars.<sup>1</sup> The “specificity, legal and moral obligation, and reciprocity that are usually lacking in informal alignments”<sup>2</sup> make a military alliance the most effective and reliable means of multilateral security cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Additional drivers of alliance formation include security concerns,<sup>4</sup> emotion and empathy,<sup>5</sup> identity and status,<sup>6</sup> and the desire to control other states<sup>7</sup> and critical resources.<sup>8</sup>

The United States and its allies must consider the possibility that China could shift from its partnership-focused approach to strategic competition and instead pursue more traditional military alliances that could bolster China's war-waging capacity, cleave away wavering U.S. partners, and secure Beijing's access to necessary resources. This *Research Short* makes the case that China may abandon its nonalliance policy, posing the question: Under what conditions will Beijing pursue new formal security alliances?<sup>9</sup>

## China's Shifting Policies Portend Growing Openness to Alliances

Recent changes in China's longstanding foreign policy positions are logical given its goals to become “the preeminent power in East Asia and a major power on the world stage”<sup>10</sup> and to bolster its security.<sup>11</sup> Beijing's shifting stance on overseas basing of military troops is a key example. China's 2013 *Defense White Paper* “For the first time ever... explicitly expressed that the country's military forces are expected to protect its overseas interests.”<sup>12</sup> The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's April 2023 evacuation of more than 1,000 Chinese citizens from strife-riven Sudan<sup>13</sup> showcased the burgeoning power-projection capabilities of what has become the world's largest navy and the operational payoff of having military forces routinely deployed abroad in places such as Djibouti. The PLA facility there



### KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

- U.S. and IC decisionmakers should remain cognizant of the gains China could obtain from pursuing a limited alliance formation strategy.
- Domestic U.S. politics might inadvertently open the field to China and others to begin alliance formation—potentially targeting wavering current U.S. alliance partners such as Thailand or the Philippines.
- China is unlikely to seek alliance parity with the United States, but picking off waverers among current American allies or key middle-power hedgers in the region—such as Singapore, Vietnam, or Indonesia—might swing geopolitical momentum into China's court.

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has the capacity for “a wide range of PLA operations well beyond logistical support,”<sup>14</sup> as well as competition with the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Such a momentous shift in People’s Republic of China (PRC) foreign policy raises the likelihood that, with a greatly empowered and more assertive top leader in Xi Jinping, others could be in the offing—including a different way of thinking about traditional security alliances. Although China’s history of nonalignment and stated views of military alliances as “Cold War thinking” suggest ongoing concern about becoming entangled in other’s conflicts,<sup>16, 17</sup> Beijing may increasingly see that risk as manageable.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, China has recently pushed its Global Security Initiative (GSI), another suballiance effort to gain alliance-like benefits, explicitly in the security realm. First proposed by Xi in 2022,<sup>19</sup> the GSI was recently described by former Defense Minister Li Shangfu as an alternative to the U.S. alliance system and “a new path to security.” Although Li also said the GSI prizes “partnership over alliances,”<sup>20</sup> it does not disadvantage China to pursue partnerships today while preparing for alliances when the conditions are right.

**“Ideas serve as roadmaps.”**

– Quansheng Zhao  
*Interpreting Chinese  
Foreign Policy*

## Five Candidate Alliance Formation Conditions for China

The alliance formation literature, plus China-specific factors (see box), point to at least five conditions under which Beijing is likely to seek formal defense agreements with other countries. First and foremost, the candidate ally must be in a **geographic location that allows a realistic projection of Chinese military power**.<sup>21, 22</sup> Wael Abbas and Zoltan Schneider’s research identifies geographic proximity as the “significant variable for alliance formation.”<sup>23</sup>

Second, and related to the first condition, a **security threat directed toward China’s border** (land or maritime) must be addressed by allying with the candidate state; this concern drove China’s intervention in the Korean War. Further, an **alignment of security interests** must exist for both states. For example, Chinese studies of Sino-Russian relations show that significantly diverging security interests create a barrier to alliance for these “no-limits” partners.<sup>24</sup> Western academics, as B. K. Yoder notes, agree that an alliance is not likely, but we should expect the partnership to be durable.<sup>25</sup>

Third, China must share **ideological or autocratic alignment** with the candidate ally. China will not want any new allies critiquing how Beijing runs its domestic business and probably will require them to agree at least tacitly to conform to Chinese views of hierarchy (see box). Although China would almost certainly form partnerships based on “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” logic that pushed Beijing and Washington together against Moscow in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the entente was discarded almost as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed. The United States has attempted to downplay the role of ideology in the current strategic competition, differentiating it from the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, and China has similarly talked derisively about the formation of blocs as redolent of a “Cold War mentality.” Certain states, including North Korea, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, however, tend to share opposition to many

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aims and efforts of the United States and its Western partners (i.e., the consonance in regime type or ideology that fuels alliances). China, therefore, is likely to find the most fertile ground for further solidifying relations with this cohort, up to and including military alliance—and, with North Korea, further institutionalization of alliance ties.

Fourth, Beijing must operate within a strategic environment where **lesser forms of partnership, such as cooperation or alignment, are insufficient to achieve China’s ends.**<sup>30</sup> As Zhen Han and Mihaela Papa wrote in 2021, based on a meta-analysis of Chinese writings on alliances and partnerships, “The alliance concept is not obsolete in Chinese IR, and alliance formation could intensify if China’s external threats become more formidable.”<sup>31</sup> As U.S.-China security tension intensifies in the coming years, this condition may be met, opening the possibility of alliances for China, just as overseas basing was once thought beyond the pale.<sup>32</sup> Among the five conditions proposed, this may be the hardest to observe empirically, but recent U.S.-China duels over enhancing diplomatic ties, e.g., in the Pacific Island countries, may provide indicators. A fresh instance of checkbook diplomacy is underway, with embassy and consulate facilities under development, among other efforts to signal commitment and interest. Might a new defense pact be the *fait accompli* that puts one competitor decisively on top?

Fifth, China’s challenge of having sufficient resources, such as potable drinking water and agricultural products, to keep its large population fed and their minds away from revolt makes **securing access to select resources** an alliance formation factor.<sup>33</sup> Beijing has acquired overseas farmland and created a strategic reserve of foodstuffs that the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates holds one-half of global wheat reserves; a state-controlled Chinese newspaper adds that the PRC’s stockpiles of rice and wheat are sufficient to keep the Chinese people fed for as long as 18 months.<sup>34</sup>

China also relies heavily on imported petroleum, which accounts for 70 percent of its daily use, and “is the biggest importer of *every* industrial commodity,”<sup>35</sup> so its vulnerability to loss of supply—most of which comes by sea—is particularly acute. China can better and more easily obtain these goods via trade, but any military adventurism targeting Taiwan is likely to trigger economic sanctions of the sort Moscow experienced after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. “The longer a conflict lasts,” historian Margaret MacMillan writes, “the more important allies and

## CHINA-SPECIFIC FACTORS

In addition to the academic literature on alliance formation, which is primarily derived from the experiences of European and other Western states, key factors particular to China also inform its alliance formation conditions, as follows:

### **Confucianism and Chinese Socialism:**<sup>26</sup>

Hierarchical concepts define an individual’s obligations within society and subordination to the collective; as seen in Xi’s global initiatives, such as the GSI, Global Development Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative.

**Legacy of Tribute System:**<sup>27</sup> Traditional view of dynastic China as the center of the world and the Chinese leader as authoritative over “all under heaven.”

**Major Power Exceptionalism/Great Power Chauvinism:** Beijing today expects to be the primary actor in any future alliance, in contrast to its junior partner status in its early Cold War alliance with the Soviet Union.

**Preference for Orderly Environment, Against Chaos:**<sup>28</sup> Beijing’s slow and steady influence campaigns, using all aspects of national power, seek to avoid outright conflict that detracts from progress.

**Relational Security/Guanxi:** Based on a calculus of certainty and stability in reciprocal relationships, China is “inclined to stress nonapparent national interests rather than apparent ones, thus transcending purely individualist rationality.”<sup>29</sup>

resources become.”<sup>36</sup> Unless Beijing is supremely confident that its war of choice over Taiwan would be “short and sharp”<sup>37</sup>—about which states are consistently and notoriously wrong<sup>38</sup>—choosing allies to help ameliorate this area of weakness would be an astute move for China.

## China’s Most Plausible Military Allies

One method of narrowing down the list of prospective allies from the dozens of countries with which China maintains various types of partnerships is to start with Han and Papa’s list of China’s 10 closest partners: Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. These states are required by agreement not to “join any alliances that threaten the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of signed partners,”<sup>39</sup> essentially giving China a veto over their potential future alliance formation behavior. Han and Papa’s inclusion of Ukraine predates Russia’s invasion, and whether China could block a potential Ukrainian move to join NATO is open to question.

**Table:** Summary of Conditional Analysis

Potential Ally Country (listed alphabetically)	Geographic Proximity or Realistic Power Projection	Addresses Threat to PRC Border or Shared Security Interests	Ideological/ Autocratic Alignment (~regime type)	Lesser Forms of Partnership Inadequate To Achieve PRC’s Aims	Securing Access to Resources
Afghanistan	X				+ copper, lithium
<b>Cambodia</b>	X	-	+	Yes?	+ fresh water?
Cuba			+	Yes	
Djibouti	X	-		No	
<b>Iran</b>	X	-	+		+ petroleum
Kazakhstan	X	-			
Kyrgyzstan	X	+			
Mongolia	X	+			
<b>Myanmar</b>	X	+	+	Yes?	+ foodstuffs
<b>Pakistan</b>	X	+	+	No	
<b>Russia</b>	X	-	++	No	+ petroleum, technology (e.g., semiconductors)
Sri Lanka	X	-			
Tajikistan	X	+			
Thailand	X	-	+		
Turkey		-	+		
Turkmenistan	X	-			
Ukraine		-			+ foodstuffs
Uzbekistan	X	-			

**Bold** = the most likely alliance partners for China, based on the conditional analysis (~Top 5)

X = most significant baseline requirement condition present

- negatively-trending condition

+ positively trending condition (the more +, the more positive)

? = soft yes

Blank space = the condition does not apply to the candidate country or more information is needed to make this judgment

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Based on geopolitical analysis and China’s observed alliance-correlated agenda<sup>40</sup>—such as serving economic or regime legitimacy interests or offering overseas bases—to these can be added: Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Iran, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Cuba. For quick comparison, the table provides a snapshot of which of the five identified conditions apply to each of China’s most plausible 18 candidate ally countries. (See Table; for a map and more details on these countries’ ties to China, please see the Appendix.)

## Implications for the United States and the IC

Although China’s alliance behavior has limited empirical data, theory-driven and culturally informed inferences about how its growth could progress may allow U.S. decisionmakers to be one step ahead of China—or, at the very least, to not be caught flat-footed when China begins to make alliance-related moves. Primary drivers of China’s prospective move toward alliances could include failure of its partnership strategy, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative, or an abrupt economic crisis that drives its leaders to look to other aspects of national power to achieve their ends, such as military capabilities. External triggers might be defections from the traditional U.S. ally camp in Asia, such as the Philippines or Thailand, or another Southeast Asian middle power that has been sitting on the pivot point between China and the United States decisively siding with Beijing.

This *Research Short* has purposely analyzed what China wants from new alliances, but these drivers suggest that future IC assessments should also weigh what those prospective alliance members would get from such agreements. Ranging from the extractive—akin to “protection money”—to more collaborative arrangements, such IC inquiry and analysis could inform alternatives that policymakers develop to help countries resist being drawn into China’s orbit.

National security analyst Josh Rogin has noted the “minilateralism” of U.S. defense treaty allies—including Australia and Japan—banding together for enhanced security cooperation,<sup>41</sup> but the key indicator of U.S. success in developing a balancing coalition against China probably will be the prospective inclusion of nonallied middle powers in the region, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, or Singapore. As Andrew O’Neil concluded in 2018, challenging China over disputed South China Sea territories carries “the potential to trigger escalation to armed conflict in the region,”<sup>42</sup> and joining a strategic-competition coalition against China may hold the same dangers for these countries. The Pacific Island nations are vulnerable to a lesser extent, which probably led the Solomon Islands to cast its lot with China in last year’s security agreement; while it is not a defense treaty, this agreement probably opens the door to a Chinese military presence.<sup>43</sup> Many other countries in the region chose to lean toward Washington in the 2022 Declaration on a 21st Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership that included U.S. pledges of more than \$800 million for developmental programs spanning climate change, infrastructure, education, security, and public health.<sup>44</sup>

In return, these countries offer what the U.S. military refers to as access, basing, and overflight (ABO)—valuable assets in the unfolding U.S.-China strategic competition that become

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invaluable should conflict ensue. But Southeast Asia's middle powers, currently sitting at the pivot point between the United States and China, offer much more than ABO. Indonesia and Vietnam, for example, are rich in natural resources, and Singapore offers financial assets. Above all, these countries are located in prized strategic locations. Singapore sits astride a principal global sea line of communication between the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca, while Indonesia is the archipelagic overseer of any plausible maritime alternative to the Malacca Strait between the Strait of Hormuz/Suez Canal and China's maritime frontier. Many Southeast Asian states are on the record about not wanting to choose between the United States and China,<sup>45</sup> but in the end, such a choice may be forced upon them.

To restate a truism that remains applicable here, the past is not the future. For China to seize upon the opportunities presented by "great changes unseen in a century,"<sup>46</sup> Beijing may need a new operating system for its external relations—one no longer constrained by the shackles that bound it when it was a weak or a middle power. Alliance networks are not solely a Western tool; for the first time since the 1960s, they could become a sanctioned component of Chinese statecraft, offering value for China and like-minded countries.<sup>47</sup> From the U.S. alliance experience after the Second World War, China has observed that alliance networks can help contain the ambitions of other states, as NATO did against the Soviet Union. Despite the possibility of becoming entangled with allies, allied and partner nation ABO can help enable global power protection and global reach. China now needs to protect its global interests, and its large, globally deployable navy can be a powerful tool for both coercion and for partnership. With all this in mind, it is plausible that alliances can be a part of Xi's China dream—part of China's rejuvenation.<sup>48</sup>

*This Research Short is part of the NIU Office of Research's "Year of China" initiative.*

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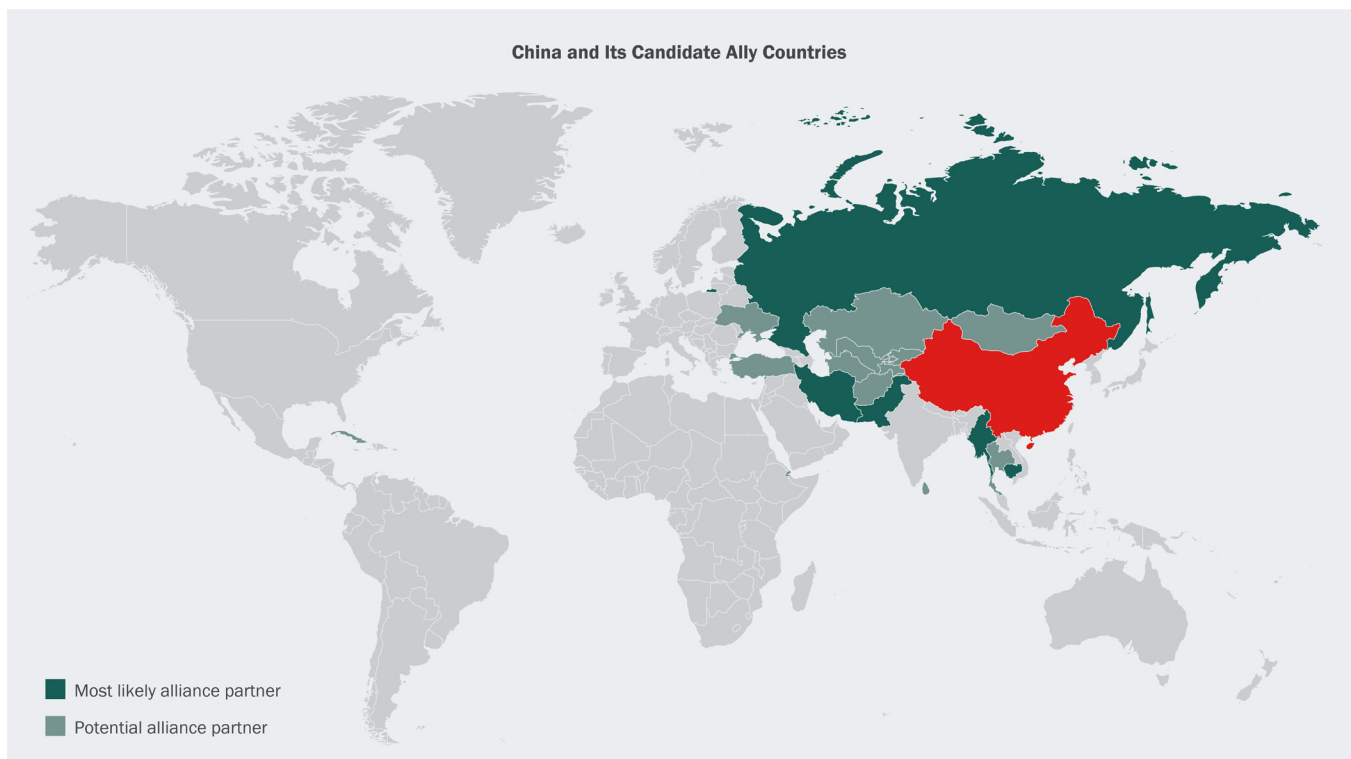
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## Appendix: Likely Military Allies Based on China's Conditions

This study of China's prospective alliance formation conditions has yielded 18 candidate ally countries (see map), each of which fulfills some, though not all, of these conditions: provides geographic proximity or power projection opportunity; shares security interests or addresses a threat to China's border; aligns ideologically/fellow autocracy; replaces a lesser partnership that no longer meets China's goals; or secures access to resources. These countries include China's 10 closest partners, as identified by Zhen Han and Mihaela Papa: Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.<sup>49</sup>

Added to these are eight countries that bear a closer look because they meet at least one of the identified conditions: Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Iran, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Cuba. The first three countries have moved closer to China under authoritarian rule or military-backed governments. Thailand, however, is unique in this group because Washington and Bangkok remain defense treaty allies despite repeated military coups.<sup>50</sup> Iran has also grown increasingly reliant on China as Tehran faces diplomatic isolation and a struggling economy.<sup>51</sup> Djibouti is notable as the location of China's first overseas military base, showcasing its geostrategic importance to Beijing by providing a prospective launching point for humanitarian assistance operations, multinational peacekeeping efforts in Africa, and antipiracy task force missions in the Indian Ocean<sup>52</sup>—illustrating the two countries' complementary economic and security goals.<sup>53</sup> A potential Chinese foothold on the other side of the Indian Ocean from East Africa is Sri Lanka, one of the more heavily infiltrated locations of China's Belt and Road





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Initiative efforts.<sup>54</sup> Turkey, a NATO member, stakes out an independent foreign policy that tacks between closeness to Europe and to China, which is Ankara's top source of imports.<sup>55</sup> And Cuba made the list powered by June 2023 media reports of Chinese intelligence bases and possibly combined military training,<sup>56</sup> not to mention Havana's communistic solidarity.

Five of the 18 candidate countries are deemed to be China's most likely alliance partners—Cambodia, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Russia—based on, most importantly, their proximity to China and, since this research focuses on prospective defense pacts, the realistic prospect of Beijing deploying its military power to these countries. For example, Cambodia hosts new naval construction and may soon host PLA Navy assets,<sup>57</sup> and Pakistan has long been a close military partner of China.<sup>58</sup> All these countries also possess resources that Beijing needs, and an alliance could provide a more durable means of guaranteeing the continued flow of such staples to China. All five are autocratic regimes, shared with the Chinese Communist Party's rule of China. About half of these countries, as Beijing's allies, would bolster China's border security or they reasonably share a similar threat outlook. In total, these five countries rated the highest across the alliance formation conditions examined in this work. Other scholars, such as Isaac Kardon, assert the group of potential military allies is smaller. Using major conflict as the driver that would move a security relationship with China to a de facto alliance, Kardon counts just two prospective allies—Pakistan and Cambodia—in addition to China's current sole ally, North Korea.<sup>59</sup>

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