



NETWORK POWER: CHINA'S EFFORT TO RESHAPE ASIA'S REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chinese President Xi Jinping first laid out a new vision for Asian regional architecture in a 2014 speech to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), a pan-Asian multilateral security organization. Xi argued, “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia.”¹ Xi’s speech was the first signal of Beijing’s more focused effort to alter the institutional scaffolding, or the security architecture, supporting the Asia-Pacific regional order. To achieve this goal, China is seeking to contest the “network power” that has enabled American leadership in the Asia-Pacific.²

This paper explores China’s bid to contest this network power by reorienting the Asia-Pacific security architecture. It argues that, in a sense, China is taking a page from America’s own playbook: It is seeking to build a multilayered network of security institutions, partnerships, and cooperative activities that enhance its regional influence.

China’s ambitions are to establish a security architecture that is more exclusively “Asian,” free of alliances, more attendant to its domestic security concerns, less liberal, and solidly rooted in Chinese economic power. These ambitions are not new, but under Xi, China is more actively focused on how to operationalize and institutionalize its vision.

China’s strategy to shape a new regional security network is nascent and has yielded mixed results thus far. This paper suggests Beijing faces a series of obstacles that stand in the way of its aims, including its

inability to convince Asian partners that China can be a fair and trustworthy security guarantor, the institutional resilience of existing structures such as U.S. alliances and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the backlash against China’s aggressive territorial ambitions. Nonetheless, Beijing is creating alternatives — security partnerships, institutions, and principles — that are generating a stronger sense of Asian integration, and that have particular appeal for authoritarian leaders less aligned with a liberal system. Additionally, China is increasingly spreading new tools and practices — selling conventional arms and dual-use technologies, as well as enhancing its focus on training and exercises to support these tools — that have the potential to reorient regional institutions and standards over time.

While the United States remains the security partner of choice for many Asia-Pacific countries, U.S. policymakers cannot afford to rest on the laurels of the network power the United States built during the 20th century. As Beijing works to cultivate an alternative security network, U.S. policymakers will need to reassess the necessary institutional investments the United States should make to preserve its interests. These include modernizing U.S. alliances, enhancing support for open and transparent domestic governance, reinvesting in Asian institutions, and refocusing on public diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION: ASIA'S REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE AND WHY IT MATTERS

For China to realize its dream of national rejuvenation, it first needs to acquire identification and support from other Asian countries and to tie the dream of the Chinese people with those of the Asian nations.

— Liu Zhenmin, vice foreign minister of the People's Republic of China, June 2014³

Although Asia's "regional security architecture" is a frequent topic of analysis among academics and policy experts, it is a subject matter that can seem byzantine from the outside. What, one might ask, is a security architecture, and why does it matter in the broader debate about U.S.-China competition?



Put simply, security architectures are the institutional scaffolding that states use to maintain regional order.

A regional security architecture consists of institutional mechanisms that nations use to manage common security concerns, resolve disputes, and establish shared norms and practices.⁴ This can include highly institutionalized organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), less institutionalized forums such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, or bilateral partnerships. Put simply, security architectures are the institutional scaffolding that states use to maintain regional order. Establishing a central position within a security architecture offers a state "network power," which can provide a disproportionate degree of influence within the regional order that may exceed a state's material capabilities.⁵

The United States has traditionally enjoyed significant network power within Asia's security architecture. One of the main sources of this network power is the system of U.S. treaty alliances that served as the early

foundation for Asia's postwar security architecture. As Asia's security architecture has become more multilateral in the post-Cold War years, U.S. alliances have offered continued advantages as anchor points for a system of "networked" multilateral security relationships.⁶ This network power has afforded the United States unique advantages in shaping the rules and principles of Asia's security order over the past 70 years.

Beijing has long chafed at this reality and, under Xi, appears both more determined and confident that the moment is right to shift the status quo. Chinese leaders view the present moment as one of unique opportunity, in which conditions are ripe for China to consolidate its growing national power and achieve the "China dream of national rejuvenation."⁷ They have been equally clear that achieving China's goals will require improving the external environment along its periphery, making it more supportive of Beijing's preferred principles and accepting of its "core interests."⁸

To achieve these goals, China has put a new premium on reorienting Asia's security architecture. In a sense, China is taking a page from America's own playbook: It is seeking to build a multilayered network of security institutions, partnerships, and cooperative activities that enhance its regional influence. This paper argues that China's ambition for the composition of this architecture, its priorities, and the principles upon which it would operate, differ in important ways from the status quo. China is reorienting existing institutions, and building new cooperation mechanisms, in a bid to create a regional network that is more exclusively "Asian," free of alliances, more attendant to its domestic security concerns, less liberal, and solidly rooted in Chinese economic power.

This paper provides only a preliminary effort to detail China's nascent strategy to reorient Asia's security architecture, but it seeks to provide insights on several key questions. What are China's ambitions in building an alternative Asian security architecture and how is it pursuing these objectives? What are the characteristics of China's preferred security architecture, and how do they differ in structure and function from the status quo? How is China leveraging alternative security institutions and relationships in practice, and what implications does this have for U.S. interests?

As China becomes an increasingly influential military power on the global stage, the question of its influence over regional security governance is an important one. Better understanding China's attempt to establish an alternative Asian security architecture can provide lessons about how China may build influence not only in Asia, but also how it may establish regional security networks elsewhere in the world.

XI JINPING AND A NEW ASIAN SECURITY CONCEPT

Xi Jinping first publicly outlined his call to reform Asia's security order in a 2014 speech to the CICA, encouraging Asian countries to "innovate our security concept, establish a new regional security cooperation architecture, and jointly build a road for security of Asia."⁹ Xi's proposal for a "new security concept" and a "new regional security architecture" have emerged as prominent themes in official Chinese speeches in recent years, including at high-profile international venues such as the Boao Forum for Asia, the Xiangshan Forum, and the Munich Security Conference.¹⁰ These ideas also feature in recent Chinese strategic documents such as China's 2015 Military Strategy, its 2017 white paper on Asia-Pacific security cooperation, and its 2019 defense white paper.¹¹

Xi is not the first Chinese leader to advocate reforms to the Asian security order. Indeed, his "new" Asian security concept explicitly echoes ideas espoused by earlier leaders, including Zhou Enlai's "five principles of peaceful coexistence," Jiang Zemin's "new security concept," or Hu Jintao's call for a "Harmonious Asia."¹² Nor is Xi the first Chinese leader to endorse the value of regional integration and multilateral security cooperation. Despite China's early suspicion of Asian regionalism, Beijing has emerged as a more active participant in Asian regional security institutions over the past 30 years. However, Xi is the first Chinese leader to prominently elevate a "new security architecture" as a central pillar of Chinese strategy, reflecting a new focus on reforming global institutions, and more specifically, the "global security governance system."¹³

Chinese officials describe Xi's new security concept as one that envisions a more "common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable" regional cooperation framework.¹⁴ While this phrase is relatively opaque,

Chinese officials have expanded on its meaning in later speeches and in China's 2017 white paper on security cooperation, highlighting common themes that shed light on the contours of the "new" security architecture China is seeking.¹⁵ Collectively, they suggest China is seeking a security architecture with five characteristics:

- First, China is seeking a security architecture in which the United States and other countries China deems "external" to the region play a limited role;
- Second, China is seeking a security architecture that explicitly rejects treaty alliances as a legitimate organizing structure;
- Third, China is seeking a security architecture more closely integrated with the Asian economic order;
- Fourth, China is seeking a security architecture that is reoriented around activities that better address its domestic security concerns; and,
- Finally, China is seeking a security architecture that is more accommodating of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology and principles.

These are not necessarily new ambitions and reflect long-standing complaints China has issued over the years about Asia's existing security order. But Xi's call for a "new security architecture" reflects a growing focus on operationalizing and institutionalizing China's preferences. As Xi argued in 2014, China is not simply advocating a new security concept, it "also works to put such a security concept into practice."¹⁶ The following section details some of the steps China is taking to reform Asia's security architecture and the challenges and successes Beijing has encountered.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A NEW ASIAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

This section outlines five characteristics of China's preferred security architecture and the steps it is taking to alter existing institutions, norms, and practices to support this vision. It suggests that much like China's broader approach to reforming global governance, China's strategy is one of selective contestation.

Rather than seeking to upend the existing security architecture, China is trying to transform it. It is attempting to weaken institutional mechanisms the CCP deems inimical to its interests, adapt the norms and practices upon which regional institutions operate, and build alternative institutions more malleable to Chinese influence.

It also argues the results of this strategy have been decidedly mixed. China has weakened existing institutions and principles in some ways, but it has not eliminated them. Where it has had relatively greater success is in creating alternatives – security partnerships, institutions, and principles – that are generating a stronger sense of Asian integration, and that have particular appeal for authoritarian leaders less aligned with a liberal system. Additionally, China is spreading new tools and practices – selling conventional arms and dual-use technologies, as well as enhancing its focus on training and exercises to support these tools – that have the potential to reorient regional institutions and standards over time.

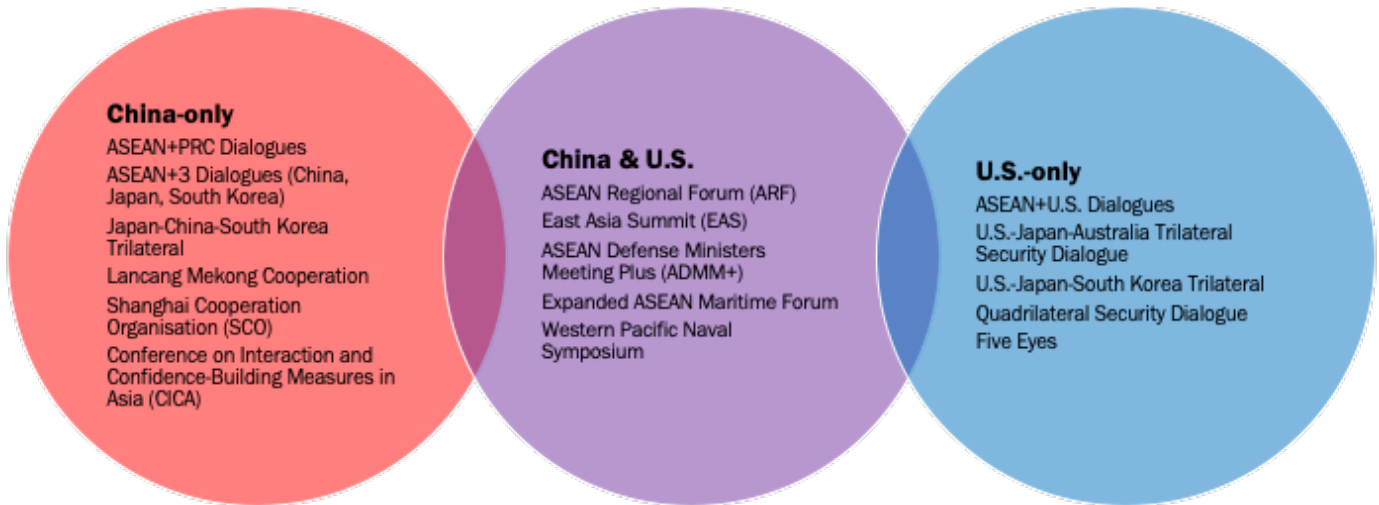
A more “Asian” architecture: Building China-centric cooperation mechanisms

Xi’s 2014 CICA speech made clear that one of China’s principal aims for a new security architecture is to dilute and minimize America’s role. To do so, China is enhancing a suite of parallel institutions in which the United States is not present.

Chinese leaders have long objected to America’s security influence, but the pointedness of Xi’s 2014 remarks caught observers by surprise, leading both American and Chinese experts to debate whether he had genuinely intended to signal a more intentional effort to limit America’s role in the region.¹⁷ While Xi’s rhetoric couches this ambition in terms of “Asian” unity, CCP commentary acknowledges more explicitly that what underlies the “Asia for Asians” language is a belief that China should advance its leading role in Asia at the expense of the United States.¹⁸ China’s shifting rhetoric supports a broader pattern. Viewed alongside China’s overt attempts to delegitimize American international leadership, and investments in military capabilities aimed at eroding the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, recent trends all suggest Beijing has decided the moment is right to more forcefully reduce America’s influence over the Asian periphery.¹⁹

One of the ways in which China is pursuing this goal is by strengthening an alternative set of “Asian” institutions in which the United States does not play a role. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the CICA, as well as two ASEAN-based mechanisms: the ASEAN+3 dialogue (ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea) and the ASEAN-China (10+1) dialogue channel. China’s interest in “Asia-only” mechanisms predates Xi, but over the past few years, China has invested more heavily in strengthening existing institutions and building smaller, exclusive coordination mechanisms with select Asian partners.

FIGURE 1: U.S. AND PRC PARTICIPATION IN SELECT ASIAN SECURITY FORUMS



Key

ASEAN:	Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam
ADMM +/East Asia Summit (EAS):	ASEAN, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the United States, Russia
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF):	EAS countries, Bangladesh, Canada, North Korea, European Union, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste
Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA):	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO):	China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan

Over the past several years, Beijing has worked to steadily enhance both the institutional capacity and scope of its preferred Asian cooperation mechanisms, which Chinese officials and experts often point to as models for Beijing's "new form of international relations."²⁰ In contrast to the East Asia Summit (EAS), which retains a relatively informal structure, all of these Asia-centric institutions now include head of state and Cabinet-level dialogue channels, in addition to an array of senior official meetings and expert-level working groups. The ASEAN-China dialogue mechanism has expanded to include 10 different ministerial engagement channels that facilitate coordinated policy initiatives on topics ranging from foreign policy to education and health as well as telecommunications.²¹ Similarly, the SCO now includes eight annual ministerial-level mechanisms and a standing counterterrorism body.²²

China has played a key role in expanding the capacity and writ of these organizations, providing financial support for institutional secretariats and frequently leveraging its chairmanship or host years to build new dialogue channels or incorporate new members into the organizations.²³ China used its 2018 presidency of the SCO, for example, to develop a new three-year SCO counterterrorism cooperation plan, a new SCO "People's Forum," and 10 different cooperation agreements that accompanied the 2018 Qingdao Summit.²⁴ Beyond enhancing the institutional capacity of individual institutions, China is also attempting to more closely link these organizations to each other, encouraging closer ties and practical cooperation agreements between regional secretariats.²⁵

Even as China has worked to strengthen Asian institutions, it has shown an increasing interest in mini-lateral coordination, mirroring a regional trend toward narrower multilateral mechanisms. The Lancang Mekong Cooperation (LMC) is the most institutionalized of these mini-lateral mechanisms. Since its inception in 2015, it has expanded rapidly, to include leaders-level, foreign minister, and senior officials meetings, as well as a formal secretariat, which is hosted in Beijing. More recently, China has developed more informal mini-lateral structures as well, such as a People's Liberation Army-led Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism with Afghanistan, Pakistan,

and Tajikistan; a new China-Russia-Iran naval exercise; and a new quadrilateral mechanism it has proposed with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nepal.²⁶

China's institutional entrepreneurialism under Xi is readily apparent, but one could reasonably question whether this flurry of institution building has moved Beijing any closer to its goals. There are certainly reasons to be skeptical. Institutions such as the SCO and the CICA have expanded in scope and membership in recent years, but their influence on broader geopolitical affairs in the region remains rather limited. In addition, while China's institution building has altered the shape of Asian security networks, creating a more fractured and contested architecture, it has not tempered America's security presence in Asia. If anything, U.S. regional security mechanisms have deepened over the past several years. The United States and allies such as Japan and Australia have established new agreements to strengthen their combined capabilities and force posture, and pursue co-development of new technologies.²⁷ Mini-lateral mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue have not only strengthened, but also expanded to include informal coordination with additional partners.²⁸

However, China's institutional investments are significant on two fronts. First, although these institutions remain admittedly limited in their ability to shape major geopolitical developments, and China has difficult political relations with some member states, Beijing has used them to challenge select aspects of the status quo. The SCO has developed a Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism and a draft International Code of Conduct for Information Security, which support China's principles on internet sovereignty and countering ethnic separatism.²⁹ Similarly, these institutions can help China generate a stronger sense of Asian policy alignment. The proliferation of lower-level bureaucratic channels, and the new linkages between organizations such as ASEAN, the CICA, the SCO, and the LMC, all create a steady workstream that can continue below the fray of major political challenges, playing an important role in thickening routine diplomatic ties between China and its neighbors.³⁰

Equally important, China leverages these organizations to offset international criticism and mitigate the impact of deteriorating ties with the United States. For example, during the early months of the current COVID-19 crisis, China engaged in virtual foreign ministers' meetings with ASEAN, the ASEAN+3, the LMC, as well as the SCO.³¹ These summits provided valuable messaging opportunities for Beijing, allowing it to push back on growing criticisms of the CCP's management of the outbreak and highlight a more positive narrative of Asian regional solidarity.³² The emergency China-ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in February 2020 included visuals of Chinese and ASEAN ministers linking arms, chanting "Stay strong, Wuhan! Stay strong, China! Stay strong, ASEAN!"³³ More substantively, these summits also offered Beijing an opportunity to propose concrete initiatives to offset growing pressure from the United States and its allies. With talk of U.S.-China economic de-coupling accelerating in Washington, China used these virtual forums to push stronger intra-Asian coordination, new "green lane" travel corridors, health and vaccine cooperation, and closer integration of Asian supply chains and national industries.³⁴

A "non-alliance" architecture: Beijing's Asian partnership strategy

Closely related to China's desire to limit U.S. influence is its pursuit of an alternative security architecture free of treaty alliances, which Xi has pointedly argued are "disadvantageous to the common security of the region."³⁵ To counter these concerns, China is pursuing a "non-alliance" security architecture grounded in what Xi has called a new "Asian security partnership program."³⁶

Xi has lauded China as "the first country to make partnership-building a principle guiding state-to-state relations," portraying China's approach as a more "inclusive" and "cooperative" form of collective security that does not advantage "one or some countries, leaving the rest insecure."³⁷ China's emerging security

partnerships vary significantly in scope and depth, but recent trends point to a focused partnership-building effort.³⁸

Russia occupies a unique position in China's regional security network. Chinese leaders now refer to the partnership as "a strategic relationship of the highest level and with the most substantive contents in China's foreign relations."³⁹ As other experts have noted, there are numerous strategic differences that hamper a deeper alignment between Moscow and Beijing.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, as recent analysis by the Center for a New American Security highlights, the two countries have forged an increasingly substantive partnership in recent years.⁴¹ Russia and China are closely aligned in their commitment to promote alternative international norms on issues such as internet sovereignty, and in 2015 the two countries signed a new agreement on "cooperation in ensuring international information security."⁴² They have increased the complexity of their military activities, engaging in joint strategic bomber patrols over the East China Sea and naval exercises in the South China Sea, and conducting a new trilateral naval exercise with Iran in the Gulf of Oman.⁴³ And on the technological front, growing China-Russia cooperation has the potential, Elsa Kania and Sam Bendett have argued, to undermine U.S. attempts to constrain their development of dual-use technologies.⁴⁴

Beyond China's partnership with other "major powers" such as Russia, China has re-energized its periphery diplomacy strategy under Xi, working to build a stronger partnership network in China's near-abroad, particularly in both Southeast and Central Asia.⁴⁵ Under Xi's leadership, China has upgraded the status of almost all of its strategic partnership agreements in Southeast Asia and Central Asia, most of whom now enjoy the highest status in China's partnership lexicon: a Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership.⁴⁶ These partnership upgrades are often timed to coincide with leaders-level visits or important anniversaries and accompanied by action plans, work plans, and additional agreements that expand bilateral ties into new areas.⁴⁷

FIGURE 2: CHINA'S RECENT PARTNERSHIP UPGRADES IN SOUTHEAST AND CENTRAL ASIA

Country	Name of partnership	Date of upgrade
<i>Southeast Asia</i>		
Brunei	Strategic Cooperative Partnership	November 2018
Cambodia	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	December 2010
Indonesia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	October 2013
Laos	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	September 2009
Malaysia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	October 2013
Myanmar	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	December 2013
Philippines	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	November 2018
Singapore	All Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times	November 2015
Thailand	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	April 2012
Vietnam	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	October 2013
<i>Central Asia</i>		
Kazakhstan	Permanent Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	September 2019
Kyrgyzstan	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	June 2018
Pakistan	All-weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership	April 2015
Tajikistan	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	August 2017
Turkmenistan	Strategic Partnership	May 2014
Uzbekistan	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	June 2016

Note: China has not formally outlined the hierarchy between its different partnership levels. In general, partnerships are described using three adjectives: cooperative, comprehensive, and strategic. As relationships are upgraded, they are re-named using different combinations of these three terms, beginning with a Cooperative Partnership and eventually moving up to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, which appears to be the highest-level Chinese partnership. Select partners, including Singapore and Pakistan, have been given unique partnership monikers in an effort to highlight the unique nature of their relationship with China.

A review of China's Asian partnership agreements shows an expanding array of cooperative security ties concluded over the past several years. In addition to upgrading its partnership agreements, China has secured defense cooperation agreements with the majority of its ASEAN partners under Xi's leadership, which include specific provisions for new defense industry cooperation, increased professional exchanges and military education, expanded joint training and exercises, and, reportedly, military access arrangements.⁴⁸ Similarly, China is steadily expanding its military sales and aid to regional partners. Recent analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies notes that China's arms sales to South and Southeast Asia nearly doubled from 2008-2018, with over 60% of its conventional arms sales going to three close partners: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.⁴⁹ Beyond conventional arms, China has widely distributed police and security technology across Southeast and Central Asia. Chinese companies have provided surveillance equipment, facial recognition technology, and even cyber and digital forensics training for regional law enforcement agencies, to partners ranging from Malaysia and Cambodia to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.⁵⁰



China's partnership strategy has not yielded uniform results. Although China is building new security ties with a wide range of partners, few have shown a willingness to align themselves too closely to Beijing.

China's partnership strategy has not yielded uniform results. Although China is building new security ties with a wide range of partners, few have shown a willingness to align themselves too closely to Beijing. Most Asian nations continue to employ a long-standing hedging strategy that balances between China, the United States, and other regional powers. Singapore signed a new military access agreement with the United States in October 2019, only months after agreeing to an enhanced Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation with China.⁵¹ Thailand's balancing approach was even more explicit — it agreed

to expand defense cooperation with China on the same day that it signed a new joint vision statement for the U.S.-Thailand alliance in November 2019.⁵² Countries are also building stronger intra-Asian security ties, such as a new defense agreement signed between Japan and the Philippines signed in 2016 and a recent India-Australia military logistics agreement.⁵³ Moreover, China's escalating provocations along its disputed maritime and territorial borders have further deepened regional skepticism about security cooperation with Beijing.⁵⁴ In one notable recent development, concern about China's behavior in the South China Sea prompted the Rodrigo Duterte administration in the Philippines to reverse course on revoking its Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States.⁵⁵

Yet China's partnership strategy has made progress on two fronts. First, Beijing has succeeded in weakening aspects of the U.S. alliance network, especially in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, China has emerged as one of the Thai military's largest weapons suppliers and closest exercise partners. Thailand has made sizable defense purchases from Beijing, agreeing to a US\$1 billion deal to purchase Chinese submarines — the largest defense deal in its history — though notably, public backlash has now delayed implementation of the agreement.⁵⁶ Should the deal proceed, it will be significant not only for the assets being purchased, but also because of the follow on effects, which include Chinese military training for Thai submarine crews and Chinese assistance in building new facilities at the Sattahip naval base, a frequent port of call for the U.S. Navy.⁵⁷

Second, with a small group of close partners — Russia, Cambodia, and Pakistan, in particular — China has developed deep ties that could have a meaningful impact on regional security. Russia is now working with China to build a ballistic missile early warning defense system and recent reports suggest they may be collaborating on the development of a non-nuclear submarine as well.⁵⁸ Both of these developments could shore up weaknesses in China's military capabilities. China's reported basing agreements in Cambodia would help extend Chinese power projection capabilities and improve its ability to coerce Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the recent conclusion of an agreement between Pakistan and the Chinese Satellite Navigation Office will make it

the first country to use China's BeiDou satellite system for civil and military purposes, potentially reducing the reliance of both militaries on U.S. satellites in the event of a conflict.⁶⁰ If, and as, China expands these types of military arrangements in the future, they could further exacerbate regional perceptions of vulnerability to Beijing and undermine the credibility of U.S. assurances to allies and partners.

A more integrated security and economic architecture: Linking Asian security to the Belt and Road

In addition to its pursuit of new "Asian" institutions and partnerships, China is seeking a security architecture that is more closely integrated with Asia's economic order. China is leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to pursue this aim.

Chinese officials repeatedly advocate a more "sustainable" approach to security, and China's 2017 white paper describes the need to "synchronize [the] progress of regional economic and security cooperation."⁶¹ Much like China's perspective on U.S. alliances, these goals are not new. They support a deeply embedded CCP view that economic development is the key to quelling instability and maintaining political strength. Xi and other officials have described economic development as the "master key" to regional security problems, reflecting a belief that economic integration will help mitigate against the risk of instability along China's periphery.⁶²

Under Xi, China has found a more successful vehicle to operationalize its vision of a closely integrated security and economic architecture: the BRI. Chinese officials have denounced the idea that the BRI is anything more than an "economic cooperation initiative," but in practice, it is increasingly blurring the lines between Asian economic and security interests.⁶³

On the one hand, China is using regional security mechanisms to strengthen the BRI. China's 2015 vision statement on "Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" advocates leveraging organizations such as the SCO and the CICA to generate stronger regional support; building stronger ties between SCO member states and the BRI was a key priority for the SCO's 2018

Qingdao Summit.⁶⁴ Similarly, China is building business councils and commercial diplomacy opportunities into regional security mechanisms, further enhancing their linkages to the BRI. The 2018 Xiangshan Forum included remarks on cyberwarfare and artificial intelligence from the vice-director general of China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO) — a leading Chinese defense company with numerous BRI projects — as well as treating forum participants to tours of NORINCO factories as part of the forum's events.⁶⁵ Along similar lines, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the SCO secretariat (hosted in Beijing) convened a joint conference with Alibaba designed to showcase Alibaba's humanitarian assistance to the "SCO family" and to encourage closer information and communications technology cooperation among member states.⁶⁶

While some of China's institutional engagement may at times appear as flash over substance, the more significant implication of the BRI for Asian security may be the ways in which it is spreading dual-use technologies and tools that could align regional commercial and security interests more closely with Beijing. Through China's "Digital Silk Road," Beijing is building the backbone of much of the digital infrastructure across Central and Southeast Asia. Chinese technology companies have netted deals for smart city infrastructure, 5G networks, or satellite coverage with every ASEAN and SCO member state (with the exception of India).⁶⁷ Of note, this digital cooperation directly links China's Digital Silk Road to regional organizations as well. Meiya Pico, a leading Chinese technology company whose digital forensics tools have elicited U.S. concerns, has provided technological support for the SCO's anti-cyberterror exercises and cyber security training for the ASEAN secretariat.⁶⁸

The ultimate impact of the BRI on Asia's security architecture is not yet clear. On the one hand, the initiative has myriad weaknesses that have become more readily apparent to China's neighbors. Concerns over China's intentions, the potential for a loss of sovereignty, and fears about unsustainable debt have generated fierce domestic debates in some countries, prompting partners including Myanmar, Pakistan, and Malaysia, to reconsider key agreements.⁶⁹

At the same time, China has shown an ability to adapt in the face of a growing BRI backlash.⁷⁰ And while countries may be more skeptical of China's intentions, few are likely to walk away from the initiative entirely given the overwhelming infrastructure gaps in the region. Although the BRI's primary appeal in the region is economic, this does not mean the initiative could not have a profound impact on Asia's security architecture. The BRI is expanding China's influence over critical infrastructure, digital technology, and space and cyber assets across the region. This has the potential to change regional incentive structures, creating stronger motivations for countries to align with the practices and standards advocated by Chinese companies and suppliers. Moreover, as the BRI reshapes China's overseas economic interests, it is reshaping its global security interests as well, creating new imperatives to better protect China's overseas investments.⁷¹ This will inevitably influence China's regional security activities, and there are already indications China is establishing new security cooperation mechanisms explicitly focused on better securing the BRI. This includes a new international security forum in Lianyungang that brings together regional law enforcement officials to discuss security cooperation along BRI trade routes.⁷²

A “non-traditional” architecture: Re-orienting security cooperation along China's periphery

China's fourth priority is to build a security architecture that is more attendant to its domestic security concerns, reorienting regional security cooperation away from traditional military affairs and toward an emphasis on “non-traditional” security. To do so, it is focused on building agreements and activities that reshape the “permissible” security activities along its periphery, both weakening security cooperation with “external” powers and building new “non-traditional” cooperation mechanisms and activities.

As noted above, Chinese leaders have elevated the importance of solidifying a more favorable external environment along China's periphery in recent years, a goal that is intimately tied to China's own sovereignty goals. As one Chinese scholar articulated, Asia is the “main theater where China preserves national security, defends its sovereign unity and territorial integrity, and... the frontline and outpost for China's defense against enemy incursions.”⁷³ China's focus

on re-orienting regional security activities toward “non-traditional” issues such as terrorism and transnational crime, while consistent with an Asia-wide interest in these issues, also directly speaks to Beijing's domestic security concerns. Chinese officials have long been wary of the potential for other countries to exploit multilateral mechanisms to erode China's sovereignty.⁷⁴ Shifting away from sensitive issues enhances Beijing's ability to prevent regional coalition-building that might undermine its position on territorial concerns. Beijing is also seeking to de-emphasize regional dialogues on issues that would exacerbate concerns about its expanding military capabilities and undermine its narrative that China's military will be used as a “force for global peace.”⁷⁵ Finally, while China portrays “non-traditional” security issues as transnational in nature, the “non-traditional” cooperation mechanisms it is building are often directly related to domestic security and activities that help China enhance control over its borders and Chinese citizens.

One tactic Beijing has used to reorient regional security cooperation is to pursue multilateral agreements — often depicted as confidence-building measures — that place limits on the types of military activities and engagements other Asian nations can pursue with outside partners. This is an approach China and Russia used successfully with the SCO in 2005, when the organization passed the 2005 Astana Declaration declaring member states should “set a deadline” regarding outside powers' use of member states' military installations.⁷⁶ Beijing has twice sought, without success, a similar agreement with ASEAN, pushing most recently in South China Sea Code of Conduct negotiations for a clause that would require unanimous consent from claimants for military exercises with external powers.⁷⁷ Xi's 2014 CICA speech, which called for a “regional code of conduct,” suggests this may be an approach China sees as having wider validity within Asia as well — essentially expanding Beijing's description of a “non-interference” principle over the decisions of other Asian nations.⁷⁸

China's track record on these efforts is rather weak, as its neighbors have been understandably reluctant to offer Beijing a veto over their military decisions and partnerships. Where China has had relatively greater success is in establishing new “non-traditional” cooperation mechanisms. China's drive to build

regional counterterrorism and law enforcement networks — motivated in large part by its desire to better control Uyghur Muslims — are especially notable. China's counterterrorism cooperation with neighboring states has been growing for the past two decades, but it has become better operationalized and more sophisticated under Xi.

China has developed wide-ranging law enforcement ties with SCO and ASEAN member states that now stretch down to the local level, including police training and memoranda of understanding between Beijing's Municipal Public Security Bureau and SCO capitals.⁷⁹ In Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and along the Mekong River, China has established routine border patrol operations that include joint training and exercises and intelligence-sharing.⁸⁰ In Central Asia, in particular, regional counterterrorism exercises have not only become more complex but have also begun to incorporate "cyber-terrorism" as a new focus.⁸¹ China is also institutionalizing its cooperation through new training mechanisms that include a China-ASEAN Law Enforcement Academy, the Lancang-Mekong Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center, hosted in Kunming, and a China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation that provides training for border security forces.⁸²

China's emphasis on "non-traditional" security is not inherently problematic. Disaster relief, counterterrorism, maritime security, and similar issues are high priorities across the region. However, the alternative mechanisms and activities China is developing are concerning on two fronts. First, they are helping Beijing build a sheen of international legitimacy around domestic security activities that run counter to international norms. From its inception, the SCO has played a central role in validating China's domestic counterterrorism narrative, enshrining China's "three evils" concept in the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism, and in SCO joint statements and documents.⁸³ Second, Beijing is leveraging some of these arrangements to extend its sovereign reach beyond its borders. The People's Armed Police, China's paramilitary force, now operates facilities in Tajikistan while the Ministry of Public Security participates in patrols along the Mekong.⁸⁴ Similarly, China uses

its regional law enforcement ties to facilitate easier tracking and extradition of Uyghur Muslims, leveraging shared criminal databases within organizations such as the SCO, and leaning on close partners including Thailand and Cambodia to repatriate Uyghur asylum seekers.⁸⁵

A less liberal architecture: Establishing new channels to build discourse power

Finally, China is seeking an architecture that is more accommodating of CCP ideology and rejects what it views as "Western" attempts to inculcate liberal values in Asian governance. China is focused on building new informal dialogue channels to combat this influence.

China's objections to the influence of liberal ideology are longstanding. Chinese leaders have consistently rejected the idea that "universal values" underpin the international system, instead advocating for greater "democracy in international relations" that accommodates alternative political systems and their policies.⁸⁶ Over the past several years, Chinese leaders have elevated the importance of pushing back against what they view as America's "discourse power" and strength in shaping international norms.⁸⁷ Chinese leaders have called for a stronger push to advance "modern Chinese values," "tell China's story," and promote uniquely "Asian" principles that could serve as the "foundation for comprehensive regional security governance."⁸⁸

A key element of China's plan to build discourse power under Xi has been its focus on elevating informal dialogue mechanisms and public diplomacy channels.⁸⁹ The most high-profile aspect of this approach is a suite of large, international forums hosted by Beijing. These include: the Boao Forum for Asia; the Xiangshan Forum; the Belt and Road Summit; the World Peace Forum; the World Internet Conference; and the newly established Dialogue on Asian Civilizations. While nominally Track 1.5 in nature, the content of these forums is guided in a top-down manner by the Chinese government in order to provide China with an uncontested platform to advance its positions before a friendly international audience. This stands in stark contrast to the frosty reception Beijing's remarks often receive in settings such as the Shangri-La Dialogue. Beijing also uses these forums to strengthen and showcase its regional

leadership, offering key partners high-profile speaking opportunities, as well as convening sideline multilateral engagements and activities. Both the China-ASEAN maritime security exercise and a new China-ASEAN defense think tank exchange were launched on the margins of the Xiangshan Forum in 2018.

China complements these high-profile venues with an array of Track II diplomacy channels and “think tank networks” it has paired with all of its priority regional institutions. These include mechanisms such as the Global Center for Mekong Studies, affiliated with the Lancang Mekong Cooperation; the Belt and Road Studies Network, affiliated with the BRI; the Network of ASEAN-China Think Tanks, affiliated with the ASEAN+1; and the SCO and CICA think tank forums. Long an arena dominated by the United States and other Western nations, think tank diplomacy has been accorded a new importance under Xi, who has explicitly tasked these think tanks with promoting “international exchanges and cooperation,” serving as “consultants and assistants to the Party” and building an international consensus “to create a broader and more favorable environment for China’s development.”⁹⁰ Think tank diplomacy augments China’s focus on official security mechanisms both by creating a useful echo chamber through which China can further promote its policy initiatives, as well as by offering a bottom-up means of seeding new ideas into formal institutional channels.⁹¹

Despite China’s significant investment in building alternative discourse channels, this aspect of China’s architecture-shaping strategy faces significant obstacles. Beijing’s public diplomacy has done little to shift high, and increasing, levels of regional concern about China’s behavior and regional influence. In a recent poll of Southeast Asian elites by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, over 60% of respondents expressed “mistrust” of China, a statistic that is unlikely to be helped by an uptick in tensions around the South China Sea.⁹² In interviews with South and Southeast Asian officials, however, some suggested that China’s consistent counter-narratives, while unconvincing on their own merits, serve a more limited purpose: de-legitimizing U.S. principles and priorities. As one Southeast Asian expert observed in an interview, Chinese officials and experts do not necessarily need to fully convince counterparts of their arguments; all they

have to do is “plant some doubt.” This expert added, “It doesn’t sway people entirely, but it does ‘just enough’ to pierce the U.S. arguments.”⁹³ Moreover, China’s use of informal dialogue channels aligns with broader CCP initiatives aimed at cultivating regional policy elites and influencers to advance China’s narratives within their countries.⁹⁴

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In responding to China’s effort to contest Asia’s security architecture, the United States should be careful to neither overestimate nor underestimate its impact. Beijing’s strategy has had mixed results thus far and this paper suggests it faces four obstacles:

- *Overcoming regional threat perceptions.* The most significant obstacle Beijing faces in attempting to reorient Asia’s security architecture is that China itself is a significant source of insecurity for many other Asian countries. Even for those countries who may not feel directly threatened by China, there are still pervasive doubts about whether it can be trusted as a fair and reliable security guarantor. While Beijing may be able to build cooperation around discrete non-traditional security issues, it will have an uphill battle establishing credibility if it cannot meaningfully address a wider range of security concerns, including territorial disputes. Even in places where China has successfully built new inroads — such as with the Duterte administration in the Philippines — the CCP’s firmly nationalist positions have made it difficult for China to appear as a good faith actor with other Asian partners.⁹⁵
- *Regional hedging tendencies.* China will face challenges in overcoming innate regional hedging tendencies that make it doubtful that other countries will closely align with Beijing. Strong non-alignment traditions in South and Southeast Asia make it more likely that many countries will continue to pursue a strategy of diversified security ties, balancing arms purchases, training, and exercises between a range of partners, including the United States, China, Japan, India, and Russia. This will create difficulties for Beijing in trying to consolidate a broader multilateral network of China-centric security partnerships.

- *Institutional resilience and path dependence.* China will have a difficult time overcoming the path dependence that is baked into Asian multilateralism. The two most enduring aspects of Asia's security architecture are U.S. alliances and ASEAN. While China has certainly weakened aspects of both institutions, neither the United States and its allies, nor ASEAN members states will easily walk away from them. China may be able to build new cooperation mechanisms, but it will likely have to settle for creating parallel structures rather than replacing existing institutions.
- *Lack of soft power.* China lacks soft power with its neighbors — something the CCP's focus on "discourse power" implicitly acknowledges. Beijing instead leans on its economic power to build influence. While this influence has worked to China's advantage in some ways, China's lack of soft power forces it to rely more explicitly on co-optation of political and economic elites or blunt economic coercion to achieve its aims, tactics that have repeatedly caused popular blowback and undermined its efforts to build trust with regional partners.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers would be wise not to dismiss the potential impact of China's network-building efforts. This paper suggests China has made steady progress in three areas.

- *Developing a core group of partners.* China is beginning to build a small, but meaningful, group of security partners. China's ties to countries such as Russia, Pakistan, and Cambodia are becoming increasingly substantive. While these relationships are more transactional than U.S. alliances and not without ongoing friction, China is seeking to replicate many of the advantages the United States enjoys through its alliance relationships. As the United States and its allies in Asia and Europe seek to strengthen cooperation among like-minded democracies, it may produce further incentives for these countries to consolidate their security ties. If China expands and deepens its core partnerships with integrated capabilities, crisis coordination channels, mutual access arrangements, and complex exercises, they could begin to complicate American and allied military operations in the Asia-Pacific. Equally problematic,

China is expanding the space for illiberalism in Asia by using military aid and economic assistance to prop up authoritarian leaders such as Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, reducing the leverage other international players can bring to bear to incentivize good governance and domestic reforms.

- *Building institutional investments.* The unfortunate reality now facing U.S. policymakers is that over the past 20 years, and particularly over the past three years, China has often been more consistent than the United States in cultivating Asian multilateral institutions. While the United States has developed a range of focused dialogue mechanisms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral dialogue, it has wavered in the degree of time and attention it has given to different multilateral venues across administrations. China, by contrast, has been relatively consistent in devoting both time and resources to institutionalize preferred venues such as the LMC and use them to build new multilateral agreements and activities. Even within Asian institutions in which China enjoys relatively less influence, such as the EAS, it has often engaged more consistently than the United States. The Chinese premier, for example, has attended every EAS leaders' meeting, while the United States has twice sent only a Cabinet-level official in the nine years it has formally participated.
- *Leveraging the BRI.* In spite of the BRI's flaws and shortcomings, China is expanding its strategic influence through this initiative, a reality that may have more meaningful security implications in the future. China's commercial influence, especially in the digital sphere, has the potential to create greater de facto alignment with Beijing on issues ranging from internet sovereignty to domestic security. Equally important, Beijing is offering training, exercises, and education to support the use of these tools, which could enhance its aim of fostering a stronger ecosystem of cooperative mechanisms centered around Beijing. As the BRI progresses, it is also likely to spur the creation of new bilateral access agreements, training, and multilateral security mechanisms, specifically centered around infrastructure security and border protection.⁹⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The deteriorating relationship between Washington and Beijing is likely to accelerate competition over Asia's security architecture in the coming years. If current trends continue, regional security networks may become further fragmented, leading to what scholar Alice Ekman has described as a "blurred polarization."⁹⁷ U.S. policymakers will need to think carefully about the necessary institutional investments the United States should make to preserve its interests in this regional environment. These should include:

- Building more resilient alliances.* The first step the United States should take to protect Asia's security architecture is to reinforce the source of its own network power: U.S. security alliances. This should include developing new combined high-end training and exercises, integrated concepts of operation, and joint technologies to deter military coercion, especially as China and Russia solidify their bilateral partnership. While this work can be done bilaterally, the United States should push to integrate these issues into trilateral defense dialogues between the United States, Australia, Japan, and South Korea as much as possible. U.S. policymakers also need to look beyond defense cooperation in alliance relationships, building new coordination mechanisms that explore economic pressure points Beijing could exploit for security gain, and identifying targeted steps to establish more integrated and resilient alliance supply chain networks.
- Reinvesting in institution building.* The United States and its allies need to refocus on Asian institution building, exploring new coordination groupings that will bring the right players to the table to respond to regional challenges. While the United States should continue to support ASEAN and bolster its political autonomy, it also needs to better operationalize emerging mini-lateral mechanisms that facilitate closer defense cooperation with key partners. The United States should consider strengthening new multilateral configurations such as a Quad-Plus or Five Eyes Plus mechanism, which can knit together both allies and close partners, as well as select
- European partners. U.S. policymakers also need to refocus on supporting domestic governance as a priority agenda item in regional institutions, seeking opportunities to expand initiatives focused on anti-corruption and transparency within ASEAN dialogue channels in particular. Although re-prioritizing domestic governance issues may have near-term tradeoffs and could create friction with partners such as Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, it will be essential to building a more resilient architecture less vulnerable to illiberal influence.
- Offering better alternatives to Chinese tools.* China is building influence most successfully in arenas where it offers needed investments or tools and regional partners lack credible alternatives. To their credit, U.S. policymakers have recognized this problem, but new "counter-BRI" initiatives, such as a trilateral U.S.-Japan-Australia infrastructure program, have been slow to build momentum. Multilateral programs have merit and should be strengthened, but U.S. policymakers should also focus on identifying areas where they can better leverage and enhance allies' unilateral strengths. For example, South Korea is an important defense supplier in Southeast Asia. It has provided light combat aircraft to the Philippines and advanced trainer jets to both Indonesia and Thailand, among other items. Japan, as my colleague Mireya Solís has noted, leads China in providing infrastructure finance in Southeast Asia.⁹⁸ In cases like these and others, the United States should look for ways to help enhance its allies' competitiveness, recognizing that in some instances, they may be in a more credible position with regional partners — such as Myanmar, for example — than the United States.
- Refocusing on public diplomacy.* The United States should reinvest in public diplomacy and a commitment to advocating for the principles it cares about. The low-hanging fruit for U.S. policymakers is to reverse the current administration's lackluster participation in regional summits. But U.S. policymakers should also focus more directly on preventing China from creating uncontested spaces to advance its narrative and promote alternative principles. Rather than avoiding Chinese-led forums or

sending low-level representatives, the United States should start treating these forums as important counter-messaging opportunities. The Trump administration's decision to send Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Chad Sbragia to the Xiangshan Forum in 2019 was a smart step in the right direction. U.S. policymakers should also coordinate more closely with like-minded partners, such as India and Vietnam, who participate in official forums and dialogues in which the United States is not present (i.e. SCO, CICA, ASEAN+1). As India's open dissent from some of China's positions in the SCO highlights, the presence of like-minded partners can be influential in preventing China from enjoying uncontested influence over the institutional agenda.

its strategic influence and alter the regional security order. China is unlikely to succeed in consolidating a firm sphere of influence — largely because there are few Asian nations who would welcome such a development — but the United States will also no longer enjoy the relatively uncontested network power it has relied upon in the past. By refocusing on institutional innovation and the need to bolster Asian multilateralism, the United States can help preserve a more liberal security order in the Asia-Pacific region.



While the United States remains the “security partner of choice” for many Asia-Pacific countries, U.S. policymakers cannot afford to rest on the laurels of the network power the United States built during the 20th century.

While the United States remains the “security partner of choice” for many Asia-Pacific countries, U.S. policymakers cannot afford to rest on the laurels of the network power the United States built during the 20th century. Beijing is working to slowly establish the institutional infrastructure necessary to expand

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