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Editor's Note: Special Issue-Chinese Foreign Policy at a Crossroads

John S. Van Oudenaren

A central effort of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping, and a core goal of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, has been to establish China as a leading global power with a significant role in all major elements of world affairs. As a result, China is now, while by no means the dominant power in every region, a strategic player nearly everywhere.

Due to this shift, the key question now is not whether China will continue on this trajectory, but rather how China's push to become a global power will take shape. A critical variable in the success of this endeavor will be whether China can get a handle on its domestic challenges and sustain its continued economic, military and technological development. As demonstrated by the ongoing, multi-year ordeal of the Chinese population with COVID-19 epidemic prevention and now a mass-scale outbreak, this will be a daunting challenge. However,

an equally key variable is how distant regions and countries, many of which lack extensive historical and cultural familiarity with China, will respond to Beijing's growing involvement in their affairs.



(Image: President Xi Jinping attends the G20 summit this November, **source:** Xinhua)

In order to better understand these dynamics, *China Brief* is pleased to publish a Special Issue on “Chinese Foreign Policy at a Crossroads,” which features four articles looking at Chinese diplomatic efforts outside its traditional, East Asian strategic environment. The recent record reveals that China’s success in achieving its global ambitions has been mixed, with Beijing achieving serious traction in some regions, but failing to match its soaring rhetoric with concrete achievements in others.

In “China Makes a Move in the Middle East: How Far Will Sino-Arab Strategic Rapprochement Go?,” Sine Ozkarasahin examines the implications of China’s deepening alignment with Saudi Arabia and other leading Arab states for both the delicate balance of power in the region and U.S. foreign policy.

In “Finland and the Demise of China’s Polar Silk Road,” Matti Puranen and Sanna Kopra detail how the once immense enthusiasm in Finland for cooperation with China in the Arctic has faded, amidst shifting geopolitical realities, in particular, the Russia-Ukraine War.

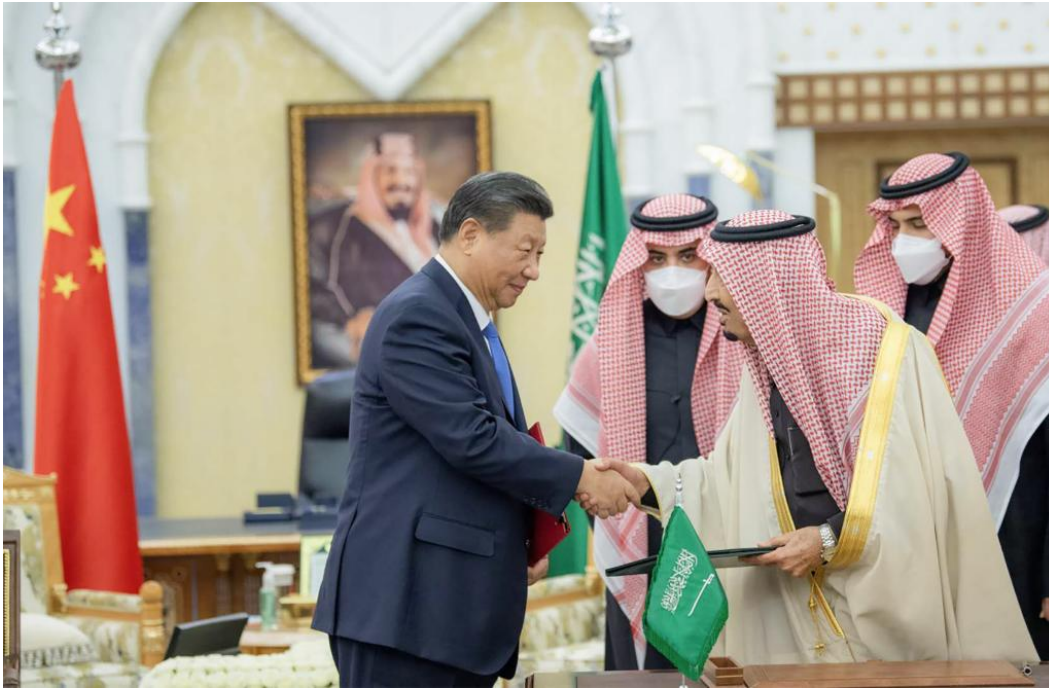
In “The Caribbean and U.S.-China Strategic Competition: Next Phase of the New Cold War?,” Scott MacDonald examines how China has been able to make extensive inroads in the United States’ near abroad, developing partnerships based on economic and diplomatic cooperation and reducing the number of Taiwan’s diplomatic allies in the region.

In “China-Pakistan Relations: The “All-Weather” Partnership Navigates Stormy Times,” Syed Fazl-e-Haider examines the state of the China-Pakistan entente, a relationship that seems to have defied the ebbs and flows of many of Beijing’s other key strategic partnerships. To be sure, differences and irritants exist, but both sides remain deeply committed to the relationship.

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China Makes a Move in the Middle East: How Far Will Sino-Arab Strategic Rapprochement Go?

Sine Ozkarasahin



(Image: President Xi Jinping and King Salman shake hands at Riyadh's al-Yamamah Palace on December 8, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

With a well-planned strategy and a careful exploitation of the gaps opened by U.S. foreign policy shifts, China has successfully increased its role as a strategic actor in the Middle East, including by gaining a foothold in the regional arms market. Chinese President Xi Jinping's early December visit to Saudi Arabia, upon King Salman's invitation, exemplifies the recent improvement in Sino-Arab ties ([Xinhua](#), December 8). While in Saudi Arabia, Xi initiated two new multilateral forums intended to strengthen engagement between China and the Arab world: the China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council summit ([Xinhua](#), December 11).

In addition to deepening political rapprochement between Beijing and several regional countries, China is simultaneously establishing crucial military-strategic ties with key Middle Eastern states. Chinese-made drones are already present in the arsenals of multiple Arab countries and technological cooperation between Beijing and its regional counterparts is rapidly increasing. The most striking example in this regard was the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) revocation of the F-35 deal that constrained its cooperation with the Chinese tech and telecommunications giant Huawei over 5G technology ([Al Arabiya News](#), December 14, 2021). As many Arab

countries' doubts about Washington's commitment to regional security grow, more and more countries are increasingly open to entreaties from China.

Although Beijing is known for using infrastructure investment and economic leverage to increase its overseas influence, Sino-Arab relations are not as purely transactional as some argue. On the contrary, they carry the utmost strategic value. With important partnerships in the fields of technology and arms transfers, Chinese influence in the region is already more extensive than many realize. As China improves its relations with once-close U.S. allies, Washington faces two imminent risks. The first risk is economic, whereas the second danger is strategic. The economic risk is that Washington is already losing its most lucrative arms market to its biggest rival. The second risk relates to geopolitics and has strategic implications. While filling the burgeoning arms market with alternatives to Western suppliers, China is also expanding strategic ties with the leading Arab states, which could reset the balance of power across the region.

Beijing and Riyadh: An Alignment Years in the Making

Although bilateral ties have taken off of late, Sino-Saudi cooperation is hardly new. The two countries officially established diplomatic relations in 1990 ([Xinhuanet](#), February 9, 2009). In fact, official relations were already preceded by defense cooperation in the 1980s, including the sale of Dongfeng-3 (DF-3) medium-range ballistic missiles ([South China Morning Post](#), December 8). However, the number of arms deals increased after 2014, as U.S.-Saudi relations soured, following the OPEC+ oil crisis and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. China drafted its Arab Policy Paper in January 2016, which aimed to boost the dialogue and cooperation between Beijing and Middle Eastern countries ([Xinhua](#), January 14, 2016). Shortly after, Saudi Arabia and China announced a five-year plan for an enhanced security agreement. Supported by 17 different high-level agreements, the plan included partnerships on science and technology, as well as counterterrorism cooperation and joint military drills ([PRC State Council](#), August 30, 2016). The first joint bilateral counterterrorism drill took place in October 2016, and the coming years followed suit with various exercises, such as the Blue Sword naval training in 2019 ([China Military Online](#), November 20, 2019).

As noted, President Xi recently made headlines for his three-day visit to the Saudi capital from December 7-10. During the trip, Xi attended the China-Arab States Summit and the China-GCC Summit in Riyadh, both of which were held for the first time. According to the statements made by the Saudi investment minister, the two countries signed over 30 bilateral trade and investment agreements worth around \$50 billion during the three-day visit ([Al Arabiya News](#), December 8). The promised areas of strategic cooperation include oil, green energy, military, logistics and cloud computing ([Masrawy](#), December 12). The deals are financially significant as Saudi Arabia is China's biggest trade partner in the Middle East ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), October 21, 2021). Moreover, Saudi Arabia is an active participant in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which yields favorable investment and other economic partnership opportunities, while opening the way to future cooperation. Both sides frame the relationship as mutually beneficial ([Global Times](#), December 9). With several annual supply deals with state oil refiners, China benefits from a secure oil supply, while Saudi Arabia enjoys a generous flow of combat-proven weapon systems and support for its strategic projects.

U.S. policy choices are an important factor fueling the rapprochement between the two countries. The Biden administration is currently trying to turn back the arms sales Trump approved for the Middle East. This change

in policy was reflected in the temporary freeze of the sale of F-35 fifth-generation fighter jets to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as the suspension of munition sales to Saudi Arabia. During the state visits that took place as part of the planned program, King al-Salman noted that the Chinese-Saudi partnership “effectively promoted regional peace, stability, prosperity and development”, emphasizing the positive trajectory of the bilateral relations ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China \[FMPRC\]](#), December 7).

Over the past few years, Saudi Arabia has scaled up its arms procurement from China. Rumors circulated on social media after the Zhuhai Air Show in November arguing that Riyadh purchased \$4 billion worth of military equipment and weapons from Beijing, marking a significant increase compared to the previous arms deal ([Zhihu](#), November 12). In addition to these public-private partnerships, the military-strategic side of Sino-Saudi relations, particularly the Chinese fingerprint on Riyadh’s ballistic missile program, is especially significant for U.S. foreign policy.

The Real Deal: Chinese Signature on Saudi Arabia’s Upcoming Ballistic Missile Program

As noted, Chinese sales of ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia are not new, but go back over three decades to 1987, when a deal was signed for the 3000-kilometer range Dongfeng-3 (DF-3) missiles. In 2007, Saudi Arabia opted for other Chinese solutions to expand its ballistic missile arsenal. The DF-2 missiles are one prominent example. Riyadh showcased Chinese missiles in a national military parade, which many analysts regarded as a political message to the U.S.

Known for its desire to build its own indigenous missile program, Saudi Arabia has hitherto largely lacked the means to kickstart such an initiative. Its familiarity with Chinese ballistic missile technologies and established links with Beijing put China in the higher ranks in the eyes of the Saudis as a reliable partner. The Chinese and the Saudis share a history of cooperation, including missile technology transfer. Although he did not touch on the allegations, a People’s Republic of China (PRC) Foreign Ministry spokesperson recently stated that the countries are strategic partners with cooperation in several fields, including trade and defense ([FMPRC](#), December 9). Consequently, the PRC appears to be the most viable partner for Saudi Arabia as it works to develop its ballistic missile program.

In late 2021, U.S. Senator Ed Markey attracted considerable attention when he said that Saudi Arabia started to manufacture its own ballistic missiles ([Senator Ed Markey Twitter](#), December 23, 2021). Private satellite imagery taken between October 26 – November 9, 2021 confirms this claim. The images show a production site located in the town of Dawadmi, which is located 200 kilometers from Riyadh. The photos feature a solid propellant production area and an engine test stand ([Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey](#), January 13). Given the past partnerships, the increasing sense of trust, a generous technology transfer and previous familiarity with Chinese missile technologies, Beijing appears the probable partner for Riyadh in this ambitious project.



(Image: Solid Fuel Disposal Site, Al Dawadni Solid Fuel Production and Test Site, source: MIIS)

However, Riyadh's development of an indigenous ballistic missile program poses a number of risks that threaten to further destabilize the region by intensifying the security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which could fuel an uncontrolled arms race in the region. As its relations with Riyadh deepen, Beijing will increasingly struggle to maintain balance in its Middle East strategy. Such a project designed under Chinese influence will have implications for regional threat perceptions. Second, it allows China to deepen its strategic-military footprint in the region, by establishing itself as a credible and reliable alternative to the West. Third, it shortens the Saudi pathway to a potential nuclear strike capability, should they acquire nuclear warheads, as several Chinese ballistic missiles are dual-use capable of carrying nuclear payloads.

Conclusion

These developments are rooted to a significant extent in U.S. policy, in particular inattention to the continued high threat perception of Saudi Arabia and other Arab allies toward Iran. The primary driver behind Saudi Arabia's desire to boost its defensive and offensive capabilities is the Iranian threat. Therefore, Washington's perceived limitations in being able to counter Tehran's aggressive behavior towards its regional allies carry costs in the Middle East.

Left out in the cold after repeated requests to purchase U.S.-made ballistic missiles (and previously UAVs) Riyadh has started seeking alternatives to counter Iran's growing power and influence.

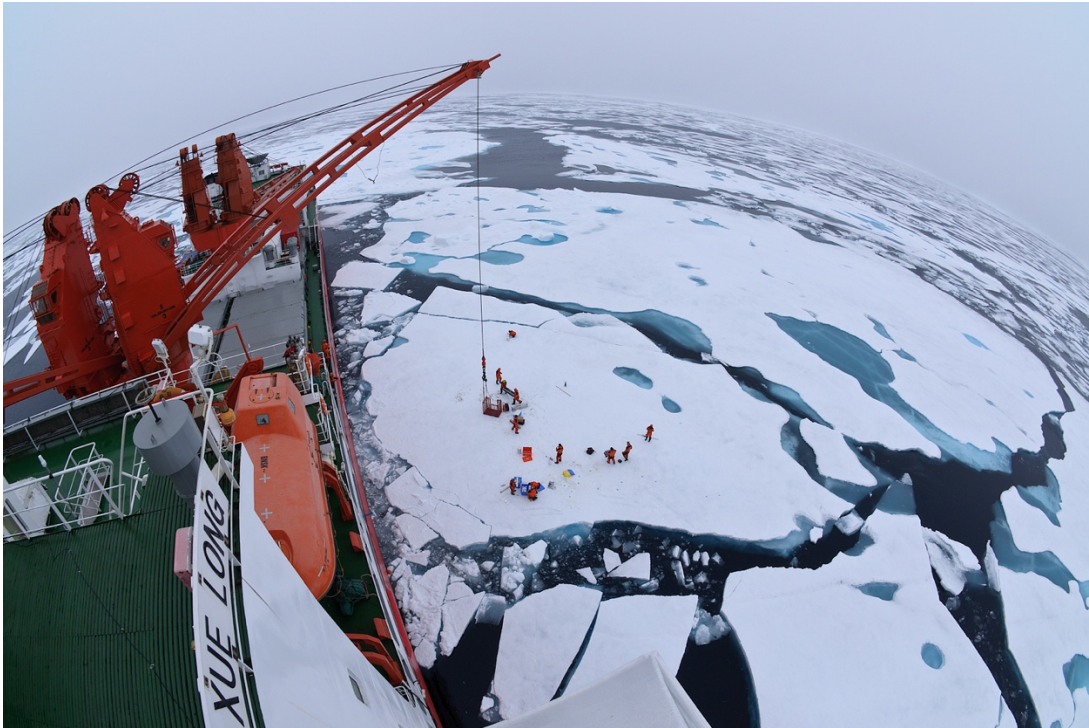
At present and in the near future, Washington will have a hard time trying to counter China in the Middle East, but should rather to seek to rebuild relationships and regain trust with its once-close regional allies. Avoiding future arms freezes and improving dialogue are the first steps in this regard. Another important aspect is persuading Riyadh that working with China can work against its favor in the long-run, especially given the rather close relations between China and Iran. Although it might be too late to turn back time and reverse the

economic partnerships between Beijing and Riyadh, as manifested in BRI, there is still time to make things right and avoid the emerging Chinese – Saudi strategic partnership being set in stone.

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Finland and the Demise of The Polar Silk Road

Matti Puranen and Sanna Kopra



(Image: The deck of PRC icebreaker Xue Long, source: Wikipedia)

Introduction

Only a short time ago, considerable enthusiasm existed in Finland regarding Beijing's efforts to forge an "Arctic corridor" of railroads and undersea tunnels, satellite ground stations, an airport for scientific expeditions, and massive biorefineries. In this, Finland was not alone but represented only a small branch of China's comprehensive thrust to permanently establish a presence above the Arctic Circle. Yet, with the recently emerging geopolitical turbulence, China's Arctic expansion is facing a standstill, even in Finland, which long seemed like its most viable partner in the region. By applying for NATO membership along with Sweden, Finland is turning westward, practically closing the gates on China's Arctic expansion beyond Russia. Its story serves as an interesting microcosm on the rise and demise of China's Arctic policy.

China's Arctic Dilemma

Today, a clear consensus exists among Chinese officials and experts that China must expand toward the Arctic region. Chinese security experts have long urged the national leadership to develop the necessary capabilities for securing Chinese interests in the new "strategic frontiers." A particularly authoritative source, the Chinese

National Defense University's *Science of Military Strategy* (战略学, *zhanlüe xue*) (SMS) textbook, even claims that the Polar regions represent nothing less than “the main direction of the expansion of China's national interests,” bound to provide new tasks for the People's Liberation Army. [1]

Xi Jinping's administration has officially acknowledged the strategic importance of the Arctic region. In 2014, the Director of China's State Oceanic Administration, Liu Cigui, declared that China plans to establish itself as a true “polar great power” (极地强国, *jidi qiangguo*) by 2035 ([State Oceanic Administration](#), November 14, 2014). In 2017, the “Polar Silk Road” was added to the Belt and Road Initiative ([Xinhuanet](#), June 20, 2017). In 2018, China's first-ever official Arctic Policy document was published, claiming that China “shoulders the important mission” of promoting security within the Arctic region ([Xinhuanet](#), January 26, 2018).

China wants to become an Arctic power, but how? Much of the Arctic Ocean falls under the jurisdiction of five coastal states, Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Norway, Russia, and the United States, which leaves only a small slice of sea available for China's exploitation under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Furthermore, Chinese experts often lament that the Arctic great powers jealously guard their backyards and do not allow entry for newcomers. [2]

The *Science of Military Strategy* suggests extreme caution and emphasizes that China's expansion towards the Arctic cannot harm China's broader strategic interests and diplomatic relations. An assertive Arctic posture or needless flashing of military power would only feed the already prominent “China's Arctic threat theories,” and China's foreign policy is already under tight scrutiny. [3]

To tackle this challenge, the SMS and many well-established Chinese Arctic experts, such as Sun Kai and Li Zhenfu, have proposed that China should adopt a multilayered, comprehensive strategy in the Arctic. From this perspective, China should carefully and patiently expand its regional presence and influence by using the tools of diplomacy, economic and scientific cooperation while strengthening its Arctic military capabilities at the same time. [4]

As far as political and diplomatic arms are concerned, the strategy suggests that China should establish a legitimate presence by actively partaking in Arctic governance and creating a new norm infrastructure. It should also employ unofficial diplomacy to nourish an Arctic “circle of friends” of sympathetic individuals and institutions to support such claims. [5] With the economic arm of the Polar Silk Road, such a strategy stipulates that China should expand its presence in the Arctic through infrastructure investments and increased use of Arctic sea lanes, even if such investments would not initially bring any considerable returns. The scientific arm would, for its part, mean expanding scientific cooperation with the Arctic states in order to gain legitimate physical outposts within the region. According to the SMS, scientific outposts and expeditions should serve as the backbone of China's military presence in the Arctic through “military-civilian fusion.” [6]

Through such comprehensive expansion towards the Arctic, China should, in the long term, develop a robust Arctic presence, which could eventually legitimate even the open use of its military forces in the region.

Finland as a Microcosm of China's Comprehensive Push Into the Arctic

Although China does not publicly or officially frame its Arctic strategy in terms of comprehensive expansion, observed Chinese conduct matches up with the approach proposed in expert discussions. This is not to say that the comprehensive strategy would be well-designed in detail or that the different economic and scientific projects would be coordinated between different agencies according to a secret, Machiavellian plan. Instead, a vague vision of the preferred end state of China as a Polar great power in 2035 exists, but the various actors take part in its construction through their own, often contradictory and self-interested ways.

Finland offers an interesting case study of China's comprehensive approach to the Arctic, which demonstrates its diplomatic, economic, and scientific arms in action. From the point of view of Beijing, Finland seems like an optimal Western partner for its comprehensive Arctic expansion ([The Diplomat](#), March 18, 2021). Diplomatic relations between the two have developed smoothly as Finland has remained sensitive towards China's "core interests," and Chinese policy towards Finland has demonstrated reciprocal moderation. When visiting Finland in 2017, Xi Jinping even praised the relationship as setting an "example for peaceful co-existence and friendly exchanges between two countries that are different in size, culture and development level" ([Helsinki Times](#), April 3, 2017). In a joint declaration presented upon Xi's visit, China and Finland promised to "intensify economic and technological cooperation" within the Arctic region ([President of the Republic of Finland](#), April 5, 2017). Under this diplomatic momentum of positive pragmatism, many collaborative projects in the fields of industry, infrastructure, tourism, culture and winter sports were launched, with little, if any, oversight from the media as to their possible security implications.

As for the economic arm of China's comprehensive strategy, the most notable and ambitious Arctic project in Finland involving Chinese investors has undoubtedly been the "Arctic Corridor" project ([The Arctic Corridor](#)). The corridor would connect the Polar Silk Road with the Central European market through a new railway connection from the Norwegian town of Kirkenes to Finland's Rovaniemi and via existing railways to Helsinki. From there, the railway would continue via a new undersea tunnel to Tallinn and towards wider Europe. [7] Agreements with Chinese state funds and construction companies have been signed, yet the economic feasibility of the corridor has been seriously questioned ([Yle](#), March 14, 2018; [Helsingin Sanomat](#), February 7, 2018). Connectivity projects with questionable economic viability would only make sense if they provided value in other forms.

In addition to its location as a possible Arctic gateway of the Polar Silk Road to European markets, Finland is known for its forestry industries. For Chinese investors, the Arctic bioeconomy sector is of particular interest. Since 2016, the Chinese Sunshine Kaidi New Energy Group has planned to invest in a biodiesel refinery in Kemi ([Yle](#), December 8, 2016). In the same year, Chinese state-owned CAMC Engineering became a major stakeholder in the Kemijärvi Boreal Biorefinery bio-refinery project ([Yle](#), November 17, 2016).

As for the scientific arm, some Sino-Finnish Arctic scientific project plans have been initiated. In 2018, a Chinese delegation reportedly sought to buy or lease a small airport in Finnish Lapland, near the small town of Kemijärvi, to conduct scientific expeditions to the North Pole ([Yle](#), March 4, 2021). The delegation, which included the assistant military attaché of the Chinese Embassy in Helsinki, planned to expand the existing runway to accommodate heavy aircraft and construct new airport buildings and research facilities. Moreover,

the Finnish Meteorological Institute and the China Academy of Sciences (CAS) also agreed in 2018 to establish the Joint Research Center for Arctic Space Observations and Data Sharing in Sodankylä, Finland ([Tekniikka & Talous](#), June 30). The research center would have provided ground stations for Chinese remote sensing and navigation satellites in a similar vein as China's first overseas land satellite receiving station, which was established in Kiruna, Sweden, in 2016 ([CAS](#), December 16, 2016). Around the same time, a private Finnish enterprise, North Base, was searching for opportunities to develop ground stations, apparently for mainly Chinese clientele ([Tekniikka & Talous](#), June 15).

Failed Promises

In the 2010s, "neutral" Finland seemed like an optimal partner as China sought to expand toward the Arctic region and establish itself as a true Polar great power. Through comprehensive expansion, Finland was perhaps envisioned as an Arctic bridgehead linking China and Europe and providing bases for data collection and expeditions toward the North Pole. Due to their dual-use potential, the latter would also serve an important function in China's Arctic military expansion by providing intelligence and navigational data.

In spite of the expansiveness of this vision, almost nothing concrete has materialized. The Arctic railway has been erased from the Lapland regional plan ([Regional Council of Lapland](#), May 17, 2021), and other economic projects involving Chinese investors are on hold or canceled altogether. Likewise, the planned scientific projects concerning the Kemijärvi airport and Sodankylä satellite stations, as well as the private satellite project, were all blocked by the Finnish authorities for security reasons. The hindrances have followed growing attention to potential security risks related to Chinese Arctic involvement in Finland and neighboring countries (e.g., [Finnish Security Intelligence Service](#), 2019; [Swedish Security Service](#), 2019). Skepticism and suspicion regarding China and the motivations of its Arctic policy have replaced the positive "buzz" of the late 2010s in official Finnish statements. [8]

Conclusion

Looking forward, the prospects of the Polar Silk Road appear poor. Since Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, the geopolitical situation in the Arctic has changed dramatically ([Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom](#), 2022). Due to China's reluctance to criticize Putin's aggression, its image among Arctic states has deteriorated significantly, making future collaboration troublesome. As with other EU countries, public discussion about dependence on China has been intensive in Finland over the past months. Notably, Prime Minister Sanna Marin herself warned the democratic countries against "being naive" about China ([YouTube](#), December 2).

Due to these developments, the Chinese comprehensive approach seems to face serious obstacles in all Arctic countries except Russia. And even there, the secondary sanctions have put most Sino-Russian Arctic projects on hold, including shipping through the Northeast Passage ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), December 14). Nevertheless, within a longer timeframe, Russia's failing war in Ukraine may provide China with new opportunities to advance its Arctic interests. Russia is facing severe economic and geopolitical challenges, with its almost total isolation among developed economies, which has greatly increased its already considerable dependency on China. In addition, China has already benefitted from the Russia-Ukraine war through

increased supplies of energy, grain, and other commodities at a discounted price, and Chinese telecommunication companies are likely watching in anticipation as regional market leaders Nokia and Ericsson are finalizing their exits from Russia ([Straits Times](#), April 12).

Besides using its geoeconomic muscles, China could expect some compensation for its support of the Russian war effort. Just days before Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" started, he and Xi Jinping declared their friendship has "no limits" and vowed to increase their Arctic cooperation, among other things ([President of Russia](#), February 4). As the war drags on and Russia's isolation deepens, could China be in the position to politely ask for the loosening of Russia's tight rules regarding foreign sailing in the Northeastern Passage or even raise the possibility of making port calls to its Arctic ports with its nuclear submarines ([The National Interest](#), June 1, 2019)?

While the Sino-Russian Arctic bloc is expected to solidify, so is its Western counterpart. NATO's latest strategy paper mentioned both China and the Arctic region for the first time, and the future membership of Finland and Sweden in the alliance will further sharpen the geopolitical divide in the High North. ([NATO's 2022 strategic concept](#)). In the words of one Chinese commentator, the region is on its way to becoming a "NATO ocean" (北约大洋, *Beiyue dayang*) ([PLA Daily](#), June 10, 2022).

As a part of these geopolitical readjustments, Finland is thoroughly rethinking its long-standing foreign policy of positive pragmatism vis-à-vis China. Since Finland represented China's last unaligned partner within the region, the turn symbolizes a hiatus, if not the end, for China's expansion within the Western Arctic.

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Notes

[1] *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学), (Beijing: National Defense University Press, August 2020), p. 162, for an [English translation](#) see China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI) "In Their Own Words" series

[2] See, e.g., Sun, Kai & Wu, Hao (2016) "北极安全新态势与中国北极安全利益维护", *Nanjing Zhengzhixueyuan xuebao*. 2016. No. 5. 71–77.

[3] On "Chinese Arctic threat" theories, see, e.g., Liu, Dan (2022) "中国北极威胁论: 现状、原因与影响", *Xibu xuekan*, 2022. No. 2. 54–58.

[4] See Sun & Wu 2016; Li, Zhenfu & You, Xue & Wang, Wenya (2015) “中国北极航线多层战略体系研究”, *Zhongguo ruankexue*, 2015. No. 4. 29–37.

[5] See Frank Jüris, “Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space” in Kirchberger, Sarah & Sinjen, Svenja & Wörmer, Nils (Eds.), *Russia-China relations: Emerging alliance or eternal rivals?* (Cham: Springer, 2020) 185–202.

[6] *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学), 167.

[7] For a good overview of the project, see Yu-Wen Chen, “The Making of the Finnish Polar Silk Road: Status in Spring 2019”, in Hing Kai Chan, Faith Ka-Shun Chan, and David O’Brien (eds.) *International Flows in the Belt and Road Initiative Context: Business, People, History and Geography* (Singapore: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2020), 193–216.

[8] On changes in official Finnish discourse, see Aukia, Jukka & Puranen, Matti (2022) “China in Finland: Balancing Between Trade and Influence” in Nikers, Olevs & Tabuns, Otto eds. [*Between Brussels and Beijing: The Transatlantic Response to the Chinese Presence in the Baltic Sea Region*](#). Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation. 36–57.

The Caribbean and U.S.-China Strategic Competition: Next Phase of the New Cold War?

Scott B. MacDonald



(Image: The PRC officially reopens its embassy in Managua, Nicaragua in December, 2021, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

Although the U.S. remains the dominant geopolitical force in the Caribbean, China has established itself as the “other” great power in the region, exerting influence from the Bahamas in the northern part of the archipelago of island-states, south through the Greater and Lesser Antilles and into the Guianas on the northeastern shoulder of South America. China is adept at economic statecraft, but unlike the Soviet Union in the last Cold War, Beijing has not sought to establish military alliances and bases in the Caribbean—at least not yet. Chinese efforts in the region are likely to increase considering the continuation by President Xi Jinping of an ambitious foreign policy agenda during his third term. Like it or not, Caribbean countries have become a geopolitical cockpit for the United States and China.

Effective Economic Statecraft

China’s economic statecraft in the Caribbean has been highly effective, with Beijing generally regarded as a good partner. As in Africa and Latin America, large state-owned companies, backed by state development banks, searching for natural resources as well as construction projects and markets, have spearheaded China’s penetration into the region. China’s trade with the Caribbean has gone from being negligible in the

1990s to China becoming one of the top trade partners for several Caribbean countries, including Barbados, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago. Chinese exports to this group of countries in 2021 were over \$9 billion, according to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) most recent data in its Direction of Trade Statistics; Caribbean exports to China are considerably lower, well below a billion dollars ([IMF](#)).

China has become a force in Caribbean infrastructure development, ranging from hotels and hospitals to roads and telecommunications. In the 2000s and 2010s, Caribbean leaders, many of them taking part in larger regional forums, which combined Latin American and Caribbean governments, became aware that China was stepping up its engagement in the Western Hemisphere. For example, the Forum of China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, commonly known as the China-CELAC Forum, was launched by China and the 33 CELAC member states during a visit by Xi Jinping to Brasilia, Brazil in 2014 ([China-CELAC Forum](#), February 7, 2018). China's increasing diplomatic and financial focus on the region coincided with diminished U.S. interest at the end of the Cold War. Chinese companies and Chinese banks quietly began to fill the void. According to the author's estimates, China's two major development banks, China Development Bank and China Export-Import Bank, are estimated to have lent Caribbean countries a little over \$5 billion during the past two decades ([Inter-American Dialogue](#)).

Chinese development banks offered a less time-consuming process than Western-dominated multilateral lending institutions, demanded less transparency and disclosure, and were often willing to supply credit at below market interest rates. While this appeared to be a great deal for the borrower, in some cases the fine print carried the option that, in the event of failure to pay, the Chinese lending institution would assume control of the asset in question. This has led some Western governments to warn about the possibility China could use leverage gained through lending or "debt-trap diplomacy" as a means for Beijing to gain control over strategic assets like harbors and railways. Similar concerns exist in the Caribbean, where China has emerged as a major lender to Jamaica (\$2.1 billion), Suriname (\$773 million) and the Dominican Republic (\$600 million) ([Congressional Research Service](#), May 4). While these are small sums when compared to other recipients of Chinese loans like Pakistan, Ethiopia and Venezuela, they are large in proportion to the Caribbean countries' economies. Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which initially focused primarily on Eurasia, has been expanded to the Western Hemisphere, first to include Latin America and eventually the Caribbean. Today, Caribbean countries that have joined the BRI are Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago (Journal of Current Chinese Affairs, 2022; [Global Times](#), December 26, 2021; [PRC Embassy Grenada](#), August 7, 2021).

Why the Caribbean?

China turned to the Caribbean starting in the early 2000s for four major reasons.

1. The Caribbean Fits into China's Larger, Overall Development Strategy.

For China to achieve national security and for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to remain in power, economic growth is critical. In order to maintain economic growth and shift from a fossil-fuel-based economy to one powered by renewables, China needs to sustain access to key natural resources. The Caribbean fits in

this mix. The region offers important strategic resources, including oil, gas, bauxite, nickel and timber. The Caribbean could also be a potential source of rare earth metals, which are central to components used in new and emerging technologies, including renewable energy. [1] China currently dominates the global rare earth metals market, but it is concerned that its supply could diminish in the years ahead.

The Caribbean is also a modest market for Chinese goods, with the largest markets being in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. At the same time, major infrastructure projects undertaken in the region by construction companies provide employment for Chinese workers. Equally important, the sea lanes that traverse the Caribbean are strategically significant for global supply chains. The Caribbean offers commercial access to the Atlantic coasts of both North and South America for Chinese vessels transiting the Panama Canal. Although China has not established any military bases in the region, concern persists that the many infrastructure projects undertaken by its state-owned conglomerates, such as ports and airports, could be converted to military use.

2. Beijing's Pursuit of "Reunification" with Taiwan Increases the Diplomatic Importance of the Caribbean

Of the fourteen countries that diplomatically recognize and maintain official relations with Taiwan, five are located in the Caribbean. Belize, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines remain "diplomatic allies" of Taipei ([Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)). Since 2017, Beijing has successfully engineered shifts in diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China by governments in the Dominican Republic, as well as several Central American states: Panama, El Salvador and Nicaragua ([Xinhua](#), May 1, 2018). Should China's diplomatic campaign succeed and Taiwan ends up with no official diplomatic relationships, its case for sovereignty will be weakened. China's use of economic statecraft has clearly been part of its argument for countries to drop Taiwan. The lure of cheap Chinese loans and investment and enhanced trade opportunities clearly influenced the decisions by governments in Panama, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic to embrace Beijing's One China Principle.

3. The Caribbean provides a convenient arena for Chinese Statecraft as Beijing Seeks to Navigate a new Cold War with the United States

As the U.S. has maintained strong support for Taiwan and seeks to contain China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere, China has used the Caribbean to cultivate new friends and allies—right in the U.S. backyard. China has remained steadfast in its support for the Maduro regime, purchasing Venezuelan crude despite U.S. economic sanctions; providing a measured degree of support for Cuba; and in 2021 gaining diplomatic recognition from Nicaragua, which is headed by the dictatorial Ortega family, who are close to Russia ([Xinhua](#) November 24; [PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[FMPRC\]](#), June 8; [Global Times](#), December 10, 2021). At the same time, Chinese economic statecraft in the form of loans and grants as well as cultural outreach through Confucius Institutes and academic exchanges has given Beijing the image of being a good partner in much of the region, including the Eastern Caribbean, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago.

With no colonial past in the Caribbean or earlier great power aspirations in the region, the good partner image has been paired with a narrative that presents China as offering an alternative development model to that

promoted by the U.S. and the West. Part of the narrative promoted by the CCP in the Caribbean is that, under its pragmatic leadership, China has maintained political stability, while pulling millions out of poverty in a relatively short period of time. Hence, China's purportedly, more successful model is portrayed as preferable to the supposedly chaotic nature of democratic politics in the U.S.

China's "good partner" narrative has been upheld by a steady stream of high-level government officials, including Presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, and the establishment of embassies in most countries in the region ([FMPRC](#), June 3, 2013). In the Eastern Caribbean, this is in contrast to the U.S., which manages diplomacy for the Eastern Caribbean out of the Embassy in Barbados. The proliferation of Confucius Institutes (to advance better understanding of Chinese history, language and culture as well as developing business and press contacts), and the provision of medical equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic, have also helped "tell the Chinese story well" ([Inter-American Dialogue](#), January 2022). Moreover, some in the region saw the U.S. as too slow to respond to Caribbean requests for help during the pandemic, something that has gained China goodwill.

4. Support China's Need to Win Hearts and Minds... and Votes at International Forums

The Caribbean comprises 16 independent countries. Although many of these countries are small, they have votes at the United Nations, the Organization of American States and other international forums. This makes the Caribbean important in China's effort to create its own world order and make certain its narrative of being the future is upheld.

The 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2020 brought forward the issue of votes in international forums. In June 2020, Beijing enacted new legislation on Hong Kong security without input from the government of Hong Kong or the city's population. The main thrust of the new law was to crush democratic protests and more tightly weave the city into mainland control. The law was brought up for a vote of criticism at the UN council, pushed by the West.

For China, such a vote could not be lost; such a counter-narrative could not be allowed to gain ascendancy in any international forum. China's position was defended by Cuba, whose authoritarian government is a clear ally. The Chinese-Cuban position was that the Hong Kong Security Bill was an internal affair not open to external sanction ([CGTN](#), July 1, 2020). Among the 53 countries voting in favor of the Chinese government position were Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Suriname, putting these parliamentary democracies in the same ranks as authoritarian regimes such as North Korea and Syria. China won the vote 53 to 27. Beijing repeated this performance this fall, when it managed to block debate on human rights abuses in Xinjiang in a narrow vote. Among the 19 countries that voted in favor of blocking debate were Cuba and Venezuela ([China Digital Times](#), October 19).

What Comes Next?

U.S.-China geopolitical competition in the Caribbean is not likely to abate. Indeed, it is likely to increase as Chinese leadership perceives itself locked in a global struggle with the U.S. over which country will be the dominant hegemonic power. China will continue its push into the region economically through its companies

and banks, trade and investment, while further trimming Taiwan's diplomatic recognition remains a top priority for Beijing vis-à-vis the Caribbean.

Despite considerable headwinds to the global economy, the Chinese footprint appears to be expanding. It remains an active buyer of oil from Venezuela, a major investor in Guyana's oil industry (through CNOOC's consortium with ExxonMobil and Hess) and a large purchaser of Trinidadian LNG ([Guyana Chronicle](#), October 15). China also remains active in the mining sector: in 2020, Zijin Mining acquired Guyana Goldfields (from its Canadian owners) and in October the same company bought Canada's IAMGOLD's Suriname operation, Rosebel Gold Mines ([Zijin Mining](#), October 20). Zijin is one of China's major gold mining companies, but is also active in copper, lead and zinc, iron and silver production, some of which are important in renewable energy development.

Chinese technology companies are also active in the Caribbean, despite U.S. efforts to discourage Caribbean countries from allowing Chinese companies ZTE and Huawei to supply key services and hardware for the digitalization of local economies. In October 2022, it was announced Huawei will establish a new office complex in Kingston, Jamaica, which will be 9,000 square feet and provide jobs for around 300 people ([Jamaica Observer](#), October 21). Prime Minister Andrew Holness attended the opening ceremony along with Huawei's head of Latin American operations and the PRC Ambassador to Jamaica. The good partner narrative was evident, with Jamaica's leader stating, "Huawei provides support to customers both locally and regionally and has continued to support the government and our economy in our ongoing quest to digitize Jamaica" ([The Gleaner](#), October 25). Huawei had also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the University of West Indies-St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago to allow the university's students and staff to participate in the Chinese company's talent development program ([Trinidad Express](#), July 27).

Caribbean Countries Seek to Leverage U.S.-China Rivalry

Although most Caribbean countries will remain friendly with the U.S. and regard it as the major regional power, with geography and migration playing a role in this, some countries will use the rivalry to extract benefits from either or both of the powers. Caribbean countries also have their own national interests, which in most cases pertain to their efforts to develop climate change-related infrastructure.

Another increasingly evident factor outside the U.S. and the West is that much of the Global South does not want to be drawn into any type of new Cold War. This was evident when the West imposed sanctions on Russia in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine, with two-thirds of the world's population living in countries where the government has declined to condemn Russia's invasion, either by adopting a position of neutrality or actually opposing expressions of condemnation ([Wilson Center](#), May 10).

While Caribbean countries have generally been open to engagement with China, they were quick to take strong positions on Russia following its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Considering that Russia has little trade with the Caribbean, the main action by governments in Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, St. Lucia and Dominica came from halting applications by Russians to their Citizenship by Investment Programs (CIPs) ([IMI](#), March 5). They were also articulate in their condemnation of Russian aggression at the United Nations, voting to condemn the invasion.

But China still looms larger in Caribbean affairs than Russia. This became evident with Barbados, when, in November 2021, the island-state ended its relationship with the British monarchy. The British press was highly critical of Barbados, with some in the U.K. blaming China for seeking to bring the Caribbean island-state under its sway. This view was resented in Barbados. While it is true that Barbados has seen growing Chinese investment in roads, homes, sewers and a hotel, it does not mean that Barbados is suddenly a Chinese dependent ([Investment Monitor](#), January 11). In response to claims that Barbados was trading one empire for another, Prime Minister Mia Mottley stated: “For you to focus on China in the Caribbean without recognizing the role that China is playing in Europe or the North Atlantic countries is a bit disingenuous, and really reflects that we are seen as pawns, regrettably, rather than a country with equal capacity to determine our activity” ([Kawasachun News](#), August 8, 2021).

One of the major challenges for the U.S. is to create a coherent Caribbean policy. Indeed, it can be argued that China’s becoming the Caribbean’s significant other has been helped by Washington’s relative disinterest in the region. A central component of any coherent U.S. response to China in the Caribbean is for Washington to reconsider its own approach to economic statecraft. As U.S. government finances face many demands, most recently helping facilitate oil and gas shipments to Europe and rebuilding infrastructure, funding for Caribbean infrastructure projects continues to be guided to the Inter-American Development Bank or World Bank. This is complicated by the status of most Caribbean countries as middle-income economies. As a result, they have less advantageous borrowing terms than poorer countries, despite high levels of debt, squeezed fiscal situations and limited access to international bond markets.

Moreover, the ongoing U.S. mantra to its neighbors of discouraging doing business with China or accepting its loans (the debt-trap diplomacy argument) has rubbed many Caribbean leaders the wrong way. Most Caribbean countries are keenly aware that closer relations with China are not appreciated in Washington; however, the U.S. approach has often had the appearance of the U.S. talking down to Caribbean countries, not to mention a willful ignorance of Caribbean security needs, which are increasingly defined in terms of sustainability and resiliency.

The Biden administration is seeking to give more attention to Caribbean concerns. After considerable pressure from Caribbean leaders, the U.S. leader did meet with several of his counterparts at the 2022 Los Angeles Summit of the Americas. Moreover, Caribbean concerns, such as de-risking and climate change, are getting greater attention. However, the U.S. still lacks a clear, overarching strategy to deal with China’s expanding role in the Caribbean. Unlike China, the U.S. cannot coerce its companies and banks into achieving foreign policy objectives. Nevertheless, U.S. policy towards the Caribbean would benefit from an overarching concept to tie together very disparate policy challenges encompassing the chaos in Haiti, a brittle authoritarian regime in Cuba, meeting energy demands throughout much of the region, contending with violent drug-trafficking operations, and managing climate change risk. Of course, understanding the intersection of China’s growing regional influence and these regional challenges will be an important part of any such strategy.

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Notes

[1] There has been speculation that rare earth metals might be found in Jamaica and Guyana, though no major finds have been announced. <https://dpi.gov.gy/mining-of-rare-earth-metals-boosting-economy/>.
<https://jis.gov.jm/large-deposits-of-rare-earth-elements/>.

China-Pakistan Relations: The “All-Weather” Partnership Navigates Stormy Times

Syed Fazl-e-Haider



(Image: The Chinese and Pakistani side hold talks during PM Shehbaz Sharif's visit, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

In a joint statement issued during Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's two-day visit to China in November, Beijing reiterated that relations with Islamabad will always be given the highest priority, reaffirming its support for Pakistan's sovereignty, territorial integrity, security and development ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China \[FMPRC\]](#), November 2). The Chinese leadership also expressed appreciation for PM Sharif's long-standing dedication to the China-Pakistan friendship ([Dawn](#), November 3). On the other side, Pakistan emphasized that the bilateral relationship is the cornerstone of its foreign policy and expressed its commitment to the One-China policy and support on the issues of Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet. The two sides exchanged views on the state of their partnership as well as the regional situation and international political landscape. Both sides agreed on the “importance of the China-Pakistan All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership amidst the emerging global challenges,” said the joint statement ([Express Tribune](#), November 2). Closing out the year on this positive note indicates probable further growth in bilateral ties in 2023 and beyond as both sides seek to manage intersecting global and domestic challenges.

'Regime Change' in Islamabad and China-Pakistan Relations in 2022

Pakistan has experienced tremendous political upheaval this year, due to the removal of PM Imran Khan's government by parliament in an April no-confidence vote. Following the ouster of the Khan government, a new coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif assumed office ([Dawn](#), April 11). China kept a close eye on developments during the no-confidence vote against former Prime Minister Khan. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said, "China is committed to non-interference policy, adding that as an all-weather strategic cooperative partner and friendly neighbor of Pakistan, it is our sincere hope that all parties in Pakistan will stay united and uphold the major interests of the country's developments and stability" ([Geo TV](#), April 1). Khan declared that his ouster was the result of a "foreign conspiracy" due to his pursuit of an independent foreign policy ([China Brief](#), April 8). In accusing the U.S. of seeking to orchestrate his removal from office, he claimed that foreign funding was being used to produce regime change in Islamabad and blamed the leadership of the main opposition parties for being part of this foreign conspiracy ([Express Tribune](#), April 1).

PRC media has also framed Pakistan as a victim of U.S. political meddling to prevent Islamabad from tilting toward Beijing, as part of a broader effort by Washington to contain China's global rise. According to an editorial in the *Global Times*: "Washington has failed in its attempts to rope in Khan, so it is possible it now has meddled in Pakistan's politics to topple the current government." Moreover, the article contends that the Western countries —particularly the U.S.—do not want "to see Khan remain in power since he has gotten tougher on them" ([Global Times](#), April 6).

China-Pakistan Relations in a Shifting International Context

China and Pakistan have sought to keep relations on a positive trajectory over the course of a year, which has been defined by international, regional and domestic challenges for both parties. For example, in March, immediately following the Russia invasion of Ukraine, Foreign Minister Wang Yi spelled out China's perceptions on currently changing geopolitical realities to his then counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi. Wang reassured Pakistan of China's support, stating that "We must not allow the return of the Cold War mentality or bloc confrontation in Asia, and must not allow small and medium-sized countries in the region to become tools or even victims of the major power games... no matter how the international situation changes, China will continue to view and promote China-Pakistan relations from a strategic and long-term perspective, and will, as always, support Pakistan in safeguarding its national sovereignty, territorial integrity and national dignity. "We will be Pakistan's most reliable partner and staunchest supporter," added Wang ([Express Tribune](#), April 1).

On February 4, Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan attended the opening ceremony of 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing in order to show solidarity with China amidst several Western countries' boycott of the games due to human rights concerns, including the repression of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang ([FMPRC](#), February 6). Khan's attendance at the opening ceremony of the Olympics was highly appreciated by Beijing. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian said, "We highly appreciate Prime Minister Imran Khan's attendance of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Games... [t]his once again shows that the ironclad friendship between China and Pakistan is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and is supported by the two peoples" ([Express Tribune](#), February 9).

Military ties are the mainstay of the China-Pakistan strategic partnership. The highest body for bilateral military cooperation is the Pakistan-China Joint Military Cooperation Committee (PCJMCC). In June, a high-powered Pakistani military delegation visited China amid rising tensions between China and the West. Both sides agreed to further strengthen military ties and deepen their strategic partnership in a challenging global environment. The high-level military interaction also came at a time when Pakistan was also under pressure from the West to strongly condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine ([Express Tribune](#), June 12).

A Revitalized CPEC?

In early November, PM Shehbaz Sharif made his first visit to Beijing since assuming office in April, meeting with top PRC leaders including President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang ([FMPRC](#), November 2). The visit not only sought to revitalize the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as a key program of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but also aimed to give a boost to CPEC's potential extension into Afghanistan ([Express Tribune](#), November 2).

Sharif's visit to China was mainly focused on seeking to revive CPEC, which had faced mounting challenges under the previous Khan government ([China Brief](#), July 15). Although 28 projects worth \$18.8 billion have so far been completed under CPEC over the past seven years, other projects worth \$34 billion are in different phases of execution or planning. The \$10 billion railway project, the Karachi Circular Railway, and energy generation projects worth \$18.5 billion encountered delays under the former Khan government ([Dawn](#), October 29). The current government has criticized Khan's administration for not initiating even a single new CPEC scheme during its four-year tenure, with several projects suspended due to concerns on the Chinese side ([The News](#), November 22). However, Sharif's visit to Beijing appears to have elicited renewed enthusiasm for CPEC with China committing to implement a \$10 billion railway project, the Karachi Circular Railway and energy generation schemes worth \$18.5 billion ([Express Tribune](#), November 2).

Conclusion

Despite a difficult year, China and Pakistan have largely aligned on international politics. Whether it is the Russia-Ukraine conflict or the backlash against China for its human rights record in Xinjiang, both countries have supported each other. As a result, the "all weather" China-Pakistan friendship looks set to continue in 2023 and beyond.

China strictly upheld the policy of non-interference in Pakistan's internal politics even during the April political crisis in Islamabad that led to Khan's ouster. As the biggest foreign investor in the country, China has evinced concerns over political instability and uncertainty, but has avoided the temptation to play political favorites in Pakistani politics.

Moreover, China maintains strong ties with Pakistan's powerful military establishment, which is responsible for the security of CPEC and other Chinese interests. For Beijing, a politically stable and economically strong Pakistan guarantees the security and expansion of Chinese interests within and beyond South Asia. China sees strategically located Pakistan as the key to increasing its regional influence. It also militarily strengthens and politically backs Pakistan to counter India, which has increasingly aligned with the U.S. against China.

Pakistan looks toward China in times of global upheaval and toes the Chinese line on many international issues, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Both China and Pakistan have learned to accommodate each other on many international issues. For instance, Pakistan's frontline role in the U.S.-led war on terror did not affect its all-weather friendship with China. The human rights abuses in the Muslim majority Xinjiang region have hitherto not generated tension between China and Pakistan, with Islamabad even dismissing the recent UN report on Xinjiang. This pattern is emblematic of the current state of relations. Despite differences and occasional irritants, both sides' commitment to a close relationship suggests the "all-weather" strategic partnership will only grow deeper.

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