

# Can Strategic Partnership Replace Alliance System?

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## 1. Asia-Pacific is the only region that Cold War security structure remains.

Though Asia-Pacific has the most vigorous economy in the world, it is also the only region that the cold war security structure still exists.

The US has a “Hub and Spokes” security structure, or a set of bilateral alliances Japan, ROK, Thailand, The Philippines and Australia, and also some security partners in the region.

The relations across the Taiwan Strait have made great progress since 2008, while officially, the two side have not end the civil war in 1940s; Similarly on the Korean Peninsula, all parties are in the state of war theoretically after 60 years of truce. On the Peninsula, China has its sole “ally”—though it is basically only exist on the paper—in the world, DPRK.

The Cold War security structure has thawed to some extent when China and the Soviet Union split and US-China got close in late 1960s and 1970s; it changed further after the end of the Cold War. China and the Russia established diplomatic relationship with ROK, while the US and Japan have not taken similar actions towards DPRK based on the principle of “mutually recognition”.

## 2. The pros and cons of US Alliance system from Chinese perspective.

The US and its alliances argued repeatedly that their alliances are not against China or any specific third party. But generally speaking, it’s hard for Chinese ordinary people or elites to believe it. To be more balanced, the US recognizes that at least part of purpose of the alliance is to hedge against China. It is one of the reasons underlining the distrust between the two countries.

Rightly or wrongly, China also believes that the alliances make China’s relations with Taiwan and neighboring countries more complicated. The mainstream view in Mainland China is the US’ relations with Taiwan hinder the peaceful reunification or even peaceful development across the Strait. China also thinks the alliances encouraged Japan and the Philippines to take bold actions in the territorial disputes with China.

Meanwhile, China does not oppose the alliance or expect it to disappear suddenly. China thinks the alliance is a reality without which the region could fall into a more chaotic situation. Moreover, the alliance plays a role of “keep the third parties down”; it can manage the regional security order so that China does not need to face up with militarized neighbors, for instance, a nuclear Japan, Korea or even Taiwan.

## 3. The danger of a new Cold War in Asia Pacific region rose in last 4 years.

The region has slipped towards a more dangerous direction during 2010-2012. Due to the crisis on Korean Peninsula (Cheonan Incident and Yeonpyeong island shelling), a DPRK-China-Russia vs. ROK-US-Japan confrontation reemerged and the ghost of neo-Cold War came back to the region. Fortunately, the tension eased gradually this year.

Currently, the situation in this region is still tensed up because of the disputes between China and Japan and the Philippines, behind whom the US stands. The US and China face a real danger of military conflicts due to these disputes.

Security tension in the region will of course make the trilateral relations among Beijing-Taipei and Washington suffers. So long as China views the US and its alliance' strategic goal negatively, it will always doubt US' intension on Taiwan issue. Just as in the Cold War, Mainland China regarded Taiwan as "unsinkable aircraft carrier" of the US which is targeted at Mainland. So long as the remnant of the Cold War security structure remains, this concern will always be there. At the same time, a tensed Mainland China-US relationship would push Taiwan into a difficult position. It has to choose side between the two giants.

To a lesser extent, the tension between China and the Philippines and Japan has already had impact on Taiwan. Like Mainland, Taiwan also has dispute with Japan over Diaoyu Islands. Its relations with the Philippines endured crisis coincidentally when a Taiwan fisherman was shot. During those crises, Many Mainlanders believe that Taiwan should naturally take a position consistent with that of the Mainland. While the Ma Ying-Jeou administration was very carefully not to give the outside world and electorates in the island such an impression. So when Taiwan and Japan signed fishing agreement, many Mainlanders felt "betrayed" by Taiwan. This difficult situation is only triggered by the relative minor difficulties between China and Japan and the Philippines. We can imagine how it will turn out to be more difficult for Taiwan and Mainland China if the US-China relations deteriorated.

#### 4. Is China's strategic partnership a desirable replacement?

Since 1996, China has set up "strategic partnership" with dozens of countries since mid-90s'. The highest level of "strategic partnership" is the "partnership of comprehensive strategic coordination" with Russia. Strategic partnership contains economic, strategic and sometime security elements. While because China has adopted a "keeping low profile" and "economy first" strategy in its relationship with other countries, besides Russia, Pakistan and some other countries, the strategic partnerships with many countries do not contain a strong security cooperation. Some of the partnership becomes even an empty slogan.

Strategic partnership is based on China's ideal of international order. Because China does not want to balance the US, nor can it become a part of the alliance, so it believes that countries should cooperate on the basis of five principles of peaceful coexistence. China views alliance system as the remnant of the Cold War, and wants to construct cooperative relationship with other countries based on nonalignment strategy.

After nearly 2 decades' effort to construct strategic partnership with various countries, China found it does not have many friends in international relation. When the US pursuit the "pivot" or "rebalance strategy" in Asia-Pacific, China found that some of its "partners" stand against it. So in recent years there is a debate in China about whether China should end its nonalignment policy? Scholars like prof. Yan Xuetong argue that China should set up alliance with some neighboring countries, particularly with Russia, DPRK, Pakistan, Iran and some Central Asian countries. Though this view is unquestionable minority among scholars, it shows a fact that China's strategic partnership cannot satisfy its own strategic need.

Then it's hard to argue that China strategic partnership can replace US alliance system in the region.

## 5. Two approaches towards an inclusive security mechanism.

Approach I. Constructing a comprehensive security regional mechanism of Asia-Pacific.

Besides US bilateral alliances, this region has set up some fragmentized and weak security mechanism, for instance the SCO, 6-party talks and those mechanisms led by ASEAN. Asia does not have strong (like NATO) and comprehensive (like OSCE) security institutions in Europe.

In the new round of diplomatic offensive to neighboring countries (*Zhou Bian*), Chinese government become quite proactive for “regional security architecture”. (Li Keqiang on EAS: *Given the numerous economic cooperation structures in the Asia-Pacific, it is imperative to establish a regional security architecture that suits the realities in the region and meets the needs of all sides.*)

Questions and problems:

- 1) Who should lead the effort of the construction? ASEAN?
- 2) Who is qualified for the membership? (Taiwan’s participation would be a problem)?
- 3) Is it a talk shop or a real platform to solve the disputes (like South and East China Sea, DPRK’s nuclear issue)?

Approach II. More bilateral security cooperation among regional countries, particularly China’s security cooperation with the US and its allies. This is a more realistic easier way to go beyond the Cold-War style security groups or camps.

The security and military cooperation between China and the US is critical to persuade the two countries that they can work together though there is alliance system in the region. President Xi and Obama agreed to construct a new type of major power relationship or new model of cooperation. No matter what does the term mean, both countries can accept the idea that given the fact there are many differences and disputes between the US and China, it is possible for China as a “rising power” and the US as a “established power” to have relations not only peaceful but constructive. Surprisingly, the mil-mil relations between China and the US improved dramatically in 2013.

China has a limited security and military cooperation with Thailand. Australia, Korea and the Philippines had expressed their interests to development security and military cooperation with China. The US rebalance strategy has shown to Chinese analyst that China’s security ties with regional countries is not enough. So there is a growing voice inside China’s policy community that China should strengthen its security ties with regional countries, including Australia and Korea at least at current phase. Moreover, the trilateral cooperation (2+2 meetings or joint exercise) among the US, China plus an US ally is also mentioned.

Questions and problems:

- 1) Is China-US mil-mil relationship sustainable? The development of mil-mil relations this year is probably outcome of political leadership. Can it survive next round US arm sale to Taiwan or a military contingency caused by Sino-Japan island dispute?
- 2) China’s problems with U.S. Allies, particularly the Philippines, Korea and Japan? China needs to take DPRK’s response into account when it plans to strengthen security cooperation with ROK. Moreover, China has territorial dispute with the Philippines and Japan, it’s very hard to have cooperation with these two countries in the short run, Particularly with Japan.

- 3) How will the US respond to China's cooperation with its allies? Will the US particularly the DoD view this as an effort to undermine US alliance system in the region?