

“China and the U.S. Alliance System”

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Abstract:

In recent years, scholarship examining U.S. and security allies’ responses to China’s rapidly growing power and ‘assertive’ policies toward its neighbours has proliferated. The English-language literature remains relatively one-sided, however. Crucial to understanding the complex forces driving strategic competition in the contemporary Asia-Pacific are comprehensive surveys of how Chinese views are evolving. This study draws extensively on Chinese sources to update existing scholarship, much of it two decades old, with a particular focus on recent Chinese reactions to major developments concerning the U.S.-centred alliance system—a foundational element of the seventy year-old regional order status quo. Beijing expresses deepening frustration toward, even open opposition to, recent alliance strengthening; instead championing alternative security architectures free of what it alleges to be “exclusive,” “zero-sum,” “Cold-war relic” U.S.-centred alliances. Proposals for concrete pathways to operationalizing this vision that take into account contemporary political and security realities (e.g., North Korea), however, appear less forthcoming.

Keywords: China, alliances, regional order, military, security, United States, Japan

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In a major foreign policy speech at the 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping championed a new framework for regional peace and security in Asia.³ An authoritative Xinhua commentary juxtaposed his proposed new “Asian Security Concept” against the sixty year-old U.S.-centered “hub-and-spokes” alliance system. It criticized U.S. alliances as the “Achilles Heel” of constructive efforts toward more sustainable, inclusive, and “win-win” regional security order, the primary obstacle to “a peaceful Asia,” and emblematic of an anachronistic “Cold War security structure [in which] some big powers pursue security as a ‘zero-sum game’ and keep strengthening military alliances in the region while excluding the common interests of other countries.”⁴ Needless to say, “some big powers”—Washington and its allies—have a very different view.

For more than two decades, China’s surging economic wherewithal and military might have gradually transformed the region’s post-Cold War international relations. Beijing’s double-digit annual defence budget increases have enabled rapid military modernization; especially capabilities intended to deter U.S. involvement in possible disputes on China’s periphery. This trend shows no sign of stopping—despite the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) simultaneously confronting worsening economic and social headwinds. Meanwhile, especially since 2010 specific Chinese rhetoric and policies vis-à-vis its vast, controversial territorial claims have raised concerns across the region. As China’s power and influence grow, whether Beijing intends to challenge core elements of the longstanding regional order has emerged as a major debate in policy, academic, and media circles overseas.

In this dynamic and potentially volatile context, understanding how Beijing evaluates the U.S.-centered alliance system’s role in regional security—arguably *the* foundational element of

³ Xi 2014

⁴ Xinhua 2014c

the post-1950s regional status quo—is crucial. Beyond direct implications for academic literatures in Chinese foreign policy, international relations, and security studies, deeper understanding is necessary to assess and inform efforts to shape the region’s future in a maximally peaceful, stable, and prosperity-promoting direction.

Much English-language scholarship assessing Chinese views of the U.S. alliance system dates to the 1997 U.S.-Japan defence guidelines’ aftermath, in a vastly different regional context. Back then, beyond the ever-present issue of Taiwan’s international status, neither China’s military modernization nor its policies and rhetoric vis-à-vis controversial sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas were major policy concerns. Beijing’s official 1997 defence budget was ten billion dollars—roughly commensurate with Taiwan’s and one-fourth Japan’s. In contrast, Beijing’s official 2016 defence budget was \$147 billion—more than thrice Japan’s and 13-times Taiwan’s. Beyond the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) rapidly advancing capabilities, Beijing’s intentions are also increasingly cited across the region as security concerns. In particular, many see China’s rhetoric and policies toward its neighbors—including several U.S. allies—as increasingly provocative and newly assertive, even aggressive. Of particular relevance since 2012 are Chinese military and paramilitary operations in waters and airspace surrounding islands administered by Japan, and various measures in the South China Sea widely considered destabilizing—most recently, militarized island-building of historically unprecedented scope.

This article engages underutilized Chinese-language sources to identify key trends and features of contemporary Chinese perspectives. The analysis reveals Beijing’s growing frustration, if not outright opposition, vis-à-vis the U.S. alliance system’s contribution to regional stability. Beginning in the 1990s, concerns deepened as U.S. alliances persisted, then strengthened—despite the disappearance of their original (and, in Beijing’s 1970s-1980s view, reasonable) *raison d’être*:

the Soviet Union. Since, Beijing has grown increasingly suspicious of U.S. intentions as Washington encourages Japan and other allies to bolster military capabilities and deepen links with the U.S. military and one another. And it notes with indignation as alliances’ scope evolve from what Beijing perceived as strict “bilateral” territorial defence to more “offensive” measures targeting “third-party’s interests”—allegedly including Beijing’s sovereignty claims to Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas. Public references to U.S. alliances’ salutary, stabilizing role appear increasingly rare.⁵ A view remarkably prominent in government-affiliated publications sees the U.S. alliance system, together with U.S. policies and rhetoric perceived as confrontational (e.g., “the pivot,” “Air-Sea Battle”), as evidence of machinations to “contain China’s peaceful rise” (*ezhi zhongguo heping jueqi* 遏制中国和平崛起). Since 1997, deepening frustrations with the regional status quo have driven Beijing’s promotion of alternative, alliance-free regional security frameworks.

These trends carry significance beyond obvious implications for policymakers. In particular, they raise questions about the notion—advocated by many international relations scholars—that U.S. forward-deployed forces and alliances ameliorate interstate political tensions and prevent otherwise destabilizing security competitions.⁶ Yet this view should not be dismissed; evidence presents a complicated picture. First, its deterrence effects are clear. And even Beijing has historically held contradictory wishes vis-à-vis the most pivotal U.S. security ally, Japan—simultaneously, if begrudgingly, appreciating U.S. forces in Japan as a reassuring “bottle cork” (*pingsai* 瓶塞) containing what many Chinese observers suspect to be latent Japanese “militarism” (*junguozhuyi* 军国主义) but opposing strengthening and expansion of the alliance’s geographical

⁵ Wu, et al. 2015

⁶ Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012; Christensen 1999

and functional scope.⁷ And a clearly interactive dynamic—whereby Beijing interprets what allies’ sincerely consider defensive responses to China’s growing military capabilities and threatening policies and rhetoric as offensive provocations threatening China’s own security—suggests security dilemmas are at least partially driving mutual arming.⁸

This article is organized as follows. It first introduces ideological and historical roots of Beijing’s basic thinking on alliances, including major slogans permeating CCP parlance. Next, it identifies major trends in Chinese views of U.S. alliances, general and specific to Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea, as well as ballistic missile defence.⁹ (Beijing considers the U.S.-Japan partnership most consequential, however, and the article allocates space accordingly.) A final empirical section assesses Beijing’s effort to champion alternative regional security frameworks free of what it considers “exclusive,” “zero-sum,” and destabilizing alliances. The penultimate section summarizes key trends and offers a critical analysis. The conclusion discusses the analysis’ broader implications for regional peace and stability, the U.S. alliance system, and U.S.-China relations.

This article aims to identify and critically assess general trends in Chinese interpretations of the U.S. alliance system, and to highlight deep disconnects with the interpretations in Washington and its allies. Neither China nor the CCP itself is a monolith, however; various perspectives on these complicated issues exist within China. The analysis herein is intended to complement the much larger English-language literature examining the views and responses of the U.S. and its allies vis-a-vis China. Identifying core features of both “sides”’ subjective assessments

⁷ Christensen 1999

⁸ Liff and Ikenberry 2014

⁹ The U.S.-Thai alliance is not a focus of Chinese analysis. Even in Washington it does not attract much attention. Case-in-point: the U.S. defence secretary’s major 2015 speech on the Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy does not even mention Thailand. Carter 2015

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of strategic interactions is a necessary step to deeper understanding of the contemporary Asia-Pacific’s increasingly complicated and tense geopolitics. And for the U.S. and its allies, awareness of evolving Chinese perspectives is crucial for effective policymaking—to formulate policy as though one “side” exists in a strategic vacuum is ill-advised.

Chinese Thinking on Alliances

Quintessentially Realpolitik Strategic Perspectives?

Perhaps somewhat ironically, given Beijing’s frequent criticism of Washington’s allegedly “zero-sum” (*linghe* 齡和) approach toward China, Chinese leaders are widely considered to have “worshipped at the high church of realpolitik,” and to have done so for centuries.¹⁰ CCP leaders have long interpreted security alliances as inherently “zero-sum” and exclusively negative—their assumed (sole) purpose is containment of threatening others. This view contrasts sharply with Washington’s contemporary positive-sum view, which sees alliances as public goods; useful guarantors of regional security and stability, especially in geopolitical contexts characterized by rapid change and uncertainty.¹¹

How far back Beijing’s basic view traces its roots is debatable, but applied in the closing decades of the Cold War as it exploited close alignment with Washington (and Tokyo) to contain a perceived hostile, existential threat from Moscow. And its basic contours persist to this day: Precisely *because* alliances proved useful during the largely zero-sum U.S.-Soviet confrontation, Beijing interprets their continued existence as *either* useless anachronisms—“Cold War relics”

¹⁰ Johnston 1998; Christensen 1999

¹¹ Shambaugh 2004, 70

(*lengzhan chanwu* 冷战产物)—no longer beneficial for Asia-Pacific stability, or aimed directly at containing what allies must—almost by definition—see as an expansionist, existential threat.

This basic lens carries important implications for how China’s leaders interpret contemporary trends. Over the past twenty years, together with its partners Washington has actively consolidated the U.S.-centered, traditionally “hub-and-spokes” alliance system significantly, with each alliance’s scope widening moderately. As alliances originally established after the Korean War, within China—especially PLA circles—these trends are seen as evincing Washington’s supposed zero-sum “Cold War thinking” (*lengzhan siwei* 冷战思维) and alleged intent to regard China’s rise like a 21st-century Soviet Union.

Reflecting this view, Ministry of State Security-affiliated scholar Dong Chunling defines “Cold War thinking” as: 1) “the principle of those who are not friends are enemies,” coupled with a constant search for potential competitors; 2) “overemphasis on the opposition of ideologies and values between countries”; and 3) “overemphasis on national political and military security.” Dong contends Washington’s China policy reflects this anachronistic mindset by hyping China’s developmental potential, identifying it as America’s sole peer competitor; presenting Beijing as an ideological threat (the “China model”); and frequently comparing U.S.-China relations to U.S.-Soviet relations.¹²

Beijing interprets recent U.S. alliance developments through this basically zero-sum lens. Since the late 1990s, authoritative government documents identify alliances as evidence of destabilizing U.S. “hegemonism and power politics” (*baquan zhuyi he qiangquan zhengzhi* 霸权主义和强权政治) motivated by a desire to contain China.¹³ As Lt. General Wang Guanzhong

¹² Dong 2014

¹³ *China’s National Defence* 1998

stated in 2014, “We oppose the practices of flexing up military alliances against a third party, resorting to the threat or use of force, or seeking so-called absolute security of one’s own at the cost of the security of others.”¹⁴

Historical and Ideological Roots of Beijing’s Alliance Allergy

While it is often remarked that Chinese strategists are quintessentially “Realist,” since the spectacular unraveling of its own alliance with Moscow in the 1960s Beijing has eschewed formal security alliances (“external balancing”), despite clear external threat perceptions.¹⁵ After several years of informal security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo vis-à-vis Moscow, China’s official “independent foreign policy” line (*duli zizhu de duiwai zhengce* 独立自主的对外政策) formally launched during the Twelfth Party Congress (1982), when CCP leaders reduced their calls for a united anti-Soviet front. As Hu Yaobang, CCP general secretary, stated, “China never attaches itself to any big power or group of powers, and never yields to pressure from any big power.” That same day, Deng Xiaoping stated that “Independence and self-reliance have always been and will forever be our basic stand.”¹⁶

This official stance has not changed significantly post-Cold War. Though some scholars have begun advocating countervailing alliances—especially with Russia—such calls are not mainstream, and remain politically controversial.¹⁷ Thirty years after Hu’s aforementioned speech, China’s 2013 defence white paper vows to “unswervingly pursue an independent foreign policy of peace.”¹⁸ In 2014, the PLA’s official newspaper analyzed a century of history to conclude “it’s

¹⁴ Wang 2014

¹⁵ Feng and Huang 2014, 17

¹⁶ Whiting 1983, 913

¹⁷ Yan 2012. Others criticize ahistoric claims that China has not benefited from past alignments. Tang 2010. See also Feng 2012. Circumstances could change, however. Some scholars note deepening cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, though still far short of a formal defence pact. Korolev 2016

¹⁸ *DECAF* 2013

time to say ‘goodbye’ to military alliances,” that alliances are “historical relics and leftovers from the 20th century, an old kind of international relations theory, products of international politics, and run counter to the current trends of seeking peace and joint prosperity.”¹⁹ In short, China’s interpretation of security alliances as inherently zero-sum and exclusive is longstanding. It remains influential in Beijing today, powerfully shaping CCP reactions to regional trends.

Chinese Post-Cold War Responses to General Trends and Key U.S. Alliances

Overview

Three basic trends manifest in Chinese views of the post-Cold War U.S. alliance system: First, U.S. policies are perceived as destabilizing drivers of regional militarization and alliance strengthening, enabling allies’ alleged provocations vis-à-vis Beijing. Second, nuanced recognition in Beijing of a strategic interaction at play—that countries may be reacting to China’s own policies considered provocative or destabilizing and/or uncertainty about its intentions—is conspicuously rare. Meanwhile, consideration of the alliance system’s positive role in underpinning the very regional stability enabling China’s own rapid development during a volatile era is also uncommon.

In an influential essay a decade ago, Chinese scholar Wu Xinbo argued that Washington’s policies augured the termination of the U.S.-centered alliance system’s “silver lining” as a prophylactic against allied (specifically, Japanese) rearmament.²⁰ Since the mid-1990s the United States is seen as galvanizing allies to expand their military capabilities, to bolster ties with Washington and one another, and to widen their security policies’ scope. The net result is an

¹⁹ Xia 2014

²⁰ Wu 2005

alleged effort to “encircle” (*weidu* 围堵) China. China’s defence white papers repeatedly criticize U.S. alliances as reflecting power politics and zero-sum thinking. Chinese analysts typically the U.S.-Japan alliance trajectory as most unsettling. Washington is seen as actively enabling Tokyo’s alleged remilitarization. Regardless of the objective reality, seen through a lens tinted by China’s experience in the 1930s and 1940s, contemporary anti-Japanese nationalism, and decades-old Chinese concerns about Japan’s possible reemergence as a military superpower (*junshi daguo* 军事大国)—modern China’s worst nightmare—these developments are deeply controversial in Beijing.²¹ In contrast, Chinese leaders were previously more assured by Washington’s alleged role containing Japan’s military development and the scope of its security policies.²²

Another driver of Beijing’s negative reaction to the alliance system has grown increasingly prominent since 2011. Beijing perceives the Obama Administration’s “Rebalance” (nee “pivot”) strategy as destabilizing, allegedly providing cover for U.S. allies to provoke China as territorial disputes fester. This perception manifest at the 2014 Shangri-la Dialogue, where one influential Chinese analyst argued that the Rebalance emboldened U.S. allies to “pick fights” with Beijing.²³ A *China Daily* editorial assailed U.S. policy as aimed at containing Beijing and criticized Washington’s failure to “rein in” its “unruly” security partners and for “ganging up [against China] with its troublemaking allies.”²⁴ In this context, U.S. security commitments are seen as backstopping its partners to adopt provocations that they allegedly would not “dare” without U.S. backing.²⁵ Overlooked in most Chinese commentary: Washington and its allies’ position that these measures are defensive reactions to Beijing’s policies and rhetoric.

²¹ Sun 2014

²² Wu 2005

²³ Minnick 2014

²⁴ *China Daily* 2014

²⁵ Ren 2014

Rather, in Beijing allies’ behavior since the 2011 “Rebalance” announcement are often interpreted in one of two manners. Whereas some analysts dismiss China’s neighbors as “pawns” (*qizi* 旗子) in a U.S.-China game of great power politics. Such interpretation typically deductively impute America’s supposed objective to “contain China’s rise” and maintain “hegemonic dominance” in the region.²⁶ Alternatively, Washington’s rhetoric and policies enable allies to actively contest China’s interests and assert their own “illegal” and “inappropriate” claims. As a 2014 *PLA Daily* article argued, “the foxes exploit the tiger’s (i.e. U.S.) might” (*hujiahuwei* 狐假虎威).²⁷

Excepting occasional references to their role diluting Japan’s alleged militarist ambitions, CCP leadership circles rarely make statements suggesting a shared view with Washington that the U.S. alliance system is a “public good” contributing to the regional stability enabling China’s rapid economic development; or that it deters dispute escalation between countries whose relations are plagued by mutual distrust. Nor does one often encounter references to a possible security dilemma-esque strategic interaction—i.e., that China’s supposedly defensively-motivated buildup and policies may be catalyzing similarly defensive reactions from U.S. allies and others—much less that China may have been the provocateur, or that sincere concerns about future uncertainty may be major drivers.

Japan

Beijing’s deepening frustration manifests most clearly vis-à-vis U.S.-Japan alliance, which Washington and Tokyo consistently identify as the “cornerstone for regional peace and security.”²⁸

²⁶ *GXD* 2014; *Ibid*

²⁷ Li 2014

²⁸ White House 2014

Not coincidentally, the center-of-gravity of post-Cold War Chinese analysis—and criticism—focuses on it.

The Cold War

For reasons of history, geographical proximity, ideology, and actual and potential material power, Beijing’s suspicions of Japan’s intentions have persisted since 1945. Indeed, throughout much of the Cold War U.S. forward-deployed forces received tacit support from Beijing, which saw them as a deterrent to a feared Japanese military buildup.

By the mid-1970s, however, the decade-old Sino-Soviet split, coupled with Soviet expansionism and Moscow’s massing of armed forces in its far east, transformed perspectives in Beijing. Whereas a few years earlier Chinese observers bemoaned Japanese “militarism” as “an indisputable reality,” by 1972 Beijing normalized relations and began supporting Japanese defence buildups.²⁹ At Beijing’s behest, 1978’s Sino-Japanese treaty of peace and friendship and Sino-American joint communique contained “anti-hegemony” clauses targeting Moscow.³⁰ China acknowledged the Soviet threat to Japan³¹ and backed Japan’s defence expansion and alliance with Washington. During his 1978 Japan trip, Deng Xiaoping called both “natural” developments.³² In 1980, Chinese leaders praised the treaty as “effective strategically against the Soviet Union,” supported further Japanese defence enhancements, and advocated cooperation together with Europe in opposition to Moscow’s hegemonism. Even the PLA stated “total agreement” (*daisansei* 大賛成) with Japan’s defence expansion, remarkably calling on Tokyo to increase defence spending two-fold.³³

²⁹ Cheng 1984, 92

³⁰ Strasser 1978

³¹ Wang 1980

³² Cheng 1984, 96

³³ *Asahi Shimbun*, 1980

Post-Cold War

Consistent with Beijing’s aforementioned tendency to view all alliances as zero-sum and exclusive, China’s support for Japan’s defence strengthening and the alliance collapsed along with their mutual Soviet adversary. Concomitant with allied efforts to bolster and widen the U.S.-Japan security partnership’s scope—and Japan’s role and capabilities within it—post-Cold War the trend has invited deepening Chinese opposition. Some Chinese analysts illustrate these concerns with colorful metaphors, e.g., an “egg shell” (*danke* 蛋壳) insulating Japan until its capabilities mature and it “hatches” as a far more self-reliant military power.³⁴

Beijing’s suspicions deepened in the mid-1990s, especially following the April 1996 Clinton-Hashimoto Joint Declaration on Security. Originally motivated by earlier developments concerning North Korea’s nuclear weapon’s program, Clinton’s trip to Japan to sign the Declaration was postponed for domestic political reasons. The long-planned Declaration was delayed until mere weeks after the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis—timing which transformed Beijing’s interpretation of its intent.

In 1997, the first-ever revision of the 1978 U.S.-Japan Guidelines of Defence Cooperation expanded Japan’s role in regional security that, due largely to timing, Beijing again interpreted as aimed at Taiwan. The Guidelines contained an ambiguous term—“situations in areas surrounding Japan”—a widening of alliance scope provocatively perceived in China to enable Japanese troops to participate in conflicts overseas, including the Taiwan Strait. The importance to Beijing of these developments was reflected in a wave of related articles in Chinese, Japanese, and Western journals in its immediate aftermath.³⁵

³⁴ Liu 1998., cited in Christensen 1999, 62. Liang and Ding 1999

³⁵ Examples: Liu 1996; Zhang, Wang, and Han 1997; Liu 1997; Takagi 1998; Masuda 1999; Garrett and Glaser 1997; Christensen 1999

Following its provocative 1998 test-firing of an inter-continental ballistic missile over the Japanese archipelago, North Korea threat-driven alliance enhancements continued, including newly-launched joint theater missile defence research and development. Evincing a clear trend, Chinese analysts interpreted the stated threat-based rationale as an excuse for Japan’s allegedly long-coveted military buildup.³⁶

Thus, by the late 1990s many in China were convinced that the alliance was evolving rapidly from an enduring “shield” (*tate* 盾) to a provocative “spear” (*hoko* 矛) threatening China directly.³⁷ Washington appeared to be encouraging Japan to expand its military capabilities and roles, including possibly even in a potential U.S.-China conflict in the Taiwan Strait. In 1999, *PLA Daily* asserted that Tokyo was accelerating its pursuit of “military great power” status.³⁸

Post-9/11 Developments

Allied efforts to make the alliance more capable, interoperable, and expansive in scope continued in the new millennium. Before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Beijing perceived the Bush Administration to be adopting a threatening view of China as a future peer competitor. After 9/11, Washington’s focus shifted, yet Beijing still saw alliance developments as threatening its interests—e.g., U.S. pushing Japan to revise its Constitution’s Article 9 “peace clause” and lift its self-imposed prohibition on collective self-defence. Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro were seen as transforming Japan’s defence posture and role in the alliance beyond strict territorial defence and toward a more assertive regional and global partnership. In 2004, Japan passed a series of security-related laws, inter alia enabling Japan to support U.S. forces overseas logistically. Within months, Tokyo deployed JSDF engineers to Iraq—without a UN mandate. As with most

³⁶ Meng 1997

³⁷ Takagi 2003, 84

³⁸ Liang and Ding 1999

Japan-related developments, this trend was widely interpreted in Beijing through a historical lens, one tinted heavily by concomitant political and diplomatic controversies over history textbooks and Koizumi’s visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

Beyond these general trends, Beijing interpreted other measures adopted by Washington and Tokyo as directly challenging China’s interests. A major Japanese defence document for the first time deemed China a security threat. A 2005 joint statement listed among the allies’ “common strategic objectives” “encouraging the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait.” Meanwhile, alliance interoperability, training, and exercises all deepened. Particularly noteworthy was a reported defence plan for retaking Japanese islands upon which Chinese forces had landed.³⁹ And in the allies’ increasingly active promotion of “value-based diplomacy” (*kachikan gaiko* 価値観外交) centered on human rights, democracy, and freedom many in China perceived ideological “othering” of Beijing.⁴⁰

A 2007 government analysis reportedly shared with Chinese military leaders concluded that the alliance had become a “long-term threat” (*changyuan weixie* 长远威胁).⁴¹ Beijing interpreted Japan’s changing defence posture as increasingly “aggressive,” despite the (remarkable) assertion that Japan had never been more secure.⁴² These twin perceptions—clearly at odds with those of most observers in Washington and Tokyo—exacerbated persistent narratives widespread in Beijing: that of long-dormant Japanese militarism’s reemergence—with the U.S. as its champion, Washington’s supposedly hegemonic regional machinations, and alliance cooperation progressively targeting China’s claimed territory and interests.

³⁹ *JFJB* 2006; Wu 2005, 123

⁴⁰ Aso 2006

⁴¹ Dan 2007

⁴² Wu 2005, 119

Also since 2011, frictions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—claimed by both countries but administered by Japan—coupled with major security reforms and efforts to tighten the alliance during the second primeministership of Abe Shinzo (2012-present) are increasingly salient. Under Abe, Japan is seen as behaving provocatively on sensitive historical issues, actively pursuing “militarization,” while simultaneously and unabashedly “hyping China threats” (*chaozuo zhongguo weixielun* 炒作中国威胁论) to bolster domestic backing for these measures.⁴³

Since Japan’s September 2012 so-called “nationalization” (*guoyouhua* 国有化) of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, circumstances have worsened precipitously. In this context, Beijing interprets Tokyo improving JSDF capabilities and tightening U.S.-Japan security ties as directly threatening China’s territorial sovereignty—increasingly incendiary flashpoints in Chinese domestic politics under Xi Jinping. One government analyst castigated Japan’s “unprecedented assertiveness,” blaming Abe for “the most serious [bilateral] confrontation of the past four decades;” seeking to “encircle China” by “intervention” in the South China Sea; and “provok[ing] some ASEAN members to confront China.” In this view, the allies are pursuing “partners globally to contain the rising China[sic.]”⁴⁴ In response, as Chinese paramilitary forces increasingly challenged Japan’s administration operationally, Beijing attempted to drive a diplomatic wedge between Washington and Tokyo over history issues, including a campaign to present Japan as undermining the post-1945 international order (*riben tiaozhan zhanhou guoji zhixu* 日本挑战战后国际秩序).

The effort appeared to backfire. In response, Washington stated clearly that the security treaty applies to the islands. Widespread misinterpretations in China of this policy as indicating an

⁴³ Xinhua 2013

⁴⁴ Jiang 2015, 438; 440-1

abrupt change exacerbated negative backlash in Beijing.⁴⁵ Also seen as provocative (and inextricable from territorial disputes festering between China and many of its maritime neighbors): expanded U.S.-Japan joint exercises and Japan’s first-ever amphibious forces; more active allied rhetorical support, capacity building, and exercises with several Southeast Asian nations also having territorial disputes with China; and possible allied cooperation in the South China Sea. Together with the Japan’s 2014 decision to allow limited exercise of collective self-defence, and with major security-related legislation now in effect, these developments—supported by Washington—are interpreted as further undoing the alliance’s traditional “bottle cork” role.⁴⁶ Two government analysts argue they are motivated by a view of China as an “imaginary enemy” (*jiaxiang diguo* 假想敌国) and likely to backfire, possibly even becoming an impetus for conflict.⁴⁷

In response to these changes and consistent with China’s basic ideology concerning alliances, the 2014 Blue Book on National Security criticizes the “Cold-war thinking” of Washington and Tokyo and their alleged efforts to “constrain” China.⁴⁸ What Beijing previously interpreted as a strictly defensive security treaty to ensure Japan’s territorial security is increasingly interpreted as offensive, actively targeting Beijing-claimed territory beyond Taiwan and emboldening Japan to provoke China on territorial issues in the East and South China Seas. To others, deepening allied cooperation is simply the latest manifestation of their expanding “hegemonic ideology” “against the trends of the times.”⁴⁹ Abe’s active diplomacy is seen as “intensifying cooperation with neighboring countries while containing China’s rise.”⁵⁰ In

⁴⁵ Landler 2014. For official PRC response to Obama’s statement, see Xinhua 2014a

⁴⁶ Ren 2014

⁴⁷ Di and Wang 2016, 65

⁴⁸ Liu 2014, 1

⁴⁹ Li 2015, 38

⁵⁰ Zhang 2015, 80

response, Beijing’s official mantra that U.S. alliances “should not hurt the interests of third parties” has gained prominence in Chinese discourse. Coupled with the oft-heard call that Washington and Tokyo “should not meddle in territorial disputes between other countries,” it has emerged as a core feature of Chinese criticisms of the U.S.-Japan alliance since 2012.⁵¹

Views of the alliance as a bottle cork do persist, albeit in often indirect and enervated form, such as when China calls for America to restrain Tokyo or expresses (tacit) appreciation of U.S. extended deterrence’s role keeping a lid on alleged pro-nuclear sentiment in Japan. Yet such statements appear increasingly rare. Beijing clearly sees the alliance encouraging Tokyo to expand JSDF roles, missions, capabilities, and interoperability with the U.S. military and Washington’s other key allies and partners (e.g., Australia, see below). Meanwhile, its expanding geographical and substantive scope is interpreted as increasingly threatening Beijing’s sovereignty claims.

Australia

Though Australia has not traditionally been a key target of Chinese analyses of U.S. alliances, circumstances have changed—especially in the past decade. Canberra’s expanded military cooperation with Washington and other U.S. partners has exacerbated concerns in Beijing about both the bilateral alliance’s trajectory and “multilateralization” of the traditionally hub-and-spokes alliance system. Especially sensitive is Australia’s expanding cooperation with fellow U.S. ally Japan.

Though the occasionally-raised fear of an “Asian NATO” appears dubious and is certainly premature,⁵² Chinese concerns are not deepening in a strategic vacuum. Washington and Canberra

⁵¹ *JFJB* 2012

⁵² Hu 2006

have discussed deepening coordination with Japan and the Republic of Korea since at least 2001.⁵³ As territorial disputes have festered, more recently the Chinese military highlights joint statements citing the importance of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and greater military transparency in China.⁵⁴ To some analysts, such cooperation presents a “new variable” in the region’s security.⁵⁵ After Obama’s 2011 announcement (in Australia) of a major strategic plan involving, inter alia, increased U.S. forces in Australia, a Chinese government spokesperson lambasted the alliance as contrary to “the interests of peace” in the region and further “manifestation of Cold War thinking” in Washington.⁵⁶ Two years later, a deputy chief of the PLA General Staff and Central Committee member, asserted that Washington’s “strategic objective” behind motivating these trends is “controlling the Pacific and the Atlantic.”⁵⁷

Two increasingly salient recent developments are deepening Chinese concern regarding efforts to bolster ties between Canberra and other U.S. allies, especially Japan, and alliance “interference” in territorial disputes. 2012 saw unprecedented Australia-Japan acquisition and cross-servicing and information security agreements.⁵⁸ Canberra and Tokyo have also reached an agreement on defence technology that will, inter alia, allow advanced military equipment exports for the first time.⁵⁹

Rhetorically, the recently established Australia-Japan “2+2” dialogue’s 2014 joint statement for the first time expressed “strong opposition to the use of force or coercion to unilaterally alter the status quo in the East China Sea.” At trilateral meetings of defence ministers,

⁵³ AFP 2001

⁵⁴ Sun 2011

⁵⁵ Fang 2013

⁵⁶ JFJB 2011

⁵⁷ Qi 2013

⁵⁸ MODJ 2012

⁵⁹ Pang 2014. For the 2+2 joint statement, see Minister for Foreign Affairs 2014. For trilateral statement, see *Defence.gov* 2014

Canberra, Tokyo, and Washington issued similar statements, even highlighting common interests and values. Meanwhile, China has reacted negatively to a U.S. call for a “quadrilateral” security dialogue involving India, Japan, and Australia—expressing concerns it could target third parties.⁶⁰ A five-year retrospective in a Ministry of State Security-affiliated journal concludes: under the “Rebalance” Australia is strengthening its alliance with Washington, deepening interoperability, and expanding the scope of cooperation—to unprecedented degree.⁶¹ As it concerns developments with Japan, some government analysts suggest that Australia and Japan have already formed a “quasi-alliance.”⁶²

Philippines

The U.S.-Philippines alliance has also not traditionally been a prominent target of Chinese criticism. As the South China Sea simmers, however, circumstances have changed. Recent conflagrations over disputed territory—especially a tense 2012 contretemps over Scarborough Shoal—and the 2014 U.S.-Philippines Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) have transformed Chinese interpretations. Nevertheless, because of its relative weakness Chinese writings sometimes dismiss Manila as a mere “pawn” in U.S. efforts to “contain China.”⁶³

More recently, however, Chinese views of the U.S.-Philippines relationship have evolved in a manner suggesting basic consistency with trends vis-à-vis other U.S. alliances. Chinese government analysts see both Washington’s and Tokyo’s deepening ties to Manila and other ASEAN countries and their alleged “intervention” in the South China Sea as aimed at containing China.⁶⁴ For example, a Chinese Academy of Social Sciences expert described EDCA—which

⁶⁰ *India Today* 2016

⁶¹ Yang 2016

⁶² Zhang 2015, 59

⁶³ *GXD* 2014

⁶⁴ Song 2015, 479-80

allows U.S. forces rotational access to five military facilities in the Philippines—as Washington’s effort “to militarise” territorial disputes. Meanwhile, Xinhua argued it would further “embolden” the Philippines to provoke China.⁶⁵ *International Herald Leader* contended that—the rollout’s “high-sounding rhetoric” to the contrary—EDCA’s “essence” was Washington’s and Manila’s desire to “jointly fac(e) the so-called ‘China threat.’” It, too, repeated the oft-cited interpretation that “the objective of America’s return to Asia is to contain China’s rise.”⁶⁶

Most recently, evincing concerns about alliances’ alleged expanding scope in March 2016 China’s Foreign Ministry demanded that U.S.-Philippines cooperation not target “a third party,” accused the allies of jeopardizing “regional peace and stability” and “militarizing” the South China Sea, and “resolutely oppose[d]” Manila’s receipt of Japanese patrol aircraft.⁶⁷ Thus, beyond deepening security ties with Washington, Beijing also appears increasingly concerned about Manila’s “increasingly confrontational attitude” and expanding security relationships with other U.S. allies, particularly Japan.⁶⁸ As one example, in July 2016 Beijing vehemently rejected as “null and void” the (from China’s perspective) very unfavorable ruling on its South China Sea territorial claims by an international tribunal, a case brought by Manila, encouraged by Washington, and which Beijing aimed to discredit by claiming the (Japanese) judge who chose the arbitrators was “rightest” and “unfriendly to China.”⁶⁹ The response so far: apparent escalation and criticism of other U.S. allies for publicly supporting the Hague’s ruling, but with a mixed record of compliance.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ *BBC* 2014

⁶⁶ *GXD* 2014

⁶⁷ Xinhua 2016a; Xinhua 2016b

⁶⁸ Song 2015, 482

⁶⁹ MFA 2016; SCMP 2016

⁷⁰ Johnson 2016; Ku and Mirasola 2016

Republic of Korea

While media discourse early in the current Park administration hyped Beijing’s efforts to court Seoul, Chinese leaders have long harbored concerns about the U.S.-South Korea alliance. These concerns are moderated strategically by the alliance’s overriding concern with Pyongyang and Beijing’s own concerns about North Korea; bilateral trade volumes exceeding Seoul’s combined trade with Washington and Tokyo; and mutual irritation vis-a-vis Tokyo over history. Yet Beijing’s concerns about bilateral alliance and the possibility of trilateral security cooperation with Tokyo, too, are fixed.⁷¹ More recent flareups over the U.S.-ROK planned introduction of Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) ballistic missile defence system, which Beijing has stated clearly “will seriously harm China-ROK relations,” suggest an upper bound on China-ROK cooperation.⁷² In short, the 60 year-old U.S.-ROK alliance’s fundamentals appear sound.

In contrast, Beijing and Seoul normalized relations in 1992, and despite deepening cooperation, shared geopolitical purpose is lacking. Outside China, Beijing is widely seen as insulating Pyongyang from foreign pressure, valuing stability over denuclearization and reunification. Consistent with its traditions, whenever the ROK bolsters security ties with America, China dismisses the alliance as a “Cold War relic.”⁷³ 2010 developments present a case-in-point. Beijing abstained from censuring North Korea even after it sank an ROK naval ship and fired with artillery on ROK territory—two *causae belli* killing 50 Korean military personnel and civilians. Instead, China castigated the allies for joint exercises in response, called the alliance a security threat, and held its own PLA exercises.⁷⁴ The years since have seen China’s controversial roll-out of an air defence identification zone over parts of South Korea’s exclusive economic zone and

⁷¹ Zhang 2013

⁷² Teng 2015b, 248

⁷³ For example, see *Chosun Ilbo* 2008

⁷⁴ Han 2012; Demick and Glionna 2010

airspace surrounding Jeju Island, multiple fatal encounters between ROK coast guardsmen and Chinese fishing boats, and mounting frustration in Seoul with perceived Chinese attempts to interfere in ROK security policy (see below). Remarkably, even Washington’s efforts to engage allies vis-à-vis North Korea’s nuclear weapons are interpreted by some government analysts as primarily aimed at containing China.⁷⁵

Missile Defence

The Chinese government has long interpreted Washington’s vision for missile defence with Asia-Pacific allies as threatening. Though aimed in the first order at North Korea’s rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, within China Washington’s policies are often seen as moves toward a regional security system designed to contain “other countries.”⁷⁶ Such concerns are often abstract, but can become concrete. Though they are often presented as a recent development, concerns about theater missile defence date back at least two decades.⁷⁷

After Pyongyang’s 1998 Taepodong launch over Japan’s home islands, the U.S. and Japan began joint BMD-related R&D. In the years since, they have fielded specific capabilities— independently and in concert. Consistent with reactions to other alliance-related developments, the PLA castigates these bilateral efforts as demonstrating “Cold War thinking,” in some instances summarily dismissing concerns as unwarranted and attributable to a “missile allergy.”⁷⁸ Regardless of the intended target, possible multilateralization of BMD in response to the increasingly clear-and-present danger of North Korea clearly unsettles Beijing.⁷⁹ In 2014 Washington and Canberra agreed “to work together to counter the growing threat of ballistic

⁷⁵ Yu 2015, 129

⁷⁶ See for example, *JFJB* 1999; Urayama 2004

⁷⁷ Ferguson 1999

⁷⁸ Cao 2007

⁷⁹ *Congressional Research Service* 2013, esp. 13–15

missiles in the Asia-Pacific region,” establishing a working group to explore potential Australian contributions to regional BMD.⁸⁰ Coupled with existing related cooperation (e.g. at Pine Gap, a joint facility), trends in BMD and conventional prompt global strike capabilities pose new challenges for China’s nuclear deterrent. They also evince the strategic dilemma allies face of addressing specific threats posed by North Korea and long-term regional stability.⁸¹ Beyond U.S. cooperation on missile defence with Japan and Australia, in 2016 Seoul consented to U.S. deployment of THAAD, a system Japan is also now considering and which some in China see as a precursor to a destabilizing chain of missile defence systems from Alaska to Taiwan.⁸² Beijing has publicly opposed THAAD deployment in South Korea as against “stability and strategic balance in the region,” stated that it would damage China-ROK relations, and put significant pressure on Seoul to reject the system—despite allied claims that THAAD poses no serious threat to China’s robust, distant missile arsenal.⁸³ After Seoul requested that Beijing not interfere in its security policy decision-making, *People’s Daily* admonished the ROK not to allow itself to be controlled by “the man behind the curtain”— Washington—which would worsen competition between China and the United States.⁸⁴

China’s Proposed Alternatives for Regional Security Architecture

Viewed through the lens that China’s leaders have chosen to employ over the past two decades, it is hardly surprising that Chinese leaders are increasingly negative about the contribution of U.S. alliances to regional peace and stability. Grievances and frustrations manifest

⁸⁰ “AUSMIN 2014 Joint Communiqué,” fact sheet, *Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/us/ausmin/ausmin14-joint-communication.html>.

⁸¹ Futter and Zala 2015

⁸² Teng 2015a

⁸³ Chen and Gale 2014; *Yonhap* 2014; Choe 2015; Song 2014

⁸⁴ Li 2015

most conspicuously in Beijing’s rhetoric, military buildup, and development of countermeasures to specific perceived threats. Yet alternative visions for Asian security promulgated by China’s leaders are also revealing, in ways intended and not.

The 1997 “New Security Concept” and the 2014 “Asian Security Concept” constitute China’s most salient proposals of institutional alternatives to alliances for regional peace and stability. Reflecting longstanding Chinese alliance ideology, Beijing frames them explicitly as foils to U.S. alliances, and allegedly superior, enlightened pathways to “universal”—as opposed to “zero-sum”—security. From both a theoretical and practical standpoint, however, as articulated by Chinese leaders both concepts appear best understood as abstract, if sincere, expressions of Beijing’s frustration rather than concrete, viable alternatives factoring in contemporary realities. Most significantly, they fail to present operationalizable pathways or address other states’ traditional security concerns—themselves shaped at least partly by Beijing’s own policies and rhetoric.

“New Security Concept” (1997)

First introduced to many foreign observers in China’s 1998 Defence White Paper, Beijing’s “New Security Concept” (*xin anquanguan* 新安全观; below, NSC) was most remarkable for being the first clear case of a Chinese vision for post-Cold War international security.⁸⁵ Not coincidentally, NSC was originally conceived in opposition to the 1996 U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration, and part of a diplomatic effort to forestall further consolidation of the “China threat theory” (*zhongguo weixielun* 中国威胁论) in the region following China’s saber-rattling in the Taiwan Strait and controversial actions vis-à-vis Mischief Reef in 1995-1996.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Finkelstein n.d., 197–198

⁸⁶ Takagi 2003, 83–84; Finkelstein n.d., 200–201

In summer 1997, Chinese leaders argued that the new security situation demanded a “new security concept” not based on military armaments and military alliances. Instead, the NSC called for 1) non-interference in internal affairs based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence; 2) strengthening economic cooperation, joint prosperity, and reducing gaps between countries; and 3) peace and security based on dialogue, cooperation, mutual understanding, and peaceful resolution of interstate disputes.⁸⁷ Its name to the contrary, NSC proved to be, at its core, a statement of political and economic principle rather than a military initiative.⁸⁸ It did not evolve into an operationalizable regional security framework acknowledging extant traditional regional security concerns. Rather, it basically asserted that security could be assured by nations just not “resort[ing] to military threats or aggression.”

In a seminal analysis, David Finkelstein concludes with significant benefit of hindsight that NSC failed to gain traction outside China given its lack of concrete or operationalizable policy substance; its anti-U.S. “packaging”; and widespread regional support for (and active strengthening of) the very alliance-centered approach Beijing intended NSC to replace.⁸⁹ Though framed as “universally applicable,” it was presented in opposition to the U.S.’ “Cold War mentality” characterized by military alliances and “blocs.” This “anti-” quality appeared again in China’s first-ever defence white paper (1998) and its 2000 follow-up.⁹⁰ Most significantly, the NSC was strictly “preventative,”—for example, offering no framework for how states should manage crises when “political relations and negotiation break down.”⁹¹ In contrast, Washington and allies would

⁸⁷ Takagi 2003, 72

⁸⁸ Finkelstein n.d., 201–203

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 204

⁹⁰ Finkelstein n.d., 197–198

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 208

argue, the U.S. alliance system is intended to function as a deterrent to ensure diplomacy is always the first line of resort, and as a hedge if diplomacy should fail.

NSC is best understood as evidence of Beijing’s dissatisfaction with the status quo amidst alliance strengthening and consolidation, coupled with concerns about China’s regional image. Though consistent with China’s ideological predispositions, NSC appears to have offered no clearly operationalizable alternative vision for regional peace and stability. The latter would require recognition of and means to address extant security concerns of U.S. allies and partners—especially North Korea, but also China’s own rapidly growing military capabilities; transparency; policies vis-à-vis vast sovereignty claims; and uncertainty about both Beijing’s and the region’s future trajectory. Ironically, when evaluated from the very Realist perspective alleged to permeate Chinese strategic thinking, one of NSC’s critical flaws seems to be failure to recognize widespread insecurity and mistrust and the anarchical nature of international politics.

“Asian Security Concept” (2014)

Under President Xi Jinping and by its own admission, Beijing increasingly “proactively” pursues its interests.⁹² In his widely-cited 2014 CICA speech, Xi championed the “Asian Security Concept” (*yazhou anquan guan* 亚洲安全观; below, ASC).⁹³ Demonstrating clear frustration with U.S. alliances, he asserted that “it is disadvantageous to the common security of the region if military alliances with third parties are strengthened.” Xi called instead for a “new regional security cooperation architecture,” including a “defence consultation mechanism” and “security

⁹² MFA 2014. Different Chinese terms capture this basic sentiment, including *fenfa youwei*, *gengjia jiji*, and *gengjia zhudong*.

⁹³ The CICA group includes Vietnam, South Korea, and Thailand, but neither the United States itself nor U.S. maritime allies Japan, Australia, and the Philippines (though Washington, Tokyo, and Manila are observers).

response center” for regional emergencies.⁹⁴ Controversially, Xi proclaimed that regional security affairs should be given back “to the people in Asia.”⁹⁵

ASC is designed as an alternative to what many Chinese observers disparage as Washington’s “stubbornly stick(ing) to the doctrine of absolute security.” Like NSC, ASC is intended as a corrective for the destabilizing “Cold War mentality” Beijing believes characterizes U.S. alliances and recent developments such as the Rebalance and Japan’s lifting of the complete ban on collective self-defence.⁹⁶ Leading commentators contrast ASC with an alleged “myth” that consolidating the alliance system will contribute to regional peace and stability.⁹⁷ An authoritative Xinhua editorial contrasts ASC directly with U.S. alliances, which it identifies as a “Cold War security structure [in which] some big powers pursue security as a ‘zero-sum game’ and keep strengthening military alliances in the region while excluding the common interests of other countries.” It castigates Washington and its allies as striving for “security in isolation from the rest” and “on the basis of others’ insecurity.” It dismisses U.S. alliances as the “Achilles Heel” of and the major impediment to “a peaceful Asia.”⁹⁸

As with its 1997 predecessor, Beijing promulgated ASC amidst accelerating alliance consolidation and deepening Southeast Asian concerns about China’s rhetoric and actions in the South China Sea.⁹⁹ However well-intended as China’s “increasingly prominent” and “responsible” contribution to international security,¹⁰⁰ ASC has apparent deficiencies similar to NSC. It does not clearly address neighbors’ existing insecurities or explicate a process by which to (gradually?) shift from the status quo to China’s desired future. Rather, official commentary presents the two

⁹⁴ *VOA News* 2014

⁹⁵ Wuthnow 2014

⁹⁶ Kun 2014; Ruan 2015b, 276

⁹⁷ Ruan 2014

⁹⁸ *Xinhua* 2014c

⁹⁹ Takagi 2014

¹⁰⁰ Ruan 2015b, 277-8

Liff “China and the U.S. Alliance System” (Forthcoming at *The China Quarterly*) AM Version as mutually-exclusive.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, ASC appears focused on nontraditional security, rather than the traditional security concerns, uncertainty, and mistrust currently driving the very alliance strengthening Beijing opposes.

From both theoretical and practical standpoints, therefore, ASC does not seem to entail a clearly operationalizable alternative to the U.S.-centered alliance system. Perhaps this is why Xi announced it at a conference of which the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines—and seven of the ten member states of ASEAN—are not members, and were not even present. Despite claims that ASC won “widespread recognition and support” across Asia, there is little evidence of this—at least among U.S. allies.¹⁰²

Discussion

Several notable trends manifest in the post-Cold War evolution of Chinese views of the U.S. alliance system:

- 1) Ideological and historical opposition to alliances appears firmly ingrained in the CCP and PLA, manifests powerfully in interpretations of contemporary real-world developments, and will not be easily overcome.
- 2) Lacking a specific, shared traditional security threat since the Soviet Union’s collapse, Beijing opposes efforts to expand U.S. allies’ capabilities and operational scope.
- 3) Traditionally focused on the U.S.-Japan alliance, Beijing appears increasingly concerned about Washington’s consolidating bilateral alliances with Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea.

¹⁰¹ *Xinhua* 2014b

¹⁰² Su 2015, 308

- 4) Chinese leaders are also increasingly unsettled by two new variables: nascent alliance multilateralization (e.g., Australia-Japan) and joint statements criticizing Beijing’s rhetoric and policies, especially vis-à-vis territorial disputes.
- 5) Concomitantly, Beijing perceives a shift from alliances’ defensive orientation focused on strict homeland defense to more regional and global roles, including alleged direct targeting of China’s territorial and other interests.
- 6) Erstwhile appreciation of alliances’ “silver lining” as stabilizing factors (e.g., a “bottle cork” containing Japan) has declined significantly. References to U.S. alliances’ role stabilizing a dynamic and potentially volatile region—even in regard to non-China specific issues—are increasingly rare. Beijing often dismisses allies’ concerns as “pretexts” to strengthen capabilities.¹⁰³

These trends throw into sharp relief an increasingly salient disconnect. Conspicuously absent from official—and many unofficial—Chinese criticisms are positive-sum rationales the United States and its allies use to explain the alliance system’s persistence and strengthening: existential threats posed by North Korea’s numerous provocations and rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities; deepening insecurity vis-à-vis Beijing’s growing military (and paramilitary) capabilities, policies and rhetoric vis-à-vis various sovereignty claims widely considered provocative; and—more abstractly—uncertainty surrounding the region’s (unknowable) future trajectory (in which China’s role is only one factor). In a dynamic region characterized by rapid economic growth, growing military budgets, and deep political mistrust (including between U.S. allies), and several potential nuclear proliferators, outside China the U.S.

¹⁰³ Jiang 2015, 444-5

presence and alliance system is generally seen as contributing to regional stability (and, incidentally, enabling China’s economic—and, by extension, military—development). In contrast, official Chinese commentary on ASC is revealing: references to the region’s half-century of peace and stability prior to 2014 do not even mention the U.S. alliance system as a factor. Rather, U.S. alliances are defined as ASC’s primary foil and the obstacle to “universal” regional security.

Yet, despite clear frustration with—even outright opposition to—U.S. alliances reflected in Chinese analyses, it is not clear that Beijing possesses the will, much less the ability, to actively undermine the alliance system, much less form a countervailing alternative. Regarding the former, post-2010 efforts have typically failed, if not backfired, with allies accelerating tightening with Washington and one another. Beijing’s proposals for “alliance-free” alternative architectures remain abstract and aspirational. Concerning the latter, despite scholars’ justifiable attribution to Chinese leaders of Realist strategic thinking, it is remarkable that formal alliances remain taboo. Circumstances could change, however. Some scholars already note deepening security cooperation between Beijing and Moscow. Yet claims of a Sino-Russian alliance redux seem, at best, premature.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of intent, China’s options may also be limited: most other major powers are already aligned with Washington and the U.S.’ own alliance system traces its roots to historically unique geopolitical conditions unlikely to recur.

Though evidence of subjective perceptual disconnects between Beijing and Washington/U.S. allies abounds, Beijing is also not interpreting or making policy decisions in a strategic vacuum. China’s own rapid military development shifted into high gear following the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis and started from a baseline at which the U.S. had overwhelming military superiority. Since the mid-1990s the U.S. alliance system has evolved significantly, in

¹⁰⁴ Korolev 2016

some ways potentially detrimental to China’s security. More recently, a clearly interactive dynamic—whereby Beijing interprets what allies sincerely consider defensive responses to China’s growing military capabilities and threatening policies and rhetoric as offensive provocations threatening China’s own security—suggests security dilemmas are at least partially driving mutual arming.¹⁰⁵ Some Chinese scholars similarly recognize shared interests in maintaining regional stability and acknowledge the “strategic dilemma” (*zhanlue kunjing* 战略困境) Washington faces maintaining stability without exacerbating U.S.-China tensions and risking a “competitive spiral” (*jingzheng de luoxuan* 竞争的螺旋).¹⁰⁶

Despite being Beijing’s favorite rhetorical devices for criticizing U.S. alliances, atavistic zero-sum, traditional “great power” thinking manifests frequently in Chinese commentary on regional security affairs. Neighbors’ concerns about China’s policies or rhetoric are often dismissed as insincere hyping of a “China threat” for alleged “ulterior motives.”¹⁰⁷ Especially in official discourse, sole responsibility for regional instability is placed on Washington and its allies, reflected in references to Washington as “the man behind the curtain” or a meme of U.S. allies as “pawns” in a great power struggle. Government analysts refer to an emerging “battlefield” between Beijing and Washington (and Tokyo), and interpret U.S. policies vis-à-vis territorial disputes the latter believes to be aimed at regional stability as intervention in China’s affairs expanding the “battlefield” to ASEAN.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, though explicitly dependent on “mutual trust” to function, Beijing’s two proposed “alternatives” to the U.S. alliance system lack clear operationalizable pathways to

¹⁰⁵ Liff and Ikenberry 2014

¹⁰⁶ Li 2016

¹⁰⁷ Su 2015, 306-7; Xinhua 2016c

¹⁰⁸ Ruan 2015a, 9-11

reassuring insecure states or enhancing trust. Rhetoric to the contrary, some of Beijing’s actual policies contradict its own stated ideals. Asked two months before ASC’s announcement what word best characterized Chinese foreign policy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi answered “proactive” (*zhudong jinqu* 主动进取), citing China’s having “vigorously defended its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests,” and emphasizing that “on issues of principle such as history and territory, there is no room for compromise” and that China would “never accept unreasonable demands from smaller countries.”¹⁰⁹ Such statements suggest a contradiction between the regional security architecture Beijing promotes rhetorically—a desirable, if aspirational end state—and what neighbors interpret as zero-sum approaches and coercion.

Contemporary realities warrant more nuanced analysis. Though balancing and deterrence are undoubtedly goals of U.S. policy and understandably shape China’s threat perceptions, Washington’s decades-old pursuit with Beijing of expanded commerce, grassroots exchange, and policy cooperation renders the fallacy of U.S. “containment” of China threadbare. Nor is America always in the driver’s seat; often, U.S. allies call for Washington to do more, and U.S. partners are proactively forming tighter links with one another. As some reflective Chinese commentators note, given these realities, if Beijing does not more proactively and credibly reassure its neighbors then such counter-balancing is to be expected.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

Chinese assessments of the U.S. alliance system’s role in post-Cold War Asia-Pacific security reveal an increasing level of frustration, even outright opposition and calls for alternatives. Past signs of ambivalence figure much less prominently. Nor does one often find reference to the

¹⁰⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014

¹¹⁰ Zhai 2014

possibility of security dilemmas at play, i.e., that China’s military buildup and policies may be catalyzing defensive reactions from the U.S. and its allies, much less that China’s own rhetoric and behavior may be a driver.¹¹¹ In contrast, a more common interpretation sees the growing capabilities, expanding scope, and nascent multilateralization of U.S. alliances as demonstrations of Washington’s alleged anachronistic, zero-sum and “Cold War” mentality; primary obstacles to regional stability; enablers of Japan’s remilitarization; an increasingly direct threat to China’s territory and interests; and part of the U.S.’ supposed desire to contain China.

All nations in the Asia-Pacific, especially the United States, its allies, and China, have shared interest in reducing tensions, consolidating mutual trust, and gradually reforming the existing order in a manner beneficial to regional peace, stability, and prosperity for all. Complex mixtures of competition and cooperation are likely to define U.S.-China relations for the foreseeable future. Serious frictions exist and are not easily soluble. As efforts by Washington and its allies to balance and bolster deterrence advance, calls from some hardliners to cease simultaneously proactively engaging Beijing risk truly zero-sum competition and, paradoxically, weakening U.S. alliances and America’s regional influence if other states—many of whose top trading partner is China—resent being forced to choose sides.

More positively, despite worsening frictions in the Near Seas, there is growing, if nascent, U.S.-China cooperation militarily in the Far Seas, to say nothing of extensive extant and future possibilities for mutually-beneficial cooperation in other domains (trade, climate, etc.). For its part, the CCP continues to judge that China’s prosperity depends on a peaceful region.¹¹² Defence white papers still refer to “peace, development, and cooperation” as the “overwhelming global trend.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Liff and Ikenberry 2014

¹¹² Dai 2011.

¹¹³ *DECAF 2013*

This is the complicated reality in which Washington and its allies engage Beijing. Explicit Chinese support for the alliance system is unlikely and beside the point. The fundamental concern should be how allied policies influence China’s behavior, with the objective of shaping China’s choices through enhanced deterrence in a low-key manner—coupled with more proactive high-level diplomacy with Beijing bilaterally and multilaterally—giving Chinese leaders clear incentives to constructively engage its neighbors and multilateral institutions.¹¹⁴ Talks should include frank and extensive discussions about the importance of greater transparency and measures the two “sides” could adopt to deepen cooperation, stability, and mitigate the insecurities and mistrust driving mutual arming—including the feasibility of operationalizing aspects of the sort of more “inclusive” security architecture Beijing clearly desires in a manner recognizing contemporary realities.

Though Chinese perspectives on the U.S. alliance system provide serious grounds for concern, the entirety of contemporary U.S.-China relations is not defined by zero-sum strategic competition in the military domain, nor should it be presented as such by leaders on either side. In this regard, the widespread “containment” meme is deeply misleading and unconstructive. Given accelerating multilateralization of the traditionally hub-and-spokes alliance system and expanded U.S. and allied security cooperation with non-U.S. treaty allies (e.g., Vietnam, India), Beijing’s evolving response to this foundational—if increasingly dynamic—aspect of the postwar regional status quo will continue to be a key variable shaping the region’s future. The analysis herein should be updated as circumstances change.

¹¹⁴ Christensen 1999, esp. 73-4, 80; Christensen 2006, esp. 116-126.

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