

*Building a more “Democratic” and “Multipolar” World: China’s Strategic Engagement with Developing Countries**

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Abstract

This article contextualizes and clarifies the political and security components of China’s contemporary strategic engagement with developing countries. Over the last decade, China has adopted a more self-confident and assertive foreign policy, under which political and military elements have become more prominent. This approach places renewed emphasis on China’s position in and leadership of the developing world. China’s leaders look to coordinate policy with “newly emerging powers” to support and foster what they identify as the trend towards a more “multipolar” world order, that is, soft balancing against American “hegemonism.” Moreover, Beijing seeks to curry favor with and raise the voices of developing countries in international institutions to build a normative constituency against American unilateralism. As part of this effort to “democratize” international relations, Beijing has also

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underwritten a constellation of China-dominated regional institutions that harmonize its policies and provide venues to build strategic relationships with developing countries.

“As the realignment of international powers accelerates and the strength of emerging markets and developing countries keeps growing, the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced,” begins China’s 2019 Defense White Paper. Indeed, not since the Mao era have developing countries played a larger role in China’s geostrategy. In an effort to constrain the United States’ unilateral use of force, China’s leaders have adopted policies that catalyze what they see as an historic trend towards “multipolarity” and the “democratization” of international relations. Developing states, in turn, are becoming ever more important strategic partners for China, which despite its rapid rise continues to portray itself as their leader.

Over the last two decades, China’s leaders have come to believe they can reshape the world in ways more befitting their interests. In 2007, President Hu Jintao said that China would seek to create a “harmonious world” and asserted that the world cannot “enjoy prosperity and stability without China.”² Since the 2009 global financial crisis, Beijing has adopted a more self-confident and proactive foreign policy, with political and military elements gaining prominence. Around the same time, Beijing also initiated a more assertive approach to maritime disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea.³ In 2012, President Xi Jinping proposed a “new type of great major power relations” with the United States, and other leaders expanded on China’s global “major power diplomacy.”⁴

The following year, Xi launched his signature policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious strategy to reshape the world by loaning a trillion or more dollars to developing states for infrastructure development. BRI has now expanded to include nearly every aspect of China’s foreign policy toward the developing world and is reshaping the global lending landscape. The second BRI Forum, held in April 2019, was less triumphalist than the first in 2017, and included commitments to increase the quality of projects.⁵ This assertiveness marks a rapid and dramatic departure from more than two decades of adherence to Deng Xiaoping’s admonition that China should “keep a low profile” (韬光養晦 *taoguang yanghui*).

In 2016, He Yafei, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, emphasized the importance of building partnerships with nations that also seek a “multi-polar world and democratic international relations.” He argued that developing countries should remain “the bedrock and strategic focus of China’s major-country diplomacy.”⁶ Indeed, Beijing has concluded scores of bilateral “strategic partnership” agreements with major developing states and has collectively engaged subsets of them, such as the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.⁷ To be sure, these countries’ interests diverge as much as they converge. For Beijing the BRICS forum serves to coordinate various overlapping interests (e.g., environmental priorities and trade-offs, trade policy, technology standards, and the form and function of international institutions) while mitigating disagreement on contentious issues.

Beijing has also created a constellation of regional institutions that expand and deepen its strategic relationships with developing states around the world, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China-Arab Cooperation Forum, the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Relations Forum (CELAC), and the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries. By creating and underwriting these new proprietary regional organizations, Beijing ensures that it remains the key veto player regarding their terms, meeting locations, and agenda.

China’s political and military engagements with developing countries are not intended to subvert the international order or, with the exception of some activities around its geographic periphery, as hard balancing against the United States. Indeed, Beijing understands that it has benefited immensely from the current international order and that its prosperity depends on a stable relationship with Washington.⁸ Still, both the evolving conceptual prism through which Beijing views the developing world and its corresponding policies strongly suggest an increasingly organized effort to capitalize on China’s overseas presence to further larger strategic goals. Broadly speaking, Beijing seeks to ensure international norms and institutions evolve towards positions that are more closely aligned with China’s interests—most importantly, constraining Washington’s space to exercise force unilaterally.

Scholars have identified and described the motivations behind China’s U.S.-focused “soft-balancing” strategy.⁹ This article’s contribution is that it contextualizes and documents the phenomenon and

elucidates how developing countries play a central role in Beijing's approach. The tactics discussed here are not limited to developing countries; nor is "soft balancing" China's only foreign policy objective, whether in the developing world or elsewhere. Nevertheless, strategic objectives have now assumed a more prominent place in China's foreign policy, particularly towards countries that Beijing has labeled "newly emerging powers."

Immediately below, we examine how China's leaders conceptualize the developing world and where it fits into their larger foreign policy lexicon. Next, we address the characteristics of China's engagement, highlighting the comprehensive and integrated nature of its relations with developing countries. In the longest and final section, we identify and describe the specific political and military means Beijing employs to achieve its strategic interests vis-à-vis developing countries.

1. Developing Countries in China's Strategic Thought

Within China's foreign policy discourse, the concepts of "multipolarity" and the "democratization of international relations" are distinct, yet mutually reinforcing. Multipolarity, Chinese strategists argue, reinforces the democratization of the international system by enhancing developing states' participation in international organizations and projecting their voices within them. In Beijing's view, the obstacles to justice and peace, are hegemonism, power politics, and the self-protective activities of "a few western states," particularly the United States.¹⁰ Thus, to constrain the United States, China employs a two-pronged approach towards the developing world: soft-balancing through collaboration with the newly emerging developing powers, that is, fostering multipolarity; and the democratization of the international system, that is, the Gulliver component designed to enlist a broad range of states to check the United States unilateral impulses, primarily by influencing norms and institutional arrangements.

China's foreign policy practice has long differentiated the relative status of bilateral relationships based on the characteristics of partner states: specifically, relations with major powers (大國 *daguo*), states on China's geographic periphery (周邊國家 *zhoubian guojia*), developing countries (發展中國家 *fazhanzhong guojia*), and, since the 18th Party Congress in 2012, with multilateral (多邊 *duobian*) international forums.¹¹ The boundaries between these categories are somewhat ambiguous, and many states traverse two or more of them.

Major powers are large, economically developed states, including the U.S., Japan, Russia, Germany, Britain, or the EU as a whole. Peripheral states, which are defined by their physical proximity to China, include an array of both developing states and major powers in East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Russia, and Southeast Asia. Former President Hu Jintao declared: “Major powers are the key, surrounding (peripheral) areas are the first priority, developing countries are the foundation, and multilateral forums are the important stage.”¹² Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, the sequence of discussions and their content, suggests this prioritization remains largely the same.

Developing states, however, have gradually assumed a larger role in China’s strategic thinking. Over the last two decades, policymakers in China have adopted a more nuanced view of the developing world, differentiating “major developing states” (發展中大國 *fazhanzhong daguo*) or “newly emerging powers” (新興大國 *xinxing daguo*) from “other” developing states.¹³ While there is no definitive list of major developing states, they appear to include a handful of large, rapidly developing and politically influential states such as the developing members of the G-20—Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Thailand.¹⁴

Although these “newly emerging powers” (with the possible exception of India) would not be defined as major powers within the Western realist international relations canon, have do have a leading voice in regional politics and a strong normative influence in global institutions. Within their own respective regions, these states can either facilitate or constrain the regional strategies of external powers like China and the United States. Thus, the success or failure of Beijing’s policy to catalyze the emergence of multipolarity depends, not only on the growing relative international influence of these large developing countries, but also their willingness to make common cause with China.¹⁵

Over time, the definition of China’s “geographic periphery” (周邊 *zhoubian*) has evolved. Sometimes translated as “strategic periphery,” these areas constitute a tactically important geographic belt around China that traditionally included Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. Under the Xi administration, however, the “greater periphery” (大周邊 *dazhoubian*) has been expanded in accordance with Beijing’s growing power and influence to include West Asia, the South Pacific, and, by some definitions, East Africa.¹⁶

This broader concept reflects China’s expanding interests as it transitions from a regional to a global power. But the sheer complexity of the

political and security environment in these regions also means the “greater periphery” is increasingly fraught for China. Among Beijing’s challenges are the U.S. military’s strength and alliances in Asia, the troubled aftermath of Washington’s democracy promotion in the Middle East, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, Japan’s reemergence as a rival political-military actor, and growing opposition in some countries to China’s lack of transparency and corrupt business practices.¹⁷ In response, many in Beijing argue that to protect its interests China must promote unifying political narratives and expand its leadership among developing countries.¹⁸

China’s interests in the developing world should be understood in the context of its broader interests—often expressed as its “core national interests” (核心利益 *hexin liyi*). While there are various formulations of this concept, all assume three basic overlapping objectives: to ensure the Communist Party will continue to rule China, to maintain and defend China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to promote a stable international environment conducive to China’s continued economic growth.¹⁹

The evolution in China’s strategy toward the developing world has taken place amid a simultaneous evolution in China’s leaders’ sense of their country’s identity and status such that China now perceives and portrays itself as both a developing state *and* a major power. The claim that China remains the largest developing country is intended to identify it with other developing states, maintain the privileges of developing country status in the World Trade Organization, and insulates Beijing from taking the lead on international issues like the Syria refugee crisis and climate change.²⁰

Emphasis on its role as leader of the developing world also reflects China’s evolving view of the global balance of power and international dynamics. According to the 2019 Defense White Paper, Beijing is now expanding collaboration with developing states, particularly the aforementioned rising powers, in response to intensified threats: “International strategic competition is on the rise [and] the United States has adjusted its national security and defense strategies, and adopted unilateral policies.”²¹

To be sure, China’s leaders view threats in the international realm through the prism of domestic politics, wherein regime legitimacy remains the bedrock objective. Domestic priorities are evident in the content and character of Beijing’s diplomacy, party-to-party relations, defense of sovereignty norms in international politics, and in its near single-minded emphasis on economic development.²² Since 1978, improving Chinese citizens’ living standards has been central to the

Party’s political legitimacy and remains essential to achieving a “moderately well-off society” (小康社會 *xiaokang shehui*) by 2021; a goal that can only be achieved by expanded foreign trade and investment.²³

Politically, the developing world is also important for the defense of “territorial integrity.” For Beijing, as for many of its strategic partners, support for the norm of state sovereignty is motivated by a desire to ward off international condemnation, sanctions and intervention related to repressive or heavy-handed domestic policies. In China’s case, these include human rights abuses and repression in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Beijing has used rhetorical intimidation and sanctions to punish countries and organizations that host the Dalai Lama.²⁴ China’s government hackers have infiltrated telecommunications networks in Malaysia and several other Southeast Asian and Central Asian countries to track the movements of ethnic Uighurs and other persons of interest.²⁵

Beijing has also enlisted allies in the developing world to counter external pressure over its imprisonment of over one million ethnic Uighurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang. When a group of 22 Western nations submitted a letter to the UN Human Rights Council condemning the mass incarcerations, China mobilized 54 mostly developing states to submit a competing letter in opposition to “politicizing human rights” and noting the challenge to China posed by “terrorism and extremism.” Most of the signatories were African and Middle Eastern states, including many long-standing political and security partners such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, North Korea, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Venezuela.²⁶ Asked in September 2019 to explain his country’s silence on China’s policies toward Muslims, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad explained: “Of course [China] is a big trading partner of ours and you do not want to do something that will fail, and in the process, also, we will suffer.”²⁷

China is also looking to gain international support for its claim to Taiwan. After a ‘diplomatic truce’ from 2008 to 2016, the competition for diplomatic recognition between Taipei and Beijing resumed with the election of Tsai Ing-wen as President of Taiwan. Due to Beijing’s renewed efforts, at the time of this article’s publication the number of states recognizing Taipei had fallen to just 14—all small states and all but one (the Holy See) in the developing world. Similarly, China’s efforts to secure its claims in the South China Sea include hard power and coercive measures directed against rival claimants. China has also solicited support from at least 66 mostly developing countries for recognition of its maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea.²⁸

Some parts of its strategic agenda place Beijing in tension with other major developing states. Yet, in promoting broad principles of non-interference and state sovereignty in its relations with democratic states, Beijing is often pushing on an open door. Even India, with its democratic system and territorial disputes with China, remains just as unwilling to support expanded UN involvement in Kashmir as China is in Xinjiang. New Delhi's votes in the UN General Assembly on a wide variety of political and economic issues are more closely aligned with those of Beijing than they are with Washington.²⁹

2. Comprehensive and Multi-tiered Engagement

China's engagement with developing countries is characterized by asymmetry, and comprised of a comprehensive, multi-tiered engagement strategy. China's estimated nominal GDP in 2019 (\$14.2 trillion) dwarfs every developing country and is roughly double the total of the other BRICS states combined: India, \$3.0 trillion; Brazil, \$2.0 trillion; Russia, \$1.6 trillion; and South Africa, \$371 billion.³⁰ Amid the rapid widening of the relative power gap between China and other developing countries, Beijing's continued calls for "brotherhood" and "equality," and willingness to meet officials from small countries at or above their rank, are intended to diminish the sense of hierarchy, project modesty and benevolence, and reinforce China's status as a developing country.

At the same time, however, China's diplomacy is increasingly embracing hierarchical structures and symbolism. Beijing-funded regional forums like the FOCAC and the CELAC alternate locations between China and different regional partners. This places China on par with entire regions and enhances Beijing's already disproportionate agenda setting power.

When China's interests have been jeopardized, its diplomats have become increasingly willing to deploy hierarchical rhetoric and threats. After Southeast Asian states pushed back against China's more assertive approach to territorial issues in the South China Sea in 2010, then-Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reminded them that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."³¹ In 2018, after Kenya banned Chinese fish imports, Ambassador Li Xuhang threatened to respond with trade sanctions and to cut off financing for the Standard Gage Railroad, the country's premier national project.³²

China's foreign policy across a variety of collaborative endeavors—including foreign aid, educational and cultural exchanges, media

cooperation and training, military assistance and training, and political cadre training—is comprised of “multi-centric, multi-layered and multi-pivotal sub-networks of regional and international cooperation that are interconnected and interwoven.”³³ By building a dense latticework of interlocking relationships at the *global*, *regional*, and *bilateral* levels Beijing seeks to create a stable and mutually reinforcing structure to expand its messaging and political influence. Although much attention has been paid to its economic elements, placed in the context of China’s political and security engagement, BRI is an overarching framework that synchronizes policy across all three tiers of engagement.

China’s creation of regional organizations is distinctive both in its approach and scale. China has deepened its engagement with regional institutions in every developing region. It established relations with ASEAN in 1991, has maintained an ambassador to ASEAN since 2008, and has participated in the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area since 2010. In 2006, China was admitted as a permanent observer to the Organization of American States, and in 2014, China and Latin American countries launched the CELAC forum. China’s regional diplomacy in Africa is orchestrated under FOCAC, which was elevated to a Ministerial-level summit in 2006 and now meets every three years, most recently in Beijing in 2018. China and Arab partners established the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2004, which along with the China-Gulf Cooperation Council strategic dialogue established in 2010, has helped Beijing expand and improve relations with the Sunni-dominated states, previously limited by China’s close ties to Shia Iran.³⁴

Although China’s creation of regional organizations is among the most distinctive features of its approach to the developing world, bilateral relations with sovereign states remain the foundation. Of the 21 countries with which China maintains “strategic cooperative partnerships” as of 2019, nineteen are developing states—the other two are South Korea and Russia.³⁵ Beijing’s approach towards a particular country depends on its location and Chinese interests there. Relationships with more distant developing countries tend to prioritize economics, while ties with nearby states are generally more extensive and complex, with a mix of overlapping political, economic, and security interests at play.

Within each region, Beijing cultivates relations with large and important states where geography, politics and/or economics make relations particularly propitious.³⁶ In East Asia, these include Indonesia and Thailand; in South Asia, Pakistan and India; in Central Asia, Kazakhstan;

in Africa, South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia; in the Middle East, Iran; and in Latin America, Brazil and Argentina. This list is not definitive, and has and will continue to evolve over time. Other states, like Venezuela under Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro, may receive special attention due to a particular (sometimes temporary) political alignment. Small, but strategically located states, like Djibouti and Cambodia, seem to be more susceptible to China's influence; the former now hosts a People's Liberation Army (PLA) base, while the latter has become a valuable "nail-house" vote in consensus-governed ASEAN.

Finally, while China remains committed to existing global international institutions, it has become increasingly active in shaping them in ways that serve its interests. Beijing regularly affirms its "UN-centered diplomacy," and calls on all states to observe the UN charter. Participation reassures Western diplomats that China is committed to the international system, provides venues to advance Chinese interests, and highlights and promotes Beijing's leadership in and solidarity with the developing world. However, when an international institution's decision runs contrary to China's interests—as occurred in 2016 when The Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled in favor of the Philippines in the South China Sea dispute—Beijing's approach has been to obstruct, attack, and question both the legitimacy and jurisdiction of the institution. While realism predicts that in a world without formal hierarchy states will engage in such behavior, these actions nevertheless run contrary to Beijing's rhetoric on equality among all states and calls to democratize the world order.

3. Strategic Engagement with Developing Countries

Having outlined the comprehensive and integrated nature of China's strategic engagement with developing countries, we now turn to an examination of the political and security elements of Beijing's approach.³⁷

a. Political Engagement

Enhancing Multipolarity

China has benefitted as much as any country—and more than most—from the current global political order and post-World War II free trade regime. Beijing supports and underwrites key international institutions, but has also sought to modify the international order in ways that give

greater representation to large developing states.³⁸ It portrays multipolarity as objectively better than U.S. hegemony and the trend toward multipolarity as a natural progression that cannot be resisted. At the same time, the Chinese definition of multipolarity differs in important ways from in the Western international relations literature. In the Chinese foreign policy lexicon, multipolarity refers to states’ autonomy in the system and their ability to influence events at the regional level, that is, freedom from hegemony; rather than the existence of states with the independent capability to challenge the dominant state.³⁹

As noted, China’s efforts to bring about multipolarity include increasing emphasis on developing strategic relations with “major developing states,” and the creation of China-dominated international organizations with various clusters of developing states. Since its establishment in 2009 the BRICS grouping has pursued primarily political-economic objectives, such as the reform of international financial institutions and opposition to farm subsidies in developed countries. Together the BRICS have established a \$100 billion currency reserve to lessen dependence on the International Monetary Fund and provided another \$100 billion to underwrite the New Development Bank.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, as Niu Haibin has argued: “It is important that China not see the BRICS group only as an economic platform, but that it also values its importance at the political and soft-power level.”⁴¹ Following Russia’s annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the other members of the G-8 suspended Russian participation in that body. Australia, which hosted the 2015 G-20 meeting, suggested Russia might also be expelled from the G-20. In response, the BRICS foreign ministers issued a joint statement warning against Russian exclusion.⁴² According to Niu, this “showed the value of the group in preventing one of its members from becoming geopolitically isolated.”⁴³ The BRICS Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism met for the first time in 2016.⁴⁴ When China assumed the BRICS’ chairmanship in 2017, Foreign Minister Wang Yi indicated that Beijing would expand the group’s political and security capacity.⁴⁵ In November 2019, South Africa, China, and Russia conducted their first tripartite naval exercise focused on building interoperability.⁴⁶

Beijing has also promoted the role of the G-20, established in 1999, as an alternative to the G-7, which does not include China. To coordinate positions and push for global governance reform, BRICS leaders meet informally on the G-20 sidelines.⁴⁷ At the 2019 G-20 meeting, Xi Jinping once again called for the BRICS to strengthen strategic partnership and

“oppose illegal unilateral sanctions” and “long-arm jurisdiction.”⁴⁸ Although China has never joined the G-77 (the group of developing nations within the United Nations that now numbers some 134 countries), Beijing supports the group and has formed the G77+China.

Beijing faces several challenges in the push for greater multipolarity in international relations. China’s diminished GDP growth since 2015, its soiled environment, the large structural imbalances dogging the economy, and its increasingly harsh authoritarian political system tarnish the nation’s image among other leading developing states. At the same time, China’s leaders are concerned that, under President Donald Trump the United States may turn its back on the post-World War II international order, threatening to render the reform of that order irrelevant to constraining Washington’s unilateral freedom of action.⁴⁹

Sovereignty Norms

China continues to emphasize the norms of state sovereignty and non-interference in its engagement with developing states. Chinese diplomats regularly reference the decades-old mantra of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the first of which is mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty. For small developing states, which warily guard their autonomy, state sovereignty and non-interference also remain sacrosanct. But while China stridently promotes the “principle” of non-intervention, its policymakers’ interpretation and application of that principle has evolved over time.

At the most basic level, non-interference references Beijing’s policy of near universal engagement, with the one requirement that states adhere to the one-China policy and recognize Beijing rather than Taipei. When leadership changes occur in partner states, whether by election or force, Beijing has generally succeeded in deftly establishing cordial relations with the successor government. Faced with the problems of governing, new leaders in developing countries are often willing to overlook China’s previous support for their political rivals. Beijing’s willingness to work with whomever holds power makes it attractive to new leaders—especially those that capture power by force—and enables China’s firms to seek opportunities in more politically turbulent markets.⁵⁰

China generally defends state sovereignty, especially in the UN Security Council (UNSC). Although it is more prone to abstain rather than veto intervention, China has used its veto to quash actions that it argues violate the principle.⁵¹ There are, however, rare cases where Beijing

has supported tough UN action, especially when the measures are supported by friendly governments near the target state.

Despite significant economic interests and investments in Libya, Beijing voted in favor of sanctions in 2011 and later abstained from a UNSC vote authorizing a no-fly zone when important Arab and African bodies supported it. After Gaddafi’s fall in 2011, China evacuated some 35,000 nationals, and the 75 Chinese enterprises from Libya and abandoned or lost large quantities of construction materials and machinery.⁵² A few months later, Beijing, claiming it was misled by the West about the Libya mission’s intentions, joined with Russia to veto UN intervention in Syria. In February 2017, Beijing and Moscow vetoed another UNSC resolution that would have imposed sanctions on 21 Syrian people and organizations linked to chemical weapons attacks.⁵³

MoU Diplomacy

Developing countries play a central role in China’s “going out” foreign trade and investment strategy, and MoU diplomacy has become the most visible and well-articulated aspect of China’s external engagement with them. Beijing works to enhance the competitiveness of its firms and entrepreneurs overseas. According to one analysis, China’s commercial service attachés working in China’s African embassies outnumber U.S. Foreign Commercial Service officers working in the region by some 15 to one.⁵⁴

As early as 1999, China had amassed about \$155 billion in foreign reserves and was looking to gain returns while generating work for its state-owned enterprises (SOE).⁵⁵ That year, at the Fourth Plenum of the 15th National Party Congress, Jiang Zemin launched the so-called going out strategy (走出去戰略), encouraging firms to “establish branches overseas” and “explore international markets.”⁵⁶ Subsequent decisions during the 2000s provided funding mechanisms to facilitate outward investment and support foreign trade. China’s move outward began slowly—and primarily involved SOEs in the extractive and construction industries—but has diversified and gathered momentum since 2010. China’s non-financial foreign direct investment (FDI) flow increased from \$3.9 billion (in 2019 USD) in 2003 to some \$205.9 billion in 2016—a real compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 36 percent.⁵⁷ Chinese outward FDI fell, for the first time, in 2017, to \$163.1 billion (in 2019 USD), but bounced back 4.2 percent in 2018.⁵⁸ According to official figures, in 2017 (excluding investment in offshore financial centers) about

half of China's total outward-bound FDI stock was in developing states.⁵⁹ When Chinese leaders conduct summit meetings they often travel with large business delegations and sign MoUs worth hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars. In Islamabad in April 2015, for example, Xi Jinping and Pakistan's President Nawaz Shari signed 51 MoUs worth nearly \$28 billion as the first phase of a larger Pakistan-China Economic Corridor Project valued at \$50 billion.⁶⁰

Increasingly, MoUs are being used to cement political or security understandings. When Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte visited Beijing in October 2016, having signaled that Manila was prepared to compromise on territorial disputes in the South China Sea, he brought home \$24 billion in pledges for investment and loans.⁶¹ Similarly, in September 2016, two months after Cambodia blocked an ASEAN statement on the South China Sea, the Cambodian Chamber of Commerce signed an MoU on trade and investment promotion with a visiting delegation of leaders from 47 Chinese enterprises.⁶² In August 2019, amid heightened Indo-Pakistan tensions in Kashmir, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission General Xu Qiliang visited Islamabad to coordinate policy responses, reiterate support for the "time-tested" Sino-Pakistan military relationship, and ink a MoU to enhance defense cooperation and capacity building of Pakistan's Army.⁶³

For smaller partner nations, the dollar values in these agreements hold out the promise of a bonanza of development. But MoUs are, of course, not legally binding contracts and many do not reach fruition. As of February 2019, almost two and a half years after Beijing's \$24 billion pledge to the Philippines, only about \$4.7 billion had arrived.⁶⁴

Party-to-Party Relations

Since Xi Jinping's accession to power in 2012, Beijing's engagement with the developing world has assumed more political overtones. Outreach by the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (ID-CPC) is a historic and ongoing feature of China's foreign policy and supplements the diplomacy conducted by state organs (e.g., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and top leaders. The Party's political outreach generally looks to engage in ways that avoid the appearance of intervention in domestic affairs. In autocracies, the ID-CPC may avoid interaction with the opposition, while in liberal democracies it maintains ties and sometimes provides largesse simultaneously to both ruling and opposition parties.

The ID-CPC has expanded its host diplomacy, cadre training, and outreach to political parties throughout the developing world. Political cadre training done by the ID-CPC and the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC and its local affiliates, while oriented towards capacity building, are also explicitly political and intended to improve foreign perceptions of China, legitimize CPC rule, and identify foreign partners to advance Chinese interests.

Ethiopia was perhaps the earliest and most eager student of Chinese cadre training, and has dispatched delegations regularly to China since 1994.⁶⁵ With funding from China, a consortium of ruling parties from six southern African countries (Tanzania, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe) opened a training academy, the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School, in Tanzania in 2018.⁶⁶ South Africa is arguably the most important case. As of 2015, some 2,000 officials of South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC) had been trained by the CPC.⁶⁷ In the summer of 2018, as the ANC prepared to dispatch another 300 cadre to the CPC’s training academy, ANC secretary General Ace Magashule suggested that the ANC was “inspired by the principles of upholding Party building and discipline by the CPC”—though others in the party dissented.⁶⁸ Still, the CPC’s approach to party-to-party cooperation is now being stress tested in Africa by the new political leadership in stalwart partners in Ethiopia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Ghana.

Education and Propaganda

According to Chinese analysts, the nation’s history endows it with great natural advantages in building cultural power.⁶⁹ China seeks to be a “cultural major power” (文化大國 *wenhua daguo*), and to that end a broad conceptual framework was adopted in 2004 under the official formulation “China’s peaceful rise.” In 2009, a Cultural Soft Power Research Center, with nine research offices, was established at Hunan University. Since 2013, Xi Jinping has spoken repeatedly on the need to increase China’s “soft power” (軟實力 *ruanshili*) by, among other things, creating a compelling Chinese narrative and strengthening Beijing’s capacity to convey its political messages overseas.⁷⁰

Over the last decade, led by *Xinhua* and CCTV, China’s state-run media has advanced an initiative to enhance the country’s influence and international image.⁷¹ Since 2005, *Xinhua* has emphasized cooperation, content sharing, and media training programs with dozens of news

outlets throughout the developing world.⁷² In 2017, for instance, Renmin University in Beijing hosted a ten-month development studies and media exchange with 48 students from Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Training topics include China's political, cultural, media, and economic studies, as well as speeches extolling stability and growth.⁷³ In April 2019, at the end of the second Belt and Road Initiative Forum in Beijing, an editorial in the state-run *Global Times* explained the rationale for these programs: "Foreign countries may understand the cultural and educational factors in China's economic development through exchange and cooperation, while China also needs to understand foreign countries' development experience and cultural backgrounds."⁷⁴

In 2004, Beijing launched the Confucius Institute program to cultivate the study of Chinese language and culture abroad. According to the Confucius Institute Headquarters website, in September 2019 there were 530 institutes around the world. Although these are clustered in developed countries, with 86 in the United States alone, many developing states also host institutes. Some question whether Beijing-backed Confucius Institutes are being used to influence university research agendas and impinge on academic freedoms, and there have been efforts in the United States and Australia to limit their operations.⁷⁵ However, such fears are rarely raised in developing countries, which are chronically short on education funding and happy to receive whatever support they can from Beijing.

China promotes many types of person-to-person exchanges, and sponsors tens of thousands of students from developing countries for training both in their home countries and at Chinese universities and vocational schools. According to the Ministry of Education, there were 492,185 international students studying in China in 2018, up from about 290,000 in 2011.⁷⁶ In 2018, more than 60 percent of foreign students hailed from Asia, most often South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan. Tens of thousands more came to China from other developing countries, with the greatest increase since 2013 coming from Africa.⁷⁷ In 2018, some 63,041 foreign students received full scholarships from the Chinese government, while others obtained funding from local governments or universities.⁷⁸

Footing the bill for so many foreign students has prompted some grassroots pushback, however. In July 2019, for instance, an online uproar erupted when Shandong University announced that its "buddy program" had paired 141, mostly female, Chinese students, with 47, mostly male, foreign students from developing countries including Kenya, Nepal, and

Yemen. One comment captured the tone: “No country takes care of Chinese students this way, so why can’t we just treat foreign students in China equally? Why should we treat them like they are gods?” Amid an onslaught of online criticism, the university apologized and promised to review the program.⁷⁹

b. Security Engagement

Military Diplomacy and Cooperation

China’s security role in the developing world is modest but growing rapidly. Until recently, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had paid scant attention to cooperation or exchanges with foreign militaries. The PLA Navy’s first fleet visit to a foreign port occurred in 1990, and it did not conduct its first combined exercise with a foreign military until 2002. The policy origins of China’s expanded military engagement can be found in the 1998 National Defense White Paper, which presented China’s comprehensive “new security concept” and contained the first official use of the term “military diplomacy.”⁸⁰ The scope and scale of that military diplomacy has increased steadily over the intervening two decades and now encompasses a wide range of activities.

As of 2019, China had established military attaché offices in 130 countries, up from 109 in 2008, and initiated 54 Defense Consultation and Dialogue mechanisms.⁸¹ At the military unit level, China has steadily increased the number of combined exercises conducted with foreign militaries, and expanded their scope to include more elements of the PLA. Its first exercises (beginning in 2005) were naval, followed by army special operations forces (2007), marines (2010), air force units (2010), airborne (2013). In July 2007, the PLA undertook its first “combined training exercise” (聯合訓練 *lianhe xunlian*), which Chinese reports emphasize differ from other types of “combined training” (聯合演習 *lianhe yanxi*) in that they involve smaller numbers of soldiers but with the full integration of Chinese and foreign elements—often down to the squad level.⁸²

Apart from its close strategic relationship with Russia, many of China’s closest and most institutionalized defense relationships are with states on its geographic periphery. Of the aforementioned 54 defense dialogue mechanisms, 17 are with neighboring states, and many of the military achievements described above were conducted with them, Thailand, in particular.

Increasingly, however, China's military engagement has reached states well beyond its geographic periphery. China now maintains some type of bilateral security relationship with every African state with which it has diplomatic relations. The PLA's nascent, but nevertheless growing, military role in Africa was highlighted by Xi Jinping's commitment in 2015 to provide \$100 million in military assistance to the African Union, as well as the inauguration of the China-Africa Defense and Security Forum in 2018, which brought senior military leaders from 50 African states to Beijing for two-days of strategic discussions.⁸³ In 2018, Beijing also hosted the China and Latin America High-Level Defense Forum and the Forum for Senior Defense Officials from the Caribbean and South Pacific Countries.

China's self-identification as both a major power and a developing country, and its desire to give its forces real world experience, makes peacekeeping operations a natural fit. China is now consistently among the top contributors of peacekeeping personnel and the largest from among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Until 2013, it dispatched only police and support forces, but that year deployed its first combat forces to Mali and in 2014 sent a battalion of combat troops to a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan. China has committed up to 8,000 troops to the UN peacekeeping standby force, roughly 20 percent of the total, and as of July 2019, 2,521 Chinese peacekeeping personnel (including 2,437 troops) were serving in UN peacekeeping operations.⁸⁴ The PLA also trains peacekeepers from other countries.

Power Projection

China's growing overseas military role should be viewed in the context of its military modernization. The country's defense budget is now the second largest in the world (though considerably smaller than that of the United States), and the PLA has built modern combat capabilities in all domains.⁸⁵ Although its priorities during the 1990s and 2000s were primarily Taiwan-related, the PLA has since developed significant power projection capability—larger warships, amphibious lift, at sea replenishment capabilities, and large cargo aircraft. Heavy bombers and improved aerial refueling tankers are under development.

In 2004, Hu Jintao directed the PLA to prepare for “new historic missions” and initiated the discussion of military missions other than war, including the protection of China's growing national interests abroad.⁸⁶ Beijing's 2008 white paper on China's National Defense

identified a “diversified” mission set, including “counter-terrorism, stability maintenance, and emergency rescue and international peace-keeping.”⁸⁷ The 2013 and 2019 defense white papers both have sections on “protecting overseas interests,” with the former stipulating that “vessel protection at sea, evacuation of Chinese nationals overseas, and emergency rescue have become important ways and means for the PLA to safeguard national interests.”⁸⁸ There have also been calls from within the PLA to greatly enhance its capability to rescue Chinese nationals under threat abroad.⁸⁹

Although China’s security footprint in the developing world remains small relative to its economic heft, it has grown rapidly over the last decade. In 2011, the PLA helped evacuate Chinese from Libya, and again from Yemen in 2015. In the Libyan case, the PLA diverted a destroyer from the Gulf of Aden to Libya and flew 40 sorties using Il-76 transport aircraft to evacuate more than 1,600 Chinese nationals. China dispatched its first anti-piracy detachment to the Gulf of Aden in December 2008 and, as of July 2019, the PLA had sent a total of 31 task forces, each generally consisting of two warships, helicopters, and a resupply vessel. They have provided security for over 6,600 Chinese and foreign ships and assistance for over 70 ships in distress.⁹⁰

Some of China’s overseas activities raise troubling questions. During territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, for instance, China often responds to perceived provocations with highly disproportionate force relative to the smaller country’s initial action. This appears to be a conscious Chinese tactic to capitalize on opportunities to change the status quo in its favor without being labeled an “aggressor.” Beijing’s large-scale land reclamation and the establishment of air and port facilities in the Spratly Islands, which followed small scale construction by others, provides the starkest example of this tactic.

Although China long eschewed overseas bases as symbols of hegemonic ambition, its position has shifted in recent years.⁹¹ In August 2017, the PLA Navy opened its first overseas base in Djibouti, adjacent to military outposts operated by the U.S., France, and Japan among others. The facility, which is equipped with maintenance facilities for ships and helicopters, weapons stores, and a contingent of military guards, is unlikely to be the PLA’s only overseas installation.⁹² According to China’s 2019 defense white paper: “To address weakness in its ability to operate overseas and in its logistical support, the PLA is developing overseas logistical facilities and enhancing its capability to

accomplish diversified tasks.”⁹³ At the conclusion of the inaugural China-Africa Defense and Security Forum, Gao Zhikai, Director of the China National Association of International Studies, suggested in a television interview that China might establish a base on the west coast of Africa.⁹⁴ Beijing has already committed to build a 19-hectare logistics support facility to support the Southern African Development Community Standby Force in Botswana.⁹⁵ Taken together, these trends suggest China’s global security presence in developing countries will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

Arms Sales

During the 1960 and 1970s China provided weapons on concessionary terms to revolutionary groups or leftist partner states.⁹⁶ Today, China limits arms transfers primarily to paying customers, but thanks to the right combination of affordability and durability it has reemerged as a sizable supplier—moving from the 6th largest in the world during 2005–2011 to the 4th largest during 2012–2018.⁹⁷ China sells arms primarily to either nearby low-income states, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, or oil-rich but technologically weak countries, such as Iran or Nigeria. For the most part, buyers are interested in the combination of cost and capability, though some buyers, such as Turkey and Venezuela, have also used Chinese purchases to signal their dissatisfaction with Washington.

China sells corvettes, frigates, and fighter aircraft, and a range of anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, as well as tanks, artillery, and small arms, almost exclusively to developing countries (See Table 1). Aircraft sales made up more than half the value of Chinese weapons sales in 2018. China has licensed production or agreed to limited joint weapons development with Pakistan, Thailand, and Indonesia. China and Pakistan have jointly developed the JF-17 fighter-bomber, which they have sought to market to countries in the Middle East and South America. In early 2018, Sudan purchased six FTC-2000 trainer aircraft.⁹⁸

China’s military and civilian leaders understand that weapons sales, especially those that come with maintenance and servicing agreements, also deepen strategic relations. China and Thailand, for instance, have announced plans to move forward with a military maintenance facility that may service Chinese equipment sold elsewhere in the region, and Beijing has sought a similar arrangement with South Africa.⁹⁹

Table 1: China’s Top Arms Recipients, 2012–2018

Country	Imports from China (value, US\$ millions)
Pakistan	\$4,094
Bangladesh	\$1,826
Myanmar	\$973
Algeria	\$864
Venezuela	\$397
Indonesia	\$325
Thailand	\$310
Tanzania	\$266

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Importer/Exporter TIV Tables, accessed September 3, 2019

4. Conclusion

Developing countries have reemerged as a central component in China’s geostrategy. Although they remain motivated largely by economics, Beijing policies toward developing countries are increasingly driven by its political and security interests. China’s leaders have moved from anticipating a more multipolar and democratic world order, to working with developing states to accelerate movement in that direction. To do this, they portray their country as both a major power and the leader of a likeminded group of developing states working to support and foster a fairer world order.

China is enlisting developing countries in its effort to constrain U.S. power—particularly Washington’s ability to deploy forces unilaterally—and reduce the possibility of foreign intervention in China’s domestic affairs. Cooperation with the “newly emerging powers” in particular, is increasingly framed in strategic terms—reinforcing norms of state sovereignty and opposing U.S. “hegemony.” By facilitating the participation of developing countries in multilateral forums and enlisting their support, China is able to, among other things, strengthen sovereignty norms that shield the Communist Party of China from external interference.¹⁰⁰

Beijing has stepped up political outreach and educational activities to deepen relations, improve the image of the country and its political system, and to enhance policy coordination. To facilitate its relations and expand its influence, China has created institutions throughout the developing world. Elites from developing countries now regularly meet with

interlocuters from the Communist Party of China and PLA in both bilateral and multilateral fora. Party schools and cadre training programs are being used to cement working level ties among political leaders, while security dialogues and arms sales do the same for the strategic communities.

The PLA is now actively engaged in military diplomacy and peace-keeping, increasingly identifies the protection of overseas interests as an important military task, is rapidly improving its ability to dispatch and maintain forces overseas, has overcome its aversion to overseas bases, and is developing a defense industry capable of exporting both small and big-ticket military systems to a range of buyers throughout the developing world. Taken together, these enhanced political and military outreach activities have succeeded in improving China's image, enhancing developing countries policy coordination with Beijing, and creating and sustaining the personal relationships that will remain important political and security assets for decades to come.

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