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China's New Thinking on Alliances

Feng Zhang

In December 1949, Mao Zedong, paramount leader of the newly founded People's Republic of China, travelled to Moscow to negotiate a military alliance with the Soviet Union. Within barely two decades, however, not only had the alliance collapsed, but the two former allies had become bitter ideological and military adversaries. Strategic exigencies compelled the Chinese leadership to seek rapprochement with the United States, producing a quasi-alliance between the two erstwhile enemies after 1972. In January 1979, during his visit to Washington, Deng Xiaoping sought to nudge the United States toward developing a de facto, if informal, alliance with China in order to secure American support for China's impending invasion of Vietnam. During the last decade of the Cold War, China and the United States also maintained a degree of strategic cooperation against the Soviet Union.¹

China's record in alliance politics during the Cold War was thus impressive enough. By the early 1980s, however, although the quasi-alliance with the United States was still operating in a circumscribed manner, the language about military alliance had disappeared from the official discourse. In fact, the alliance rhetoric had begun to diminish with the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations after the late 1950s, to be finally delegitimised in 1982, when the 12th Party Congress established an 'independent and self-reliant foreign policy of peace'. Beijing avowed to follow the principle of non-

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alignment in the conduct of China's relations with the United States and the Soviet Union in order to exercise independent diplomatic initiatives.² This has proved to be a watershed in Chinese foreign-policy discourse: from the last years of the Cold War, when China implemented economic reforms, via the changing 1990s, when its economic rise took off, through the present day, as the country begins to make its presence known on the global stage, Beijing has consistently rejected alliance as a foreign-policy principle, denigrating it as a relic of the Cold War unpalatable to Chinese morals.

Yet alliance thinking is making a comeback in China's intellectual and policy communities. Important scholars are suggesting a re-evaluation of the non-alignment principle in China's foreign policy. Though still on the margins of official thinking, a new discourse on alliances has emerged in the last couple of years, advocated by some of the country's eminent international-relations scholars. Why has alliance thinking returned to Chinese discourse? What are its possible policy implications? The roots of China's new thinking on alliances are in a fundamental sense similar to those of its alliance policies during the Cold War: the country feels compelled by perceived strategic pressures generated by a change in the structure of the international system. Just as pressure from the United States in the immediate post-Second World Wars years compelled China to seek an alliance with the Soviet Union, and pressure from the Soviets in the late 1960s compelled China to seek an alliance with the United States, so now the pressures of America's strengthening hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region – represented by America's so-called 'pivot to Asia'³ – are compelling restive minds in China to reconsider alliance as an option for a new Chinese strategy. But there are other causes of China's new alliance thinking that warrant discussion, as do the intellectual significance and policy implications of this change.

New thinking

Among the contributors to contemporary China's unofficial international-relations discourse, Tsinghua University-based Yan Xuetong stands out as one of the most controversial and blunt advocates of unorthodox policies.⁴ He also appears to possess the longest record among Chinese analysts of

consistently advocating alliance, suggesting the idea as early as 2009.⁵ The following year, in a speech to university students, Yan asserted that China's non-alignment principle was a major flaw in its foreign policy because it was inhibiting China from improving its relationships with its neighbours. This view was based on the somewhat counter-intuitive reasoning that, at a time when the security dilemma in East Asia has been heightened by rising Chinese power, an alliance policy pledging Chinese security guarantees to the country's neighbours would be the best way of alleviating their suspicions of Chinese power and thus dampen tensions in the region.⁶

In a 2011 article published in the popular *Global Times* newspaper, to which Yan is a frequent contributor, he contends that the current international distribution of power, rather than tending toward multipolarity, is in fact developing into a structure of 'two superpowers, many great powers' (at least in terms of material capabilities), with the United States and China leading the international pecking order.⁷ Yan, it should be noted, was an active participant in China's strategic debates on international order in the first half of the 1990s, which produced a near consensus inside China that the international structure in the 1990s was characterised by 'one superpower, many great powers', with the United States as the sole superpower and China as one among several great powers. Now China's continued economic success has prompted Yan to revise that earlier assessment in favour of an emerging bipolar structure. In terms of the international strategic order, however, he laments that American unipolarity has been strengthened rather than undermined, mainly due to smarter foreign policies pursued by the Obama administration. He argues that China is currently the only country in the world capable of challenging this American-centred strategic unipolarity, by establishing an alliance with Russia.

In 2012 Yan has intensified his call for adjusting China's foreign-policy principles. In an article ostensibly on the South China Sea issue published in the journal *World Affairs*, Yan insisted that China must now abandon its long-cherished principles of *tao guang yang hui* and non-alignment, which have served as cornerstones of Chinese foreign policy for 20–30 years, respectively. The former principle – usually if misleadingly translated as 'hide our capacities and bide our time' – was established by Deng Xiaoping in the

aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.⁸ As alternatives, Yan proposes *qianxu jinshen*, which might be translated as 'act modestly and prudently', to replace *tao guang yan hu*,⁹ and an alliance strategy to override the non-alignment principle. "Non-alignment", he wrote,

means not making the most reliable friends. Without reliable friends, we have no one to rely on in times of difficulties. Our lack of allies does not reduce other countries' fear of our rise. The non-alignment policy has become an obstacle for us to win the support of most countries in the South China Sea region. The United States is worried about our abandoning non-alignment, because this policy helps it isolate us. Looking over China's four peripheral regions, the most secure regions are the west and northwest, and their security relies on a semi-military alliance – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In sum, what China faces today is not only the problem of adjusting foreign policy strategies, but also that of adjusting foreign policy principles, namely whether to adjust the principles of *Tao Guang Yang Hui* and non-alignment.¹⁰

This general discussion was followed by more specific analysis of the necessity and feasibility of a Sino-Russian alliance. Beginning with the premise that the desirability and reliability of any alliance is determined by the degree of common security interests among its members, he avers that neither Russia nor China has a better strategic choice at the moment than to opt for an alliance with each other. Russia has been under consistent and increasing Western pressure in the post-Cold War era, while China is facing potential encirclement by America's allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific, thus creating a high degree of common interest between the two countries in jointly opposing America's strategic encroachment.¹¹

While Yan is the most vocal advocate of alliance, he is not alone. And although he usually takes the offensive or hardline stance in domestic policy debates, on the alliance question he is in fact making a defensive argument, suggesting that a Sino-Russian alliance, as a response to heightened international strategic pressure, will be a defensive one intended to

prevent the worsening of the strategic environment.¹² Much more aggressive is the stance taken by Dai Xu, a People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force colonel. In an article published in the *Global Times* in January 2012, he asserted that Washington is currently pursuing a military strategy of global domination, with Eurasia as the main battlefield and China and Russia the ultimate targets. As a result, he argued, it was necessary for China and Russia to establish a 'Euro-Asian grand alliance' in order to jointly oppose America's habit of 'slaying' weak countries and its strategic ambition of establishing a global empire. This would require China to re-evaluate its non-alignment principle and revise its foreign policy, currently centred on economic development and peaceful intent. He suggested that while mounting an offensive defence on the maritime front, China should simultaneously carry out a 'long march' into the Eurasian heartland to defeat America's strategic encirclement.¹³

Dai's radicalism is not widely shared even by those who favour a change in China's alliance policy. Rather, most Chinese would see Dai as being on the far margins of the intellectual and policy spectrum, and his glib and crude assertions are unlikely to be taken seriously. Of greater importance are the proposals of more modest scholars such as Zhang Wenmu of the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, who suggests the need for updating the Sino-Russian relationship from a strategic partnership to a strategic alliance. Rather than being an offensive alliance for conflict, he stresses, the alliance's main task would be to defend the legitimate interests of China and Russia against American encroachment. At the same time, however, he attacks believers in the non-alignment principle for misunderstanding the nature of China's foreign policy. According to him, the central principle of China's foreign policy since 1949 has been independence and self-reliance, not non-alignment. Committing oneself to permanent non-alignment, he warns, is like digging one's grave before conflict begins.¹⁴

Luo Yuan, a retired PLA major-general and deputy director of the World Military Affairs Research Department at the Academy of Military Science, usually a forceful advocate of a more coercive approach in China's foreign policy, is in fact somewhat sceptical of a formal alliance strategy. He suggests instead that China upgrade its relationships with strategically significant

countries (including Russia) to achieve higher levels of strategic cooperation, so that these relationships could serve as *de facto* alliances without the trappings of formal alliances.¹⁵

Such proposals for quasi-alliances, especially between China and Russia, seem to be gaining followers, apparently because it is thought that quasi-alliances would allow China to benefit from the security advantages afforded by strategic alignment while avoiding the risk, inflexibility and complexity of formal alliances.¹⁶ Relatively cheap, flexible and convenient, quasi-alliances are seen to entail no loss of the foreign-policy independence cherished by China. A Sino-Russian quasi-alliance in particular, with its proposed defensive orientation, is seen as potentially developing into a new model of great-power relationship. As Yu Zhengliang writes, a Sino-Russian quasi-alliance is not meant to challenge or replace American hegemony; it is merely a strategic reaction to evolving circumstances intended to achieve a balanced relationship with the West and protect China's strategic interests.¹⁷ The informal nature of quasi-alliances partly explains their popularity with analysts concerned about abandoning established policies too quickly.

Another important voice in the growing alliance debate belongs to Fudan University scholar Tang Shiping, who does not advocate a specific alliance policy but rather suggests consideration of the role alliances have played in China's own rich experiences. He criticises China's denial of alliance-making as an act of self-deception, adding that it has exposed China to the derision of other countries because of the dishonesty in glossing over the importance of alliances in China's own foreign-policy history. He argues that alliance-building does not necessarily signal a 'Cold War mentality', as China's official discourse alleges, and that, historically, China was never a non-aligned country. He concludes that depriving alliance of its proper role as a security strategy seriously inhibits China's strategic thinking, and urges that China should consider all strategies, whether they involve alliances or not, that can advance its interests, even though this does not necessarily mean officially terminating the independent foreign-policy line established in 1982.¹⁸ Such a position has been echoed by other scholars, such as Shi Yinhong of People's University.¹⁹

International pressures, increased capabilities and domestic frustrations

Why is China's new thinking on alliances emerging at this particular moment? The most apparent answer is a structural-realist one: scrutiny of existing policies is being driven by consequential changes in the international system under whose constraints China must operate.²⁰ Those constraints are now tightening, thanks to enhanced US strategic hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, perceived strategic pressure from the United States is most frequently invoked as a justification for alliances to defend against or compete with the American security system in the region.

Alliance is a prescription for external balancing, which can include 'moves to strengthen and enlarge one's own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one', as Kenneth Waltz has noted.²¹ Chinese analysts are considering both aspects of the strategy: building up China's own alliances by working with Russia and other countries, and undermining the American alliance system by applying measured strategic pressures to America's regional allies and by increasing the costs of America's commitments to them. Moreover, there is a distinctive Chinese understanding of alliance politics with respect to China's neighbourhood policy. It holds that alliances with neighbours would contribute to building strategic trust with them, thus dampening their suspicions and consolidating strategic cooperation, while at the same time reducing the attraction of the United States as a security provider.²² At a minimum, building alliances with neighbours might save China from losing any more of an already very small number of friends in its periphery, a worry recently deepened by changes in Myanmar.

If such ideas become policy, the result may be two opposing alliance systems in the Asia-Pacific, creating a Sino-US version of the Cold War confrontation for the twenty-first century. If nothing else, the region has seen a disheartening revival of realist logic. The rise of Chinese power and the country's apparent assertiveness²³ in recent years have elicited a vigorous strategic response from Washington and its regional allies, which has in turn stimulated Chinese domestic discussions on an equally robust response centred on reclaiming alliance from the historical limbo of Chinese foreign policy. One can interpret this as an example of an intensifying security dilemma between China and those of its neighbours that are stra-

tegitally backed up by the United States, whereby one side, in seeking to be more secure through expanding military capabilities, increases fears in the other and hence drives it to build up its own capabilities, thus rendering neither side more secure than before.²⁴ Equally plausibly, one can interpret this as a strategic competition between a rising power (China) and an existing hegemon (America) over the future configuration of the regional order. Either way, if America continues its 'pivot' without reassuring China, and if China finds itself compelled to adopt an alliance strategy, the worst outcome may be a struggle for strategic dominance in the Asia-Pacific.

Structural pressure is not the only reason for China's new alliance thinking, however. Nor does it necessarily lead to such thinking. A little historical perspective will help make this clear. After the 1980s, when alliance lost its prominence in China's strategic policy, there were at least two occasions on which it might have been resurrected. Between 1989 and 1992, Western diplomatic isolation and sanctions imposed in the aftermath of Tiananmen and a changing geopolitical order at the end of the Cold War presented China with stark foreign-policy choices. The leadership debated strategic realities and responses, but the idea of an anti-US alliance, conceivably with a new Russia, did not receive any significant consideration. Almost exactly ten years later, in 1999, a new policy debate erupted following the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the war in Kosovo. This time, the debate took place not just within the leadership but also among a considerable number of analysts outside the government. Yet, as before, the alliance option received scant attention.²⁵

The fact that structural pressures similar to those driving alliance thinking today did not drive similar strategic ideas or policies in these instances suggests that international strategic pressure is only a partial explanation for the new alliance thinking. The remaining explanations must be found in China's enhanced power position, as well as changes in domestic foreign-policy debates. When is a country more likely to ally itself with others? Structural-realist balance-of-power theory suggests that states balance against the most powerful states in the system.²⁶ Presumably, the larger the power gap, the greater the propensity of weak states to balance against strong ones, unless they are in a unipolar system in which one state is so

materially dominant that traditional balancing is rendered inoperative.²⁷ Balance-of-threat theory, on the other hand, holds that states usually align against a more threatening state, with the level of threat determined by the combination of that state's power resources, geographical proximity, offensive capability and policies that suggest malign intent.²⁸

The Chinese case, however, presents puzzles for both theories. If balance of power theory is correct, China's propensity to balance the United States should be gradually diminishing in the post-Cold War era, since it is catching up with the United States in terms of material capabilities. Yet the alliance argument has in fact arisen at a time when China has achieved the status of the world's second-largest economy, not when it was lagging far behind. Thus, when analysts such as Yan Xuetong argue that China is now in almost the same power category as the United States, producing an emerging global bipolarity, they are suggesting balancing, even though, from the perspective of relative power, China has less need of balancing today than during the entire post-Cold War period. On the other hand, if balance-of-threat theory is correct, the alliance rhetoric should have appeared several times since the end of the Cold War; certainly, it should not be more intense today than, say, in 1999 when an American bomber actually damaged a Chinese embassy.

A different cause, having to do with a distinctive Chinese understanding of alliance politics, seems to account for the emergence of alliance proposals at a time of Chinese strength. China, according to this logic, needs to construct alliances when its power is equal to or stronger than that of its alliance partners, and when it is not significantly weaker than the balancing target. Chinese analysts have learned that in previous alliances with the Soviet Union and the United States, China, as the weaker partner, was at a disadvantage, especially in its relationship with the Soviet Union. They would thus prefer a reverse asymmetry in future alliances, with China as the stronger side, or at least a structure of equality. It is argued that an alliance with Russia, for example, would pose no risk for China, since Chinese power now rivals Russia's and is likely to overshadow it in future.²⁹ (This is even more true of alliances with other, weaker countries.) Analysts also

*China was
the weaker
partner*

believe that China's present capabilities will make alliance an effective and consequential strategy to counterbalance US power, unlike, say, during the early 1990s, when external balancing might have made little difference due to China's material weakness. In this sense, the new thinking on alliances is emboldened by China's enhanced power position after three decades of impressive economic growth. It seems that, to many Chinese analysts, achieving the No. 2 rank in terms of global power is the threshold past which external balancing begins to make sense, as the country is not significantly weaker than the No. 1 country against which it will balance, and is stronger than the rest, with which it might ally.

Finally, the new alliance idea is also a product of Chinese analysts' impatience, dissatisfaction and frustration with current policy. The frustration has grown steadily since the late 1990s, in part facilitated by the government's loosening of its controls over intellectual discussions. The absence of an alliance idea in 1989–92 might be partially accounted for by China's weakness. A much more important reason, however, was the rise of a new foreign-policy orthodoxy established and blessed by the authority of Deng himself, namely the aforementioned principle of *tao guang yang hui*, which, by advocating a low-profile and defensive approach, subsumed the non-alignment principle. That orthodoxy served China well in the 1990s. Now, however, an increasing number of analysts from both the left and right of the policy spectrum have become sceptical of its utility. A radical wing, in some way represented by the new alliance discourse, argues that the idea has outlived its usefulness – or, worse, that it has compromised Chinese foreign policy in debilitating ways. Again, Yan Xuetong appears as a distinguished critic. He contends that a foreign policy oriented toward domestic economic development is outdated at a time when China's security interests outweigh its economic interests. Alliance is a response to a deteriorating security environment, but it is also touted as a remedy to the failings in recent Chinese foreign policy. In particular, he argues that alliances could enhance China's moral authority and strategic credibility, the lack of which is seen as a major problem today.³⁰ To Yan and some other outspoken critics, the frustration with official policy runs deep, because the government has consistently ignored their voices, seemingly content to stick with the 20-year-old Deng orthodoxy.

Intellectual status and policy implications

How important is the new alliance thinking compared with established policies, and with other policy ideas vying for intellectual dominance and policy support? In official circles, not only is alliance thinking not in the mainstream, it is antithetical to the official non-alignment thinking that has become entrenched in the past 30 years. The more activist and forceful approach it represents in terms of China's foreign policy is seen as a radical challenge to the more reactive and defensive approach embodied in *tao guang yang hui*.³¹ As Yan Xuetong noted somewhat bitterly after the rejection of his article on a Sino-Russian alliance by four different publications, the topic is simply a taboo in the official discourse.³² Indeed, the 2011 White Paper entitled 'China's Peaceful Development' – the last foreign-policy White Paper of the Hu Jintao administration – reaffirms that China 'will not align with any country or group of countries'.³³

Neither is alliance a mainstream idea within China's intellectual community. Its intellectually significant advocates number perhaps no more than a dozen. The vast majority of Chinese scholars and analysts outside the government have not taken the idea seriously or, if they have, have simply opposed it. This says more about the nature of alliance thinking than about its advocates, some of whom are important, mainstream scholars in China's international-relations community. Among those mentioned above, Yan Xuetong, Shi Yinong and Tang Shiping are respected scholars in China's major universities, each having made distinguished contributions to the development of the international-relations discipline in China. Two of them (Yan and Tang), moreover, have worked in China's key policy-research institutes (the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, respectively) and are thus deeply aware of the policy stakes of their arguments. On the other hand, there are some advocates of alliance thinking who are not mainstream scholars, and still others who cannot be said to be serious scholars at all. Dai Xu, for example, has made his name through writing sensational opinion pieces in the *Global Times*; 'media analyst' would be a more appropriate title for him. Zhang Wenmu, despite the attention his geopolitical thesis has attracted (mainly in the West, interestingly³⁴), is not accepted by the mainstream stra-

tegic community. And while Luo Yuan is a recognised strategist, it is not clear whether his views represent the mainstream thinking of the military or rather are intended to nudge the military toward his positions.

Unsurprisingly, the new alliance thinking has generated controversies and opposition from multiple directions. Some consider it unrealistic. In an article published in the *Global Times*, the Peking University scholar Zhu Feng wonders which countries would be willing to ally with China. If there are such countries, but the resulting alliances cannot change the power balance, why are alliances needed at all? He concludes that seeking a Sino-US confrontation, if this is the goal of an alliance strategy, is simply

*The US,
not Russia,
is China's
'natural ally'*

strategic folly.³⁵ Similarly, Zhu's senior colleague Wang Jisi, a significant scholar and policy analyst also based at Peking University, avers that there is almost no country in the world that is willing to construct a long-term, anti-US alliance with China, and that building a cooperative partnership with the United States, rather than pursuing an anti-US strategy, remains China's primary policy objective.³⁶ Still others doubt whether Russia, if it were willing to ally with China or even play second fiddle in such an

alliance, would be a reliable ally given its historical policy pragmatism and fickleness. Over the long run, problems and even competitions between China and Russia are not inconceivable, and may be no less significant than those between China and the United States.³⁷ Moreover, an alliance with Russia is unlikely to solve intractable problems in China's foreign policy, such as territorial disputes, meaning that a good relationship with the United States will continue to be essential. Indeed, it is no less logical to argue for a Sino-US alliance instead of a Sino-Russian one, something that has in fact been done from two different perspectives. Firstly, an argument from the perspective of the national interest asserts that so long as such an alliance serves China's interests, constructing it makes good sense. The second argument, from a politicised perspective, contends that the United States, not Russia, is China's 'natural ally' because of its support of China during the Second World War and the relevance of its liberal political model.³⁸

An analysis of the structure of China's foreign-policy debates helps to further clarify the place of the alliance idea in the intellectual spectrum, which is currently dominated by three schools of thought. The first school, which might be called the 'status quo' school, continues to insist on the validity and applicability of the *tao guang yang hui* orthodoxy. But this is now a minority view, mainly held by a small number of former foreign-policy officials who have deeply internalised the established principles of the Deng era. Most contemporary officials and policymakers now recognise that the Deng orthodoxy requires modification, if not yet rejection.

More influential within the intellectual community are two other schools of thought that both suggest revising the Deng orthodoxy, but in different and sometimes contradictory ways. One school, which might be called 'cooperative revisionism', holds that the Deng orthodoxy of a low-profile and defensive approach geared mainly toward the United States and the West needs to be revised, in accordance with changed international environments and domestic contexts, toward a more proactive approach in furthering foreign cooperation and managing new challenges. The general direction should be toward 'peaceful development' (which eventually became the catchphrase of Chinese foreign policy during the Hu Jintao era after the much-discussed 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious world' formulations³⁹), rather than revolution or confrontation. This is probably the dominant thinking among intellectuals; certainly, it prevails in policymaking, and thus represents the mainstream in China today.

In contrast, the other revisionist school, which might be called 'assertive revisionism', would see the Deng orthodoxy replaced by a more assertive and confrontational stance. On China's US policy, for example, while the cooperative revisionists would continue to seek strategic cooperation with Washington, the assertive revisionists would prefer that China free itself from its 'American obsession', a bias said to influence at least some Chinese policymaking that casts the United States as the top priority, thus limiting policy latitude and strategic vision. Members of this school would not balk at confronting the United States were the need to arise. Indeed, some now think the United States can and should be challenged; the question is when and how.

Both the assertive and cooperative revisionists agree that the Deng orthodoxy needs to be modified, as do many policymakers. Both Yan Xuetong from the assertive revisionist camp and Wang Jisi from the cooperative revisionist camp, for example, suggest replacing the expression *tao guang yang hui* with *qianxu jinshen* (modest and prudent),⁴⁰ a move likely to find at least implicit endorsement from State Councillor Dai Bingguo, China's highest official in charge of foreign policy, who recently declared in an important signed article that *qianxu jinshen* maintains the spirit of *tao guang yang hui*.⁴¹ But Yan and Wang diverge sharply on a range of policy issues, particularly US policy. Indeed, US policy is producing the deepest divide between the two camps and polarising Chinese opinions in general, with one side insisting on cooperation and accommodation and the other emphasising autonomy and contention.

So far, the emerging alliance discourse seems to be more strongly associated with assertive revisionism, rendering it less influential than the cooperative revisionist mainstream. But this does not necessarily mean that the alliance idea is insignificant. A marginal idea in one period may become a guiding principle in another, as demonstrated by the rise of neo-conservatism in recent American foreign policy. In evaluating a policy idea, one should always ask how significant its intellectual force is, what light it sheds on the state of current policy, and what conditions might propel or curtail its rise to prominence.

Although alliances have played a role Chinese foreign policy before – as we have seen, they were a feature of China's Cold War foreign policy, and even now China continues to maintain an alliance treaty with North Korea and have a quasi-alliance with Pakistan – advocating it openly in the post-Cold War period is revolutionary. Alliance-building as a security strategy would overturn the official security doctrine of the New Security Concept established during the 1990s, and would dismantle China's post-Cold War foreign-policy architecture. If not yet official policy, the idea has already stimulated a debate on the 'alliance crisis' in China's foreign policy among mainstream scholars.⁴² And key policy research institutes are beginning to take the idea seriously. The newly established National Institute of International Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held a

high-profile conference on alliance theory and East Asian order in May 2012. The alliance idea has quickly made its way into mainstream academic discourse, thus gaining legitimacy as an intellectual option for China's foreign policy.⁴³ Whether it can find its way into the policy agenda will depend both on the interaction between the international environment and domestic needs and on the relative strength of other policy ideas emerging from domestic debates.

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The influence of contemporary alliance thinking in China should not be exaggerated: it falls outside the mainstream among both China's intellectual and policy communities. Rather, its importance lies in the forceful challenge it presents to official policies, in its ability to provoke wide-ranging debates, and in its potential as a policy option for the future. It appears at a time when the established policies of the last 30 years are being questioned as never before. And it presents itself just as a new generation of leaders prepares to take office. Whether the new leadership under Xi Jinping will be able to initiate major policy changes remains to be seen, but China's imminent once-in-a-decade leadership transition, coupled with a roiling domestic debate about foreign policy, will at least provide an important occasion, and perhaps more favourable conditions, for change. That makes new thinking such as the alliance idea worth tracking.

The outside world need not be unduly alarmed, both because alliance is not yet a policy and because most proposals are defensive rather than offensive in their strategic orientation. At the same time, however, Washington needs to recognise that the strengthening of America's strategic dominance in the Asia-Pacific is a major cause of China's new alliance thinking, which, if adopted as a policy, could produce a Cold War-style confrontation that no one really wants. The consolidation of its strategic position in the Asia-Pacific may seem a merely defensive posture to Washington and its regional allies, but it is highly offensive to many Chinese strategists. Allies and friends need to be reassured about America's commitment, but so too does China about America's strategic design. Striking the right balance is an important

strategic responsibility for American foreign-policymakers. Likewise, it is the duty of both the United States and China to ensure that they continue to cooperate, and that they succeed in developing a relationship that represents a new model of great-power relationship, one that transcends the great-power rivalries of the past.

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Notes

- 1 See Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011).
- 2 Feng Zhang, 'Rethinking China's Grand Strategy: Beijing's Evolving National Interests and Strategic Ideas in the Reform Era', *International Politics*, vol. 49, no. 3, May 2012, p. 322.
- 3 See David W. Barno, Nora Bensahel and Travis Sharp, 'Pivot but Hedge: A Strategy for Pivoting to Asia While Hedging in the Middle East', *Orbis*, vol. 56, no. 2, Spring 2012, pp. 158–76.
- 4 See Feng Zhang, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 5, no. 1, Spring 2012, pp. 73–102.
- 5 Yan Xuetong and Xu Jin (eds), *Wangba Tianxia sixiang ji qidi* [Thoughts of World Leadership and Implications] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2009), p. 240; Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 143.
- 6 Yan Xuetong, 'Dangqian guoji xingshi yu Zhongguo Waijiao de tiaozheng' [The Current International Situation and the Adjustment of Chinese Diplomacy], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], vol. 1, no. 2, May 2010, pp. 11–12.
- 7 Yan Xuetong, 'Yichao duoqiang kaishi xiang "liangchao duoqiang" yanbian' [The Structure of One Superpower, Many Great Powers Begins to Evolve into 'Two Superpowers, Many Great Powers'], *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global

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