

# China and the US Alliance System

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## Abstract

In recent years, scholarship examining US and security allies' responses to China's rapidly growing power and "assertive" policies towards its neighbours has proliferated. The English-language literature remains relatively one-sided, however. Crucial to understanding the complex forces driving strategic competition in the contemporary Asia-Pacific are comprehensive surveys of how Chinese views are evolving. This study draws extensively on Chinese sources to update existing scholarship, much of it two decades old, with a particular focus on recent Chinese reactions to major developments concerning the US-centred alliance system – a foundational element of the 65-year-old regional order. Beijing expresses deepening frustration towards, and even open opposition to, recent alliance strengthening, and instead champions alternative security architectures free of what it alleges to be "exclusive," "zero-sum," "Cold-war relic" US-centred alliances. Proposals for concrete pathways to operationalizing these abstract visions that take into account contemporary political and security realities (for example, North Korea), however, appear less forthcoming.

**Keywords:** China; alliances; regional order; military; security; United States; Japan

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In a major foreign policy speech at the 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Chinese president, Xi Jinping 习近平, championed a new framework for regional peace and security in Asia.<sup>1</sup> An authoritative Xinhua commentary juxtaposed Xi's proposed new "Asian security concept" against the 65-year-old US-centred "hub-and-spokes" alliance system. It criticized US alliances for being the "Achilles heel" of constructive efforts towards building a more sustainable, inclusive and "win-win" regional security order; the primary obstacle to "a peaceful Asia"; and emblematic of an anachronistic "Cold War security structure [in which] some big powers pursue security as a 'zero-sum game' and keep strengthening military alliances in the region while excluding the common interests of other countries."<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, "some big powers" – Washington and its allies – have a very different view.

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1 Xi 2014.

2 "China voice: eliminate Asia's Achilles heel," Xinhua, 20 May 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/20/c\\_133347127.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/20/c_133347127.htm).

For more than two decades, China's growing economic wherewithal and military might have gradually transformed the region's post-Cold War international relations. Beijing's substantial defence spending increases have enabled rapid military modernization, and in particular those capabilities intended to deter US involvement in possible disputes on China's periphery. This trend continues despite the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) simultaneously confronting worsening economic and social headwinds. Meanwhile, especially since 2010, specific Chinese rhetoric and policies vis-à-vis its vast, controversial sovereignty claims have raised concerns across the region. As China's power and influence grow, whether Beijing intends to challenge core elements of the longstanding regional order has emerged as a major debate in policy, academic and media circles overseas.

In this dynamic and potentially volatile context, understanding how Beijing evaluates the US-centred alliance system's role in regional security – arguably *the* foundational element of the post-1950s regional status quo – is crucial. Beyond direct implications for the academic literature on Chinese foreign policy, international relations and security studies, a deeper understanding is necessary to assess and inform efforts to shape the region's future in a maximally peaceful, stable and prosperity-promoting direction.

Much English-language scholarship specifically assessing Chinese views of the US alliance system dates back to 1997 and the reaction to the US–Japan defence guidelines, a vastly different regional context. Back then, beyond the ever-present issue of Taiwan's international status, neither China's military modernization nor its policies and rhetoric with regard to controversial sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas were major policy concerns. Beijing's official 1997 defence budget was US\$10 billion, which was roughly commensurate with Taiwan's and one-fourth of that of Japan. In contrast, Beijing's official 2016 defence budget, which was widely believed to underreport China's actual military spending significantly, was \$147 billion – more than thrice Japan's budget and 13 times more than that of Taiwan. Beyond the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) rapidly advancing capabilities, Beijing's intentions are also increasingly identified across the region as security concerns. In particular, many see China's rhetoric and policies towards its neighbours, including several US allies, as increasingly provocative and newly assertive, even aggressive. Of particular relevance since 2012 are Chinese military and paramilitary operations in waters and airspace surrounding islands administered by Japan, and various measures in the South China Sea widely considered outside China to be destabilizing, including most recently militarized island-building on a historically unprecedented scale.

This article takes a long view and engages underutilized Chinese-language sources to identify key trends and features of contemporary Chinese perspectives. The analysis reveals Beijing's deepening frustration, if not outright opposition, vis-à-vis the US alliance system, as well as pessimism concerning its contribution to regional stability. Beginning in the 1990s, Chinese concerns increased as US alliances persisted, then strengthened, despite the disappearance in 1991 of

their original (and, in Beijing's 1970s–1980s view, reasonable) *raison d'être*: the Soviet Union. Since then, Beijing has grown increasingly suspicious of US intentions as Washington encourages Japan and other allies to bolster military capabilities and strengthen ties with the US military and one another. Furthermore, Beijing notes with indignation its view that the alliances' scope has evolved from what it perceives as strict "bilateral" territorial defence to more "offensive" measures targeting "third-party's interests," allegedly including Beijing's sovereignty claims to Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas. Public references to the US alliances' salutary, stabilizing role are increasingly rare.<sup>3</sup> A view remarkably prominent in government-affiliated publications sees the US alliance system, together with US policies and rhetoric perceived as confrontational (for example, "the pivot," "Air-Sea Battle"), as evidence of machinations to "contain China's peaceful rise" (*ezhi Zhongguo heping jueqi* 遏制中国和平崛起). Consequently, since 1997, deepening frustrations with the regional status quo have driven Beijing's promotion of alternative, alliance-free regional security frameworks.

These trends evince a complicated strategic picture in the contemporary Asia-Pacific. There remains strong evidence to support the decades-old logic underpinning the US alliance system's persistence post-Cold War: that US forward-deployed forces and alliances ameliorate interstate political tensions and destabilizing security competitions during a period of rapid change.<sup>4</sup> While the US strategy's deterrent effects seem clear, an action–reaction dynamic also suggests security dilemmas are at least partially driving mutual arming. Indeed, Beijing interprets what Washington and its allies consider to be defensive measures as offensive provocations threatening China's own security.<sup>5</sup> As for the view that US security guarantees mitigate otherwise destabilizing arms competitions, even Beijing has historically held contradictory wishes with regard to the most pivotal US security ally, Japan, simultaneously, if begrudgingly, appreciating US forces in Japan as a reassuring "bottle cork" (*pingsai* 瓶塞) containing what many Chinese observers controversially assert to be latent Japanese "militarism" (*junguozhuyi* 军国主义) while opposing the strengthening and expansion of the alliance's geographical and functional scope.<sup>6</sup>

This article is organized as follows. It first introduces the ideological and historical roots of Beijing's basic thinking on alliances, including major slogans permeating CCP discourse. Next, it identifies key trends in Chinese views of US alliances, general and specific to Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea, as well as vis-à-vis ballistic missile defence.<sup>7</sup> (Beijing considers the US–

3 Wu, Ting, et al. 2015.

4 Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2012; Christensen 1996.

5 Liff and Ikenberry 2014.

6 Christensen 1999.

7 The US–Thai alliance is not a focus of Chinese analysis; even in Washington it does not attract much attention. The US defence secretary's major 2015 speech on the Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy does not even mention Thailand. Carter 2015.

Japan partnership most consequential, however, and the article allocates space accordingly.) A final empirical section assesses Beijing's effort to champion alternative regional security frameworks free of what it considers "exclusive," "zero-sum" and destabilizing alliances. The penultimate section offers a summary and critical analysis. The conclusion discusses several broader implications of the analysis for regional peace and stability, the US alliance system, and US–China relations.

This article aims to identify and critically assess the general trends in Chinese interpretations of the US alliance system, and to highlight persistent deep disconnects with Washington and its allies. The analysis herein is thus intended to complement the much larger English-language literature examining the views and responses of the US and its allies in relation to China. Identifying core features of the subjective assessments of strategic interactions of both "sides" is a necessary step to gaining a deeper understanding of the contemporary Asia-Pacific's increasingly complicated and tense geopolitics. And, for the US and its allies, awareness of evolving Chinese perspectives is crucial for effective policymaking; to formulate policy as though one "side" exists in a strategic vacuum is ill-advised. Although the focus here is on general trends, it is important to stress that neither Beijing nor the CCP itself is a monolith. Various perspectives on these complicated issues exist within China.

## Core Characteristics of Beijing's Thinking on Alliances

### *Alliances as inherently zero-sum*

Perhaps somewhat ironically given Beijing's frequent criticism of Washington's allegedly "zero-sum" (*linghe* 齡和) approach towards China, leading scholars assess that Chinese leaders have "worshipped at the high church of realpolitik" and have done so for centuries.<sup>8</sup> For their part, CCP leaders have traditionally interpreted security alliances as inherently "zero-sum" and exclusively negative: their assumed (sole) purpose is the containment of threatening states. This view contrasts sharply with Washington's more comprehensive contemporary view which sees alliances as having deterrent value but also as positive-sum public goods: that is, useful guarantors of regional security and stability, especially in geopolitical contexts characterized by rapid change and uncertainty.<sup>9</sup>

How far back Beijing's basically negative view traces its roots is debatable, but it certainly applied in the closing decades of the Cold War as Beijing exploited close alignment with Washington (and Tokyo) to contain a perceived hostile, existential threat from Moscow. Its basic contours persist to this day. From Beijing's perspective, it is precisely because alliances proved useful during the largely zero-sum US–Soviet confrontation that their continued existence is

8 Johnston 1998; Christensen 1999.

9 Shambaugh 2004, 70.

interpreted either as a useless anachronism no longer beneficial for Asia-Pacific stability – “Cold War relics” (*lengzhan chanwu* 冷战产物) in CCP parlance – or as aimed directly at containing what Beijing alleges Washington and its allies must, by the former’s own definition, see as an expansionist, existential threat: in this case, China.

The prevalence of this analytical lens carries important implications for how China’s leaders interpret contemporary trends. Over the past 20 years, Washington has together with its partners actively consolidated the traditionally US-centred “hub-and-spokes” alliance system, with each alliance’s scope widening moderately. Because these alliances were originally established in the crucible of the early Cold War, Beijing, and especially those in PLA circles, views these trends as evincing Washington’s supposed zero-sum “Cold War thinking” (*lengzhan siwei* 冷战思维) and alleged intent to regard China’s rise like a Soviet Union redux.

Reflecting this view, Ministry of State Security-affiliated scholar Dong Chunling 董春岭 defines “Cold War thinking” as: 1) “the principle of those who are not friends are enemies,” coupled with a constant search for potential competitors; 2) “overemphasis on the opposition of ideologies and values between countries”; and 3) “overemphasis on national political and military security.” Dong contends that Washington’s China policy reflects this anachronistic mindset by hyping China’s developmental potential and identifying China as America’s sole peer competitor, presenting Beijing as an ideological threat (the “China model”), and frequently comparing US–China relations to US–Soviet relations.<sup>10</sup>

Beijing often interprets recent US alliance developments through this basically zero-sum lens. Since the late 1990s, authoritative government documents allege that US alliances are evidence of America’s destabilizing “hegemonism and power politics” (*baquanzhuyi he qiangquan zhengzhi* 霸权主义和强权政治), themselves motivated by a purported US desire to contain China.<sup>11</sup> As Lt. General Wang Guanzhong 王冠中 stated in 2014, “We oppose the practices of flexing up military alliances against a third party, resorting to the threat or use of force, or seeking so-called absolute security of one’s own at the cost of the security of others.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Historical and ideological roots of Beijing’s alliance perspective*

While it is often remarked that Chinese strategists are quintessentially “realist,” since the spectacular unravelling of its own alliance with Moscow in the 1960s Beijing has conspicuously eschewed new formal security alliances (“external

<sup>10</sup> Dong 2014.

<sup>11</sup> “China’s national defense,” Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, July 1998, <http://china.org.cn/e-white/5/index.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Wang, Guanzhong 2014.

balancing”), despite clear external threat perceptions.<sup>13</sup> After several years of informal security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo vis-à-vis Moscow, China’s official “independent foreign policy” line (*duli zizhu de duiwai zhengce* 独立自主的对外政策) was formally launched during the 12th Party Congress in 1982 when CCP leaders reduced their demands for a united anti-Soviet front. As Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, the-then CCP general secretary, stated, “China never attaches itself to any big power or group of powers, and never yields to pressure from any big power.” That same day, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 declared that “Independence and self-reliance have always been and will forever be our basic stand.”<sup>14</sup>

This official stance does not seem to have changed fundamentally post-Cold War. Although some Chinese scholars have begun advocating countervailing alliances, especially with Russia, such calls do not appear to be mainstream, and remain politically controversial.<sup>15</sup> Thirty years after Hu’s aforementioned speech, China’s 2013 defence white paper vows to “unswervingly pursue an independent foreign policy of peace.”<sup>16</sup> In 2014, the PLA’s official newspaper analysed a century of history and concluded that “it’s time to say ‘goodbye’ to military alliances.” It argued that alliances are “historical relics and leftovers from the 20th century, an old kind of international relations theory, products of international politics, and run counter to the current trends of seeking peace and joint prosperity.”<sup>17</sup> In short, Beijing’s interpretation of security alliances as being inherently zero-sum and exclusive is longstanding. It remains influential in China today, powerfully shaping CCP reactions to regional trends.

## Overview of Chinese Post-Cold War Responses to General Trends and Key US Alliances

Chinese views of the post-Cold War US alliance system largely reflect this basic lens. Several general trends are particularly salient. First, US policies are widely alleged to be destabilizing drivers of regional militarization and alliance strengthening, and increasingly targeting China and areas over which it (controversially) claims sovereignty. Second, nuanced recognition in Beijing of a strategic interaction at play – that Washington and its allies may be reacting to China’s own policies considered provocative or destabilizing and/or uncertainty about its intentions – appears to be conspicuously rare, especially outside the scholarly community. Meanwhile, explicit

13 Feng and Huang 2014, 17. The formal exception is the 1961 Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, which significantly predates the post-Cold War focus of this study.

14 Whiting 1983, 913.

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

16 “Diversified employment of China’s armed forces,” Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 16 April 2013, [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7181425.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7181425.htm).

17 Xia 2014.

consideration of the alliance system's positive role in underpinning the very regional stability that enabled China's own rapid development over the past 40 years is also uncommon.

Since the mid-1990s, the United States is widely seen in China as galvanizing allies to expand their military capabilities, to bolster their ties with Washington and one another, and to widen the scope of their security policies. The net result, many Chinese observers allege, is an effort to “encircle” (*weidu* 围堵) China. For their part, during this period China's defence white papers repeatedly criticize US alliances as reflecting power politics and zero-sum thinking. Chinese analysts typically view the US–Japan alliance trajectory as most unsettling. In a widely-read essay of a decade ago, Chinese scholar Wu Xinbo 吴心伯 argued that Washington's policies augured the termination of the US-centred alliance system's “silver lining” as an erstwhile prophylactic against allied (specifically, Japanese) rearmament.<sup>18</sup> Today, Washington is seen as actively enabling Tokyo's alleged remilitarization and cheerleading its more ambitious regional and global security role. Seen through a lens tinted heavily by China's experience in the 1930s and 1940s, contemporary anti-Japanese nationalism, and decades-old Chinese concerns about Japan's possible re-emergence as a military superpower (*junshi daguo* 军事大国), these developments are deeply controversial in Beijing.<sup>19</sup>

Another driver of Beijing's negative reaction to the alliance system has grown increasingly prominent since 2011. Beijing perceives the Obama administration's “rebalance” (or “pivot”) strategy as destabilizing, allegedly providing cover for US allies to provoke China as territorial disputes fester. This perception was manifest at the 2014 Shangri-la Dialogue, where an influential Chinese analyst argued that the rebalance strategy emboldened US allies to “pick fights” with Beijing.<sup>20</sup> A *China Daily* editorial assailed US policy for being aimed at containing Beijing while simultaneously criticizing Washington's failure to “rein in” its “unruly” security partners and for “ganging up [against China] with its trouble-making allies.”<sup>21</sup> In this context, US security commitments are seen as backstopping its partners who adopt provocations that they allegedly would not “dare” otherwise.<sup>22</sup> Most Chinese commentaries, however, overlook the position of Washington and its allies that these measures are defensive reactions to Beijing's policies and rhetoric. Rather, in Beijing, the behaviour of the US allies since the 2011 “rebalance” announcement is often interpreted in one of two ways. Some analysts dismiss China's neighbours as being “pawns” (*qizi* 旗子) in a US–China game of great power politics. Such an interpretation typically and deductively imputes America's supposed objective to “contain China's rise” and

18 Wu, Xinbo 2005.

19 Sun, Jianguo 2014.

20 Minnick 2014.

21 “US shows its true colors,” *China Daily*, 29 April 2014.

22 Ren 2014.

maintain “hegemonic dominance” in the region.<sup>23</sup> An alternative interpretation is that Washington’s rhetoric and policies enable allies to contest China’s interests and assert their own “illegal” and “inappropriate” claims. As a 2014 *PLA Daily* article argued, “the foxes exploit the tiger’s [the US] might” (*hujiahuwei* 狐假虎威).<sup>24</sup>

Except for the occasional reference to the role the US plays in diluting Japan’s alleged “militarist” ambitions, CCP leadership circles rarely make statements that suggest they share the view with Washington that the US alliance system is a “public good” which contributes to regional stability and therefore enables China’s rapid economic development, or that it deters dispute escalation between countries whose relations are plagued by mutual distrust. Nor are there many references to a possible security dilemma-esque strategic interaction, i.e. that China’s supposedly defensively-motivated build-up and policies may be catalysing similarly defensive reactions from US allies and others, let alone any suggestions that China may have been the provocateur, or that sincere concerns about future uncertainty may be major drivers.

### *Japan*

Beijing’s stated concerns manifest most clearly in relation to the US–Japan alliance, which for their part Washington and Tokyo consistently identify as the “cornerstone for regional peace and security.”<sup>25</sup> Not coincidentally, the centre of gravity of post-Cold War Chinese analysis – and criticism – focuses on it.

*The Cold War.* For reasons of history, geographical proximity, ideology and actual and potential material power, Beijing’s suspicions of Japan’s intentions have persisted since 1945. Indeed, for significant periods of the Cold War, US forward-deployed forces received tacit support from Beijing, which saw them as a deterrent to a feared Japanese military build-up.

By the mid-1970s, however, the decade-old Sino-Soviet split, coupled with Soviet expansionism and Moscow’s massing of armed forces in its far east, transformed perspectives in Beijing. Whereas only a few years earlier Chinese observers had bemoaned Japanese “militarism” as “an indisputable reality,” by 1972 Beijing had normalized diplomatic relations with Tokyo and had even begun to support Japanese defence build-ups.<sup>26</sup> At Beijing’s behest, the 1978 Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship and Sino-American joint communiqué contained “anti-hegemony” clauses aimed at Moscow.<sup>27</sup> China acknowledged the Soviet threat to Japan and backed Japan’s defence expansion and alliance with Washington.<sup>28</sup> During his 1978 trip to Japan, Deng Xiaoping

23 *Guoji xianqu daobao* 2014; Ren 2014.

24 Li, Bin 2014.

25 “US–Japan joint statement,” 25 April 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/25/us-japan-joint-statement-united-states-and-japan-shaping-future-asia-pac>.

26 Cheng 1985, 92.

27 Strasser 1978.

28 Wang, Taiping 1980.

described both developments as “natural.”<sup>29</sup> In 1980, Chinese leaders praised the US–Japan security treaty as “effective strategically against the Soviet Union.” They also supported further Japanese defence enhancements and advocated cooperation with Europe in opposition to Moscow’s hegemonism. Even the PLA proclaimed its “total agreement” with Japan’s defence expansion, remarkably calling on Tokyo to increase defence spending two-fold.<sup>30</sup>

*Post-Cold War.* Consistent with Beijing’s aforementioned tendency to view all alliances as inherently zero-sum and exclusive, China’s support for Japan’s build-up of defences and the US–Japan security treaty evaporated gradually as Sino-Soviet ties improved after 1985, and disappeared after the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991. Post-Cold War, allied efforts to bolster and widen the US–Japan security partnership’s scope – and Japan’s role and capabilities within it – have invited deepening Chinese opposition. Some Chinese analysts illustrate these concerns with colourful metaphors, for example describing the alliance as an “egg shell” (*danke* 蛋壳) that will protect Japan until its capabilities mature and it “hatches” as a far more self-reliant military power.<sup>31</sup>

Beijing’s suspicions intensified in the mid-1990s, especially following the April 1996 Clinton–Hashimoto joint declaration on security. Originally motivated by earlier developments concerning North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme, Clinton’s trip to Japan to sign the declaration was postponed for domestic political reasons. The long-planned declaration was eventually signed just a few weeks after the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. This timing transformed Beijing’s interpretation of its intent.

In 1997, the first-ever revision of the 1978 US–Japan Guidelines of Defence Cooperation expanded Japan’s role in regional security, a move which, owing largely to timing, Beijing again interpreted as being aimed at Taiwan. The guidelines contained an ambiguous term, “situations in areas surrounding Japan.” This widening of alliance scope was perceived in China as enabling Japanese troops to participate in conflicts overseas, including the Taiwan Strait. The importance to Beijing of these developments was reflected in a wave of related articles in Chinese, Japanese and Western journals in the immediate aftermath.<sup>32</sup>

Following North Korea’s provocative 1998 test-firing of a ballistic missile over the Japanese archipelago, Washington and Tokyo continued threat-driven alliance enhancements, including newly launched joint theatre missile defence research and development. Evinced a clear trend, Chinese analysts interpreted the stated North Korea-focused threat-based rationale as an excuse for Japan’s allegedly long-coveted military build-up.<sup>33</sup>

29 Cheng 1985, 96.

30 “Boei rongi ni ikkoku tojita ... Nakasone hochuji no Chugokugawa hatsugen naiyo” (Stirring a defence debate ... content of PRC statements during Nakasone’s China trip), *Asahi Shimbun*, 16 May 1980.

31 Liu Jiangyong (from 1998), cited in Christensen 1999, 62; Liang and Ding 1999.

32 Examples include Liu, Jiangyong 1996; 1997; Zhang, Rui, Wang and Han 1997; Takagi 1998; Masuda 1999; Garrett and Glaser 1997; Christensen 1999.

33 Meng 1997.

Thus, by the late 1990s, many in China were convinced that the alliance was evolving rapidly from a tolerable “shield” to a provocative “spear” that threatened China directly.<sup>34</sup> Washington appeared to be encouraging Japan to expand its military capabilities and roles, including possibly even in a potential US–China conflict in the Taiwan Strait. By 1999, the *PLA Daily* asserted that Tokyo was accelerating its pursuit of “military great power” status.<sup>35</sup>

*Post-9/11 developments.* Allied efforts to make the alliance more capable, interoperable and expansive in scope continued in the new millennium. Before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Beijing perceived the George W. Bush administration as adopting a threatening view of China as a future peer competitor. After 9/11, Washington’s focus shifted, yet Beijing still saw alliance developments as threatening its interests. For example, Washington called on Japan to revise the “peace clause” in the latter’s constitution (Article 9) and to lift its self-imposed prohibition on collective self-defence. President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro were seen as transforming Japan’s defence posture and role in the alliance beyond strict territorial defence and towards a more assertive regional and global partnership. In 2004, Japan passed a series of security-related laws allowing Japan to support US forces overseas logistically. Within months, Tokyo deployed Japan’s Self-defence Forces (JSDF) engineers to Iraq. As with most Japan-related developments, this trend was widely interpreted in Beijing through a historical lens, one tinted heavily by concomitant political and diplomatic controversies over history textbooks and Koizumi’s visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

Beyond these general trends, Beijing interpreted other measures adopted by Washington and Tokyo as directly challenging China’s interests. In 2004, a major Japanese defence document for the first time deemed China a security threat. A 2005 joint statement listed among the allies’ “common strategic objectives” “encouraging the peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait.” Meanwhile, alliance interoperability, training and exercises all intensified. Particularly noteworthy was a reported defence plan for the retaking of Japanese islands on which Chinese forces had landed.<sup>36</sup> And, in the allies’ increasingly active promotion of “value-based diplomacy” (*kachikan gaiko*) centred on human rights, democracy and freedom, many in China perceived ideological “othering” of Beijing.<sup>37</sup>

By 2007, a government analysis, reportedly shared among Chinese military leaders, concluded that the alliance had become a “long-term threat” (*changyuan weixie* 长远威胁).<sup>38</sup> Chinese analysts interpreted Japan’s changing defence stance

34 Takagi 2003, 84.

35 Liang and Ding 1999.

36 “MeiRi lianhe duodao junyan zhide guanzhu” (US–Japan joint island-seizing military exercises deserve attention), *Jiefangjun bao*, 9 January 2006; Wu, Xinbo 2005, 123.

37 Aso 2006.

38 Dan 2007.

as increasingly “aggressive,” asserting that Japan had never been more secure – a controversial claim, to say the least.<sup>39</sup> These twin perceptions, clearly at odds with those of most observers in Washington and Tokyo, exacerbated persistent fears, widespread in Beijing, of long-dormant Japanese militarism’s re-emergence, with the US as its champion, of Washington’s supposedly hegemonic regional machinations, and of alliance cooperation progressively targeting China’s claimed territory and interests.

In addition, since 2010, tensions over the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands 钓鱼岛 in Chinese), claimed by both countries but administered by Japan, coupled with major security reforms and efforts to tighten the alliance during Abe Shinzo’s second term of office (2012–present), are increasingly salient. Japan under Abe is seen as behaving provocatively on sensitive historical issues and actively pursuing “militarization,” while (allegedly) simultaneously and unabashedly “hyping China threats” (*chaozuo Zhongguo weixielun* 炒作中国威胁论) in order to bolster domestic support for these measures.<sup>40</sup>

Since Japan’s so-called “nationalization” (*guoyouhua* 国有化) of the islands in September 2012, circumstances have worsened precipitously. In this context, Beijing interprets Tokyo improving its JSDF capabilities and tightening US–Japan security ties as directly threatening China’s territorial sovereignty – an increasingly incendiary flashpoint in Chinese domestic politics under Xi Jinping. One Chinese government analyst castigated Japan’s “unprecedented assertiveness,” blaming Abe for “the most serious [bilateral] confrontation of the past four decades” and accusing him of seeking to “encircle China” by “intervention” in the South China Sea, and “provok[ing] some ASEAN members to confront China.” According to this view, the allies are pursuing “partners globally to contain the rising China [sic].”<sup>41</sup>

As Chinese paramilitary forces increasingly challenged Japan’s administration of the contested islands operationally, Beijing attempted to drive a diplomatic wedge between Washington and Tokyo over history issues, including a campaign to present Japan as a threat to the post-1945 international order (*Riben tiaozhan zhanhou guoji zhixu* 日本挑战战后国际秩序). The effort appeared to backfire as Washington stated clearly that the security treaty applies to the islands. In Beijing, widespread misinterpretations of this policy as indicating an abrupt change provoked a negative backlash.<sup>42</sup> Also viewed as provocative (and inextricable from territorial disputes festering between China and many of its maritime

39 Wu, Xinbo 2005, 119.

40 “Waijiaobu jiu Chaoxian bando jushi, Riben chaozuo ‘Zhongguo weixielun’ deng dawen” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs answers questions about circumstances on Korean Peninsula, Japan hyping “China threat theory,” etc.), Xinhua, 29 March 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-03/29/c\\_115215330\\_2.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-03/29/c_115215330_2.htm).

41 Jiang 2015, 438; 440–41.

42 Landler 2014. For the official PRC response to Obama’s statement, see “Waijiaobu: Rimei tongmeng shi lengzhan chanwu, buying sunhai Zhongguo zhuquan” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Japan–US alliance is Cold War relic: should not damage China’s sovereignty), Xinhua, 24 April 2014, <http://mil.huanqiu.com/china/2014-04/4979514.html>.

neighbours) are the expanded US–Japan joint exercises and Japan’s first-ever (post-war) amphibious forces; more active allied rhetorical support, capacity building, and exercises with several South-East Asian nations also having territorial disputes with China; and possible allied cooperation in the South China Sea. Together with Japan’s 2014 decision to allow the limited exercise of collective self-defence, and with major security-related legislation now in effect, these developments, which are supported by Washington, are interpreted as further undoing the alliance’s traditional “bottle cork” role.<sup>43</sup> Two government analysts argue that these moves are motivated by a view of China as an “imaginary enemy” (*jiaxiang diguo* 假想敌国) and are likely to backfire, possibly even becoming an impetus for conflict.<sup>44</sup>

In response to these changes and consistent with Beijing’s basic ideology concerning alliances, the 2014 *Blue Book on National Security* criticizes the “Cold War thinking” of Washington and Tokyo and their alleged efforts to “constrain” China.<sup>45</sup> What Beijing previously interpreted as a strictly defensive security treaty to ensure Japan’s territorial security is now increasingly interpreted as offensive. It is seen as actively targeting Beijing-claimed territory beyond Taiwan and emboldening Japan to provoke China on territorial issues in the East and South China Seas. To others, deepening allied cooperation is simply the latest manifestation of the allies’ expanding “hegemonic ideology,” “against the trends of the times.”<sup>46</sup> Abe’s active diplomacy is seen as “intensifying cooperation with neighboring countries while containing China’s rise.”<sup>47</sup> In response, Beijing’s official mantra that US alliances “should not hurt the interests of third parties” has gained prominence in Chinese discourse. Coupled with the oft-heard call that Washington and Tokyo “should not meddle in territorial disputes between other countries,” it has emerged as a core feature of Chinese criticisms of the US–Japan alliance since 2012.<sup>48</sup>

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

43 Ren 2014.

44 Di and Wang 2016, 65.

45 Liu, Hui 2014, 1.

46 Li, Xiushi 2015, 38.

47 Zhang, Yaohua 2015, 80.

48 “Jianjue fandui Meiguo hui 2013 cainian guofang shouquan faan youguan shehua neirong ‘MeiRi anbao tiaoyue’” (Resolutely oppose US Congress’ FY2013 national defence authorization act content concerning China [US–Japan Security Treaty]), *Jiefangjun bao*, 24 December 2012.

## Australia

Australia has not traditionally been a key target of Chinese analyses of US alliances; however, circumstances have changed, especially in the past decade. Canberra's expanded military cooperation with Washington and other US partners has heightened concerns in Beijing about both the bilateral alliance's trajectory and the "multilateralization" of the traditionally hub-and-spokes alliance system. Of particular note is Australia's expanding cooperation with fellow US ally, Japan.

Although the occasionally raised fear of an "Asian NATO" appears (at best) premature, Chinese concerns are not growing in a strategic vacuum.<sup>49</sup> Washington and Canberra have discussed strengthening coordination with Japan and the Republic of Korea since at least 2001.<sup>50</sup> As territorial disputes fester, analysts highlight bilateral and trilateral statements citing the importance of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and calling for greater military transparency in China.<sup>51</sup> To some analysts, such cooperation presents a "new variable" in the region's security.<sup>52</sup> After Obama's 2011 announcement (in Australia) of a major strategic plan involving, inter alia, increased US forces in Australia, a Chinese government spokesperson lambasted the alliance as contrary to "the interests of peace" in the region and a further "manifestation of Cold War thinking" in Washington.<sup>53</sup> Two years later, a deputy chief of the PLA General Staff and Central Committee member asserted that Washington's "strategic objective" motivating these trends is "controlling the Pacific and the Atlantic."<sup>54</sup>

Two increasingly salient recent developments are deepening Chinese concern regarding efforts to bolster ties between Canberra and other US allies, especially Japan, and alleged alliance "interference" in territorial disputes. In 2012, there was an unprecedented Australia–Japan acquisition, cross-servicing and information security agreement.<sup>55</sup> Canberra and Tokyo have also reached an agreement on defence technology that will, among other things, allow advanced military equipment exports for the first time.<sup>56</sup>

Rhetorically, the recently established Australia–Japan "2 + 2" dialogue's 2014 joint statement for the first time expressed "strong opposition to the use of force or coercion to unilaterally alter the status quo in the East China Sea." At trilateral

49 Hu 2006.

50 "Australia denies proposed Asian security alliance with US aimed at China," Agence France-Presse, 31 July 2001, transcribed in FBIS-CHI-2001-0731.

51 Sun, Xun 2011.

52 Fang 2013.

53 "Qianghua he kuoda junshi tongmeng shi lengzhan siwei biao xian" (Strengthening and expansion of military alliances is a demonstration of Cold War thinking), *Jiefangjun bao*, 1 December 2011.

54 Qi 2013.

55 MODJ 2012.

56 Pang 2014. For the 2+2 joint statement, see "5th Japan–Australia 2+2 foreign and defence ministerial consultations, joint media release," 12 June 2014, [http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2014/jb\\_mr\\_140612a.aspx?ministerid=4](http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2014/jb_mr_140612a.aspx?ministerid=4). For trilateral statement, see "Joint statement from the Japan–US–Australia defense ministers meeting," 30 May 2014, <http://archive.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=16726>.

meetings of defence ministers, Canberra, Tokyo and Washington issued similar statements, even highlighting common interests and values. Meanwhile, China has reacted negatively to a US call for a “quadrilateral” security dialogue involving India, Japan and Australia, expressing concerns that it could target third parties.<sup>57</sup> A five-year retrospective in a Ministry of State Security-affiliated journal concludes that under the “rebalance,” Australia is strengthening its alliance with Washington, deepening interoperability and expanding the scope of cooperation to an unprecedented degree.<sup>58</sup> As for Canberra and Tokyo, some government analysts suggest they have already formed a “quasi-alliance.”<sup>59</sup>

### *The Philippines*

The US–Philippines alliance has also not traditionally been a prominent target for Chinese criticism. As the South China Sea simmers, however, the situation has changed. Recent conflagrations over disputed territory, including a tense 2012 contretemps over Scarborough Shoal, and the 2014 US–Philippines Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) have attracted intense attention in Beijing. Nevertheless, because of its relative weakness, Chinese analysts sometimes dismiss Manila as a mere “pawn” in US efforts to “contain China.”<sup>60</sup>

More recently, however, Chinese views of the US–Philippines relationship have evolved in a manner suggesting basic consistency with trends vis-à-vis other US alliances. Chinese government analysts see the deepening ties forged by both Washington and Tokyo with Manila and other ASEAN countries, and their alleged “intervention” in the South China Sea, as aimed at containing China.<sup>61</sup> For example, a Chinese Academy of Social Sciences expert described the EDCA, which allows US forces rotational access to five military facilities in the Philippines, as Washington’s effort “to militarize” territorial disputes. Meanwhile, Xinhua argued the agreement would further “embolden” the Philippines to provoke China.<sup>62</sup> The *International Herald Leader* contended that the EDCA’s “essence” was Washington and Manila’s desire to “jointly face the so-called ‘China threat’.” It, too, repeated the oft-cited interpretation that “the objective of America’s return to Asia is to contain China’s rise.”<sup>63</sup>

Most recently, and evincing Chinese concerns about the alliance’s allegedly expanding scope, in March 2016 China’s Foreign Ministry demanded that

57 “China warning on US push for Asian ‘quadrilateral’ security dialogue,” *India Today*, 3 March 2016, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/china-warning-on-us-push-for-asian-quadrilateral-security-dialogue/1/610963.html>.

58 Yang 2016.

59 Zhang, Yaohua 2015, 59.

60 *Guoji xianqu daobao* 2014.

61 Song, Junying 2015, 479–480.

62 “China media: US–Philippines deal,” BBC News, 29 April 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27200858>.

63 *Guoji xianqu daobao* 2014.

US–Philippines cooperation should not target “a third party.” It also accused the allies of jeopardizing “regional peace and stability” and “militarizing” the South China Sea, and “resolutely oppose[d]” Manila’s receipt of Japanese patrol aircraft.<sup>64</sup> Thus, beyond the deepening security ties between Manila and Washington, Beijing also appears more and more concerned about Manila’s “increasingly confrontational attitude” and expanding security relationships with other US allies, particularly Japan.<sup>65</sup> For example, in July 2016, Beijing vehemently rejected as “null and void” an international tribunal’s (from China’s perspective) very unfavourable ruling concerning key aspects of Beijing’s vast sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. The case had been brought by Manila and encouraged by Washington. Beijing even pre-emptively aimed to discredit the ruling by claiming the (Japanese) judge who chose the arbitrators was “rightest” and “unfriendly to China.”<sup>66</sup> So far, the Chinese response has been to escalate criticism of other US allies for publicly supporting the Hague’s ruling, together with a mixed record of compliance.<sup>67</sup>

### *Republic of Korea*

While media discourse early in the Park Geun-hye administration hyped Beijing’s efforts to court Seoul, Chinese leaders have long harboured concerns about the US–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance. These concerns are moderated strategically by the alliance’s overriding concern with Pyongyang and Beijing’s own concerns about North Korea; bilateral trade volumes exceeding Seoul’s combined trade with Washington and Tokyo; and mutual irritation with Tokyo over history. Yet, Beijing’s concerns about the bilateral alliance and the possibility of tri-lateral security cooperation with Tokyo, too, are fairly stable.<sup>68</sup> More recent flare ups over the US–ROK planned introduction of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) ballistic missile defence system, which Beijing has stated clearly “will seriously harm China–ROK relations,” suggest an upper bound on China–ROK political ties, at least as long as disconnects over North Korea policy persist.<sup>69</sup> In short, the 65-year-old US–ROK alliance’s fundamentals appear sound.

In contrast, Beijing and Seoul did not even normalize relations until 1992, and despite increasing cooperation, the two sides share little geopolitical purpose. Outside China, Beijing is widely seen as insulating Pyongyang from foreign

64 “China warns Philippines not to challenge sovereignty on South China Sea,” Xinhua, 10 March 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/10/c\\_135175931.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/10/c_135175931.htm); “US, Philippine military deployment in South China Sea to disturb regional peace, stability,” Xinhua, 23 March 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/23/c\\_135213569.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/23/c_135213569.htm).

65 Song, Junying 2015, 482.

66 MFA 2016; “Questions of neutrality: China takes aim at judges in South China Sea case,” *South China Morning Post*, 11 July 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1988119/questions-neutrality-china-takes-aim-judges-south-china>.

67 Johnson 2016; Ku and Mirasola 2016.

68 Zhang, Jingquan 2013.

69 Teng 2015b, 248.

pressure, valuing regime stability over denuclearization, to say nothing of reunification. Consistent with its traditions, whenever the ROK bolsters security ties with America, China dismisses the alliance as a “Cold War relic.”<sup>70</sup> Developments in 2010 present a case-in-point. Beijing abstained from censuring North Korea even after it sank an ROK naval ship and fired artillery shells at ROK territory: two provocative acts that collectively killed 50 Korean military personnel and civilians. Instead, China castigated the allies for responding with joint military exercises, called the alliance a security threat and conducted its own military drills.<sup>71</sup> The years since have seen China’s controversial roll-out of an air defence identification zone over parts of South Korea’s exclusive economic zone and airspace surrounding Jeju Island, multiple fatal encounters between ROK coast guardsmen and Chinese fishing boats, and mounting frustration in Seoul with perceived Chinese attempts to interfere in ROK efforts to bolster its deterrent vis-à-vis Pyongyang (see below). Remarkably, even Washington’s efforts to engage allies to bolster deterrence with regard to North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme are interpreted by some Chinese government analysts as primarily aimed at containing China.<sup>72</sup>

### *Missile defence*

The Chinese government has long interpreted Washington’s vision for missile defence with Asia-Pacific allies as threatening. Although aimed in the first order at North Korea’s rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, within China Washington’s policies are often seen as moves towards a regional security system designed to contain “other countries.”<sup>73</sup> Such concerns are often abstract, but can become concrete. Although they are often presented as a recent development, Chinese concerns about theatre missile defence date back at least two decades.<sup>74</sup>

After Pyongyang’s 1998 missile launch over Japan’s home islands, the US and Japan accelerated joint ballistic missile defence-related research and development. In the years since, they have fielded specific capabilities. Consistent with reactions to other alliance-related developments, the PLA criticizes these bilateral efforts as demonstrating “Cold War thinking,” and in some instances, summarily dismisses allies’ concerns as unwarranted and attributable to a “missile allergy.”<sup>75</sup> Regardless of the intended target, the possible multilateralization of a ballistic missile defence system in response to the increasingly clear and present danger of North Korea clearly unsettles Beijing.<sup>76</sup> In 2014, Washington and

70 See, e.g., “China insists Korea–US alliance a Cold-War hangover,” *Chosun Ilbo*, 30 May 2008.

71 Han 2012; Demick and Glionna 2010.

72 Yu 2015, 129.

73 See, e.g., “Hanguo yuanhe guanwang TMD” (Why Korea’s watching TMD from the sidelines), *Jiefangjun bao*, 3 May 1999; Urayama 2004.

74 Ferguson 1999.

75 Cao 2007.

76 Rinehart, Hildreth and Lawrence 2013, esp. 13–15.

Canberra agreed “to work together to counter the growing threat of ballistic missiles in the Asia-Pacific region,” and established a working group to explore potential Australian contributions to regional ballistic missile defence.<sup>77</sup> Coupled with existing related cooperation (for example, the joint facility at Pine Gap), Beijing fears that trends in ballistic missile defence and conventional prompt global strike capabilities will pose new challenges for China’s nuclear deterrent. This response also exemplifies the strategic dilemma confronting allies of how to address specific threats posed by North Korea and long-term regional stability.<sup>78</sup> In addition to US cooperation with Japan and Australia on missile defence, in 2016 Seoul consented to US deployment of THAAD, a system Japan is also now considering and which some in China fear is a precursor to a destabilizing chain of missile defence systems from Alaska to Taiwan.<sup>79</sup> Beijing has publicly opposed THAAD deployment in South Korea, claiming that it would upset “stability and strategic balance in the region.” Stating that it would damage bilateral relations, Beijing put significant pressure on Seoul to reject the system – despite allied claims that THAAD poses no serious threat to China’s robust, distant missile arsenal.<sup>80</sup> Following Seoul’s request that Beijing not interfere in its security policy decision making, the *People’s Daily* admonished the ROK against allowing itself to be controlled by “the man behind the curtain” (i.e. Washington), a situation which would only exacerbate competition between China and the United States.<sup>81</sup>

### China’s Proposed Alternatives for Regional Security Architecture

Viewed through the lens that China’s leaders have chosen to adopt over the past two decades, it is hardly surprising that Beijing is increasingly negative about the contribution of US alliances to regional peace and stability. Grievances and frustrations manifest most conspicuously in Beijing’s rhetoric, military build-up and development of countermeasures to specific perceived threats. Yet, alternative visions for Asian security promulgated by China’s leaders are also revealing, in ways intended and not.

The 1997 New Security Concept and the 2014 Asian Security Concept constitute China’s most salient alternative proposals for regional peace and stability. Reflecting longstanding Chinese alliance ideology, Beijing frames these concepts explicitly as foils to US alliances and as allegedly superior, enlightened pathways to “universal” – as opposed to “zero-sum” – security. However, from both a theoretical and practical standpoint, both concepts, as articulated by Chinese

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

78 Futter and Zala 2015.

79 Teng 2015a.

80 Chen and Gale 2014; “S. Korea, China experts spar over US missile-defense system,” Yonhap, 28 November 2014, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2014/11/28/75/0301000000AEN20141128007500315F.html>; Choe 2015; Song, Sang-ho 2014.

81 Li, Dunqiu 2015.

leaders, appear best understood as abstract, if sincere, expressions of Beijing's frustration rather than as concrete, viable alternatives factoring in contemporary realities. Most significantly, they fail to either present operationalizable pathways to realization or address other states' traditional security concerns, which are themselves shaped in large part by Beijing's own policies and rhetoric.

### *New Security Concept (1997)*

First introduced to many foreign observers in China's 1998 Defence White Paper, Beijing's New Security Concept (*xin anquanguan* 新安全观; below, NSC) was most remarkable for being the first clear case of an official Chinese vision for post-Cold War international security.<sup>82</sup> Not coincidentally, the NSC was originally conceived in opposition to the 1996 US–Japan Joint Declaration, and as part of a diplomatic effort to forestall further consolidation of the “China threat theory” (*Zhongguo weixielun* 中国威胁论) in the region following China's sabre-rattling in the Taiwan Strait and its controversial actions over Mischief Reef in 1995–1996.<sup>83</sup>

In summer 1997, Chinese leaders argued that a new security situation demanded a “new security concept” not based on military armaments and military alliances. Instead, the NSC called for 1) non-interference in internal affairs based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence; 2) strengthening economic cooperation, joint prosperity, and the reduction of gaps between countries; and 3) peace and security based on dialogue, cooperation, mutual understanding and peaceful resolution of interstate disputes.<sup>84</sup> Its name to the contrary, the NSC proved to be, at its core, a statement of political and economic principle rather than a military initiative.<sup>85</sup> Significantly, it did not evolve into an operationalizable regional security framework acknowledging extant traditional regional security concerns. Rather, it basically asserted that security could be assured by nations just not “resort[ing] to military threats or aggression.”

In a seminal analysis, David Finkelstein concludes with the benefit of hindsight that the NSC failed to gain traction outside China because of its lack of concrete or operationalizable policy substance, its anti-US “packaging,” and widespread regional support for (and active strengthening of) the very alliance-centred approach Beijing hoped the NSC would replace.<sup>86</sup> Despite being framed as “universally applicable,” the NSC was presented as being in opposition to Washington's alleged “Cold War mentality” characterized by military alliances and “blocs.” This “anti” quality appeared in China's first ever defence white paper (1998) and again in its 2000 follow-up.<sup>87</sup> Most significantly, the NSC

82 Finkelstein *n.d.*, 197–98.

83 Takagi 2003, 83–84; Finkelstein *n.d.*, 200–01.

84 Takagi 2003, 72.

85 Finkelstein *n.d.*, 201–03.

86 *Ibid.*, 204.

87 *Ibid.*, 197–98.

was strictly “preventative” and, for example, offered no framework for how states should manage crises when “political relations and negotiation break down.”<sup>88</sup> In contrast, Washington and its allies would argue, the US alliance system is intended to function as a deterrent to ensure that diplomacy is always the first line of resort and as a hedge if diplomacy should fail.

The NSC is best understood as evidence of Beijing’s dissatisfaction with the status quo amidst alliance strengthening and consolidation and deepening concerns about China’s image in the region. Despite being consistent with China’s ideological predispositions, the NSC appears to have offered no clearly operationalizable alternative vision for regional peace and stability.

### *Asian Security Concept (2014)*

Under President Xi Jinping and by its own admission, Beijing is increasingly “proactively” pursuing its interests.<sup>89</sup> In his widely cited 2014 CICA speech, Xi championed the “Asian security concept” (*Yazhou anquan guan* 亚洲安全观; below, ASC).<sup>90</sup> Demonstrating clear frustration with US alliances, he asserted that “it is disadvantageous to the common security of the region if military alliances with third parties are strengthened.” Xi called instead for a “new regional security cooperation architecture,” including a “defence consultation mechanism” and “security response centre” for regional emergencies.<sup>91</sup> Controversially, Xi proclaimed that regional security affairs should be given back “to the people in Asia.”<sup>92</sup>

The ASC is designed as an alternative to what many Chinese observers disparagingly describe as Washington “stubbornly stick[ing] to the doctrine of absolute security.” Like the NSC, Beijing intends the ASC to be a corrective for the destabilizing “Cold War mentality” it believes characterizes US alliances and recent developments such as the US “rebalance” and Japan’s lifting of its complete ban on collective self-defence.<sup>93</sup> Leading commentators contrast the ASC with the alleged “myth” that consolidating the alliance system will contribute to regional peace and stability.<sup>94</sup> An authoritative Xinhua editorial contrasts the ASC directly with the US alliances, which it identifies as a “Cold War security structure [in which] some big powers pursue security as a ‘zero-sum game’ and keep strengthening military alliances in the region while excluding the common interests of other countries.” It castigates Washington and its allies as striving for “security in isolation from the rest” and “on the basis of others’ insecurity,”

88 *Ibid.*, 208.

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

90 The CICA group includes Vietnam, South Korea and Thailand, but not the United States itself or US maritime allies Japan, Australia and the Philippines (although Washington, Tokyo and Manila are observers).

91 “China’s Xi warns Asian countries on military alliances,” Voice of America News, 21 May 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/article/1919035.html>.

92 Wuthnow 2014.

93 Zhai 2014; Ruan 2015b, 276.

94 Ruan 2014.

and accuses US alliances of being the “Achilles heel” of and major impediment to “a peaceful Asia.”<sup>95</sup>

As with its 1997 predecessor, the ASC was also promulgated by Beijing in response to accelerating alliance consolidation and diplomatic fallout owing to China’s rhetoric and actions in the East and South China Seas.<sup>96</sup> However well-intended as China’s “increasingly prominent” and “responsible” contribution to international security,<sup>97</sup> the ASC also has apparent deficiencies similar to those of the NSC. It does not clearly address neighbouring countries’ existing insecurities or explicate a process by which to (gradually?) shift from the alliance-centric status quo to China’s desired future. Rather, official commentary presents the two as mutually exclusive.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the ASC appears focused on non-traditional security rather than on the traditional security concerns, uncertainty and mistrust currently driving the very alliance strengthening Beijing opposes.

To have any realistic chance of gradually replacing the alliance system, such an alternative framework would need to recognize and suggest ways to address the extant security concerns of US allies and partners, in particular with regard to North Korea but also regarding China’s own rapidly growing military capabilities and policies vis-à-vis vast sovereignty claims, its relatively low military budget and decision-making transparency, and more generally, widespread uncertainty about both Beijing’s and the region’s future trajectory. Ironically, when evaluated from the very “realist” perspective alleged to permeate Chinese strategic thinking, one of the NSC’s critical flaws seems to be its failure to recognize widespread insecurity and mistrust in the region, the anarchical nature of international politics, and the reality that China’s own policies are a major driver of the alliance system consolidation (i.e. balancing) it wishes to prevent.<sup>99</sup>

From both theoretical and practical standpoints, therefore, the ASC does not seem to entail a clearly operationalizable alternative to the US-centred alliance system. Perhaps this is why Xi announced it at a conference of which the United States, Japan, Australia and the Philippines, along with seven of the ten member states of ASEAN, are not members and were not even present. Despite claims by Beijing that the ASC won “widespread recognition and support” across Asia, there is little evidence of this, especially from among US allies.<sup>100</sup>

## Discussion

Several notable trends are manifest in the post-Cold War evolution of Chinese views of the US alliance system. First, ideological and historical opposition to alliances appears firmly ingrained in the CCP and PLA, manifests powerfully

95 Xinhua, 20 May 2014.

96 Takagi 2014.

97 Ruan 2015b, 277–78.

98 “China voice: new concept to be proved effective for Asia’s security,” Xinhua, 26 April 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2014-04/26/c\\_133292377.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2014-04/26/c_133292377.htm).

99 Liff 2016a.

100 Su 2015, 308.

in interpretations of contemporary real-world developments, and will not be easily overcome. Second, lacking a specific, shared traditional security threat since the Soviet Union's collapse, Beijing opposes efforts to expand US allies' capabilities and the alliances' operational scope. Third, traditionally focused on the US–Japan alliance, Beijing appears increasingly concerned about Washington's consolidation of bilateral alliances with Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea. Fourth, Chinese leaders appear unsettled by two new variables: nascent multilateralization (for example, Australia–Japan) of the traditional “hub-and-spokes” system of US-centred bilateral alliances and joint statements criticizing Beijing's rhetoric and policies, especially with regard to territorial disputes. Fifth, concomitantly, Beijing perceives a shift in alliances' defensive orientation focused on strict homeland defence to more regional and global roles, including alleged targeting of China's territorial and other interests. Finally, erstwhile appreciation of the alliances' “silver lining” as a stabilizing force (for example, as an alleged “bottle cork” containing Japan) has declined significantly. References to US alliances playing a role in stabilizing a dynamic and potentially volatile region, even in regard to non-China specific issues, are rare. Beijing often dismisses allies' stated security concerns (e.g. North Korea) as “pretexts” to strengthen capabilities.<sup>101</sup>

These trends throw into sharp relief an increasingly salient disconnect. Conspicuously absent from official, and many unofficial, Chinese criticisms are the positive-sum rationales used by the United States and its allies to explain the alliance system's persistence and strengthening. These include the clear and present dangers posed by North Korea's numerous provocations and rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities; the deepening insecurity surrounding Beijing's own rapidly growing military (and paramilitary) capabilities, policies and rhetoric vis-à-vis various sovereignty claims widely considered provocative; and, more abstractly, uncertainty surrounding the region's (unknowable) future trajectory (in which China's role is only one factor). In a dynamic region characterized by rapid economic growth, expanding military budgets, deep political mistrust (including even between US allies Japan and South Korea) and several potential nuclear proliferators, the US presence and alliance system is generally viewed by those outside of China as contributing to regional stability (and, incidentally, as one factor enabling China's peaceful economic, and by extension, military, development). In contrast, official Chinese commentary on the ASC is revealing: references to the region's half-century of peace and stability prior to 2014 do not even mention the US alliance system as a factor. Rather, US alliances are defined as the ASC's primary foil and the obstacle to “universal” regional security.

Yet, despite clear frustration with and even outright opposition to US alliances reflected in Chinese analyses, it is not clear that Beijing possesses the will, much

101 Jiang 2015, 444–45.

less the ability, to actively seek to fundamentally undermine the alliance system, much less form a countervailing alternative. Post-2010 efforts to drive wedges between allies have typically failed, if not backfired, with allies tightening their links with Washington and one another. Beijing's proposals for "alliance-free" alternative architectures remain abstract and aspirational and, despite scholars justifiably attributing the concept of "realist" strategic thinking to Chinese leaders, it is remarkable that open discussion of actively pursuing new, formal alliances remains taboo. Circumstances could change, however. Indeed, some scholars already note increased security cooperation between Beijing and Moscow. Yet, claims of a Sino-Russian alliance redux seem, at best, premature.<sup>102</sup> Regardless of intent, China's options may also be limited: most other major powers are already aligned with Washington and the US alliance system traces its roots back to historically unique geopolitical conditions that are unlikely to recur.

Although evidence of subjective perceptual disconnects between Beijing and Washington/US allies abounds, Beijing does not interpret or make policy decisions in a strategic vacuum. China's own rapid military development shifted into high gear following the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, starting from a baseline at which the US had overwhelming military superiority. Since the mid-1990s, the US alliance system has evolved significantly, and in some ways, in a direction that is potentially detrimental to China's security. More recently, a clearly interactive dynamic suggests security dilemmas are at least partially driving mutual arming. Beijing interprets as offensive provocations threatening China's own security actions which Washington and its allies sincerely consider as nothing more than defensive responses to perceived threats vis-à-vis China (or North Korea).<sup>103</sup> Some Chinese scholars similarly recognize shared interests in maintaining regional stability and acknowledge the "strategic dilemma" (*zhanlüe kunjing* 战略困境) Washington faces when trying to maintain stability without exacerbating US–China tensions and risking a "competitive spiral" (*jingzheng de luoxuan* 竞争的螺旋).<sup>104</sup>

Despite being Beijing's favourite rhetorical device for criticizing US alliances, atavistic zero-sum, traditional "great power" thinking manifests frequently in Chinese commentary on regional security affairs. Neighbours' concerns about China's policies or rhetoric are often dismissed as insincere hyping of a "China threat theory" for alleged "ulterior motives" (*bieyouyongxin* 别有用心).<sup>105</sup> Especially in official discourse, sole responsibility for regional instability is placed on Washington and its allies, as reflected in references to Washington as "the man behind the curtain" or a meme of US allies as "pawns" in a great power struggle. Chinese government analysts provocatively refer to an emerging "battlefield"

102 Korolev 2016.

103 Liff and Ikenberry 2014.

104 Li, Chen 2016.

105 Su 2015, 306–07; "Japan's defence white paper hypes up 'China threat' for hidden agenda," Xinhua, 3 August 2016, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2016-08/03/content\\_39013536.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2016-08/03/content_39013536.htm).

between Beijing and Washington (and Tokyo), and interpret US policies in relation to territorial disputes the US and its allies believe to be aimed at regional stability as intervention in China's affairs and – in the case of the South China Sea – as expanding the “battlefield” to ASEAN member states.<sup>106</sup>

Although explicitly dependent on “mutual trust” in order to function, Beijing's two proposed “alternatives” to the US alliance system lack clear operationalizable pathways to reassuring insecure states or enhancing trust. Some of Beijing's actual policies contradict its own stated ideals. Just two months prior to the announcement of the ASC, when asked what word best characterized Chinese foreign policy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi 王毅 answered “proactive” (*zhudong jinqu* 主动进取), pointing out that China had “vigorously defended its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests,” emphasizing that “on issues of principle such as history and territory there is no room for compromise,” and asserting that China would “never accept unreasonable demands from smaller countries.”<sup>107</sup> Such statements suggest a contradiction between the regional security architecture Beijing promotes rhetorically – a desirable, if aspirational end state – and what many neighbours interpret as China's own zero-sum and coercive approaches.

Contemporary realities warrant more nuanced analysis, from both sides. Balancing and deterrence are undoubtedly goals of US policy and understandably shape China's threat perceptions. Yet, Washington's decades-old pursuit with Beijing of expanded commerce, grassroots exchange and policy cooperation renders the fallacy of a US “containment” strategy vis-à-vis China threadbare. Nor is America always in the driver's seat; often, US allies call for Washington to do more, and US partners are proactively forming tighter links with one another.<sup>108</sup> As some reflective Chinese commentators note, given these realities, if Beijing does not do more to proactively and credibly reassure its neighbours, then such counter-balancing is to be expected.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

Chinese assessments of the US alliance system's role in post-Cold War Asia-Pacific security reveal an increased level of frustration and even outright opposition to the system, as they call for alternatives. Signs of ambivalence figure much less prominently than in the past and there is little reference to the possibility of security dilemmas being at play, i.e. that China's military build-up and policies may be catalysing defensive reactions from the US and its allies, much less that China's own rhetoric and behaviour may be a driver.<sup>110</sup> In contrast, a more common interpretation sees the growing capabilities, expanding

106 Ruan 2015a, 9–11.

107 MFA 2014.

108 Liff 2016b.

109 Zhai 2014.

110 Liff and Ikenberry 2014.

scope and nascent multilateralization of US alliances as demonstrations of Washington's alleged anachronistic, zero-sum and "Cold War" mentality; primary obstacles to regional stability; enablers of Japan's remilitarization; an increasingly direct threat to China's territory and interests; and part of Washington's supposed desire to contain China.

All nations in the Asia-Pacific, especially the United States, its allies and China, have a shared interest in reducing tensions, consolidating mutual trust and gradually reforming the existing order in a manner beneficial to regional peace, stability and prosperity for all. Complex mixtures of competition and cooperation are likely to define US–China relations for the foreseeable future. Serious frictions exist and are not easily soluble. As efforts by Washington and its allies to balance and bolster deterrence advance, calls to cease simultaneously proactively engaging Beijing risk truly zero-sum competition and, paradoxically, may weaken US alliances and America's regional influence if other states – many of which trade heavily with China – resent being forced to choose sides.

More positively, despite worsening frictions in the Near Seas, there is growing, albeit nascent, US–China cooperation militarily in the Far Seas, to say nothing of extensive extant and future possibilities for mutually beneficial cooperation in other domains (trade, climate, etc.). For its part, the CCP continues to judge that China's prosperity depends on a peaceful region.<sup>111</sup> Defence white papers still refer to "peace, development, and cooperation" as the "overwhelming global trend."<sup>112</sup>

This is the complicated reality in which Washington and its allies engage (and balance) Beijing. Explicit Chinese support for the alliance system is unlikely and beside the point. The fundamental concern should be how allied policies influence China's behaviour with the objective of shaping China's policies through enhanced deterrence in a low-key manner, coupled with more proactive high-level diplomacy with Beijing bilaterally and multilaterally, giving Chinese leaders clear incentives to engage its neighbours and multilateral institutions constructively.<sup>113</sup> Talks should include frank and extensive discussions about the importance of greater transparency and measures the two "sides" could adopt to deepen cooperation, ensure stability, and mitigate the insecurities and mistrust driving mutual arming – including possibly the feasibility of operationalizing aspects of the more "inclusive" security architecture Beijing clearly desires in a manner recognizing contemporary realities.

Although Chinese perspectives on the US alliance system evince major disconnects and provide serious grounds for concern, the entirety of contemporary US–China relations is not defined by zero-sum strategic competition in the military domain, nor should it be presented as such by leaders on either side. In this regard, the widespread "containment" meme is deeply misleading and unconstructive. Given nascent multilateralization of the traditionally hub-and-spokes

111 Dai 2011.

112 DECAF 2013.

113 Christensen 1999, esp. 73–74, 80; Christensen 2006, esp. 116–126.

alliance system and expanded US and allied security cooperation with non-US treaty allies (for example, Vietnam and India), Beijing's evolving response to this foundational, if increasingly dynamic, aspect of the post-war regional status quo will continue to be a key variable shaping the region's future. The analysis herein should be updated as circumstances change.

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**摘要:** 近年来, 分析美国与其安全联盟应对中国的崛起及其“强势”周边外交的学术研究不断增加。但是, 英语文献仍然具有相对的片面性。比较欠缺的是对于中方观点的演变做全面研究, 而这对理解当代亚太地区战略竞争的复杂驱动因素至为重要。本文用中文, 日文, 和英文材料对基本已有二十多年的现有文献做进一步更新。本文主要分析中国如何应对以美国为主导的联盟体系的新发展 – 而这一联盟体系是七十多年来区域秩序现状的基础构成。中国领导人对于近来 (美国东亚) 联盟体系的强化表现出不满甚至公开的反对; 中方领导人倡导一种替代性的安全结构, 以代替他们认为是“排他”、“零和”以及“冷战遗产”的美国主导的联盟体系。但是, 考虑到诸如北朝鲜一类当代政治和安全的现实挑战, 如何实现替代秩序的具体路径建议, 仍然是非常欠缺的。

**关键词:** 中国; 同盟; 联盟体系; 区域秩序; 军事; 安全; 美国; 日本

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