

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP DIPLOMACY: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, INSTRUMENTS, AND FIELDS OF APPLICATION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the People's Republic of China's (PRC) strategic partnership diplomacy, a central instrument of Chinese foreign policy since the 1990s. Because the concept of "strategic partnership" still lacks an internationally agreed definition, the study treats this conceptual ambiguity as its central problem, asking what conceptual foundations, institutional tools, and foreign-policy principles underlie China's strategic partnership diplomacy, and how this diplomacy relates to China's declared "core interests." Drawing on Chinese official statements and the international relations literature, the article traces the evolution of the concept from "comprehensive cooperation" toward "strategic partnership", analyzes the institutional mechanisms China has developed - joint committees, strategic dialogues, hotlines, and public-diplomacy programmes - and examines the China-Russia relationship as the most institutionalised case. The study further situates strategic partnership diplomacy within the Belt and Road Initiative and reviews critical debates about whether these instruments represent a revisionist challenge to the existing international order or a flexible, non-binding form of cooperation. The article concludes that strategic partnership diplomacy functions both as a rhetorical device and as an institutionalised foreign-policy practice closely tied to China's concerns over sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity.

Keywords: China, strategic partnership, foreign policy, Belt and Road Initiative, diplomacy.

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu maqolada Xitoy Xalq Respublikasining (XXR) 1990-yillardan beri Xitoy tashqi siyosatining markaziy vositalaridan biriga aylangan strategik hamkorlik diplomatiyasi tahlil qilinadi. "Strategik hamkorlik" tushunchasi xalqaro miqyosda kelishilgan yagona ta'rifga ega bo'lmagani sababli, tadqiqotning asosiy muammosi ushbu tushunchaviy noaniqlikdir: Xitoyning strategik hamkorlik diplomatiyasi qanday kontseptual asoslarga, institutsional vositalarga va tashqi siyosat tamoyillariga tayanadi hamda bu diplomatiya Xitoyning e'lon qilingan "asosiy manfaatlari" bilan qanday bog'liq? Xitoy rasmiy hujjatlari va xalqaro munosabatlar adabiyotiga tayangan holda, maqolada tushunchaning "keng qamrovli hamkorlik"dan "strategik hamkorlik"ka qarab evolyutsiyasi, Xitoy tomonidan ishlab chiqilgan qo'shma qo'mitalar, strategik muloqotlar, to'g'ridan-to'g'ri aloqa liniyalari va ommaviy diplomatiya kabi institutsional mexanizmlar hamda eng institutsionallashtirilgan misol sifatida Xitoy-Rossiya munosabatlari ko'rib chiqiladi. Tadqiqot, shuningdek, strategik hamkorlik diplomatiyasini "Bir kamar, bir yo'l" tashabbusi konteksti bilan bog'laydi

va ushbu vositalarning mavjud xalqaro tartibga qarshi revizionistik tahdid ekanligi yoki moslashuvchan, majburiy bo'lmagan hamkorlik shakli ekanligi haqidagi tanqidiy munozaralarni ko'rib chiqadi. Maqola, strategik hamkorlik diplomatiyasi Xitoyning suverenitet, xavfsizlik va hududiy yaxlitlik manfaatlari bilan chambarchas bog'liq bo'lgan ham ritorik, ham institutsionallashtirilgan tashqi siyosat amaliyoti sifatida faoliyat yuritishi xulosasiga keladi.

Kalit so'zlar: Xitoy, strategik hamkorlik, tashqi siyosat, Bir kamar - bir yo'l tashabbusi, diplomatiya.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье рассматривается дипломатия стратегического партнёрства Китайской Народной Республики (КНР), являющаяся одним из центральных инструментов внешней политики Китая начиная с 1990-х годов. Поскольку понятие «стратегическое партнёрство» до сих пор не имеет единого, согласованного на международном уровне определения, основной проблемой исследования выступает именно эта концептуальная неопределённость: на каких концептуальных основах, институциональных инструментах и принципах внешней политики строится дипломатия стратегического партнёрства Китая и как она соотносится с провозглашёнными «коренными интересами» КНР? Опираясь на официальные заявления китайского руководства и литературу по международным отношениям, статья прослеживает эволюцию понятия от «всестороннего сотрудничества» к «стратегическому партнёрству», анализирует институциональные механизмы, разработанные Китаем — совместные комитеты, стратегические диалоги, линии прямой связи и программы публичной дипломатии, — а также рассматривает китайско-российские отношения как наиболее институционализированный пример подобного партнёрства. Исследование также помещает дипломатию стратегического партнёрства в контекст инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» и анализирует критические дискуссии о том, представляют ли эти инструменты ревизионистский вызов существующему международному порядку или являются гибкой, не имеющей обязывающего характера формой сотрудничества. В заключение утверждается, что дипломатия стратегического партнёрства функционирует одновременно как риторический приём и как институционализированная внешнеполитическая практика, тесно связанная с интересами суверенитета, безопасности и территориальной целостности Китая.

Ключевые слова: Китай, стратегическое партнёрство, внешняя политика, инициатива «Один пояс, один путь», дипломатия.

INTRODUCTION

Following the end of the Cold War, alongside the traditional alliance-based understanding of security, a new diplomatic instrument emerged in the international system that allowed inter-state relations to be institutionalised in more flexible and

multidimensional forms: the strategic partnership. Since the 1990s in particular, this concept has occupied a central place in the foreign-policy practice of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and has become one of the principal instruments through which Beijing manages the process of globalisation in accordance with its own interests¹. China's network of strategic partnerships has continuously expanded from its first examples in the 1990s to the present day, coming to encompass a wide spectrum ranging from great powers to developing countries, and from regional organisations to supranational structures². This expansion is notable in that it demonstrates China's capacity to establish flexible forms of cooperation not only with great powers, but also with states at different levels of development and under different political regimes. The concept of strategic partnership still lacks a single, agreed-upon definition in the international relations literature. Different states use this concept to describe widely divergent forms of cooperation, which weakens its analytical clarity³. The situation is even more complex in China's case: alongside the term "strategic partnership", Beijing has produced numerous sub-categories such as "comprehensive strategic cooperation", "energy strategic partnership", and "strategic friendly relations"; this diversity makes it difficult to grasp the concept coherently at both the academic and political levels⁴. The problem is not merely terminological but also functional: unless the distinction between strategic partnerships and alliances, their degree of bindingness, and their relationship to China's "core interests" are clearly established, the real weight of this diplomatic instrument within Chinese foreign policy cannot be adequately understood. The purpose of this study is to provide a holistic examination of the PRC's strategic partnership diplomacy through its conceptual framework, institutional instruments, and concrete cases of application - particularly the China-Russia relationship and the Belt and Road Initiative. The study aims to demonstrate that, for China, strategic partnership is not merely a symbolic discourse but a calculated and institutionalised foreign-policy instrument geared toward securing national interests. The significance of the topic becomes apparent at two levels. First, in the process of China's rise as a global power, strategic partnerships constitute concrete evidence of a search for a more flexible and multilateral world order distinct from the traditional alliance system⁵. Second, the fact that many states, including Turkey, have established strategic partnerships or similar statuses with China makes understanding the logic of this diplomacy a practical necessity for the management of bilateral relations as well⁶. Within this framework, the study's central research question can be formulated as follows: On what conceptual foundations, institutional instruments, and foreign-policy

¹Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, "China's Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: Engaging with a Changing World", ESPO Working Paper, No. 8, July 2014, p. 3.

²Georg Strüver, "China's Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests or Ideology", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2017, pp. 32-40.

³Feng and Huang, op. cit., p. 5.

⁴Feng and Huang, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

⁵Strüver, op. cit., pp. 60-63.

⁶Turkish Foreign Policy Research Center (TUDPAM), "The Recently Developing Strategic Partnership between Turkey and the People's Republic of China", tudpam.org, accessed 11 August 2026.

principles does the PRC's strategic partnership diplomacy rest, and how does this diplomacy relate to China's "core interests"? Related sub-questions addressed throughout the study include: at which points does strategic partnership diverge from comprehensive cooperation; what features characterise the China-Russia relationship as the most developed example of this model; and in what direction does the Belt and Road Initiative transform the strategic partnership network?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT IS A "STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP"?

In the context of the relations developing with the European Union in the early 2000s, China began to speak of two distinct types of partnership: "comprehensive cooperation" and "strategic partnership"⁷. Comprehensive cooperation refers to a broad form of relationship encompassing economic, scientific, technological, political, and cultural fields, which may be bilateral or multilateral and may be conducted by non-governmental as well as governmental actors. Strategic partnership, by contrast, carries a long-term and stable character; it denotes a type of relationship in which the parties have delineated a broad framework of cooperation and, being aware of this framework, possess the capacity to withstand certain events that may otherwise have a negative impact⁸.

In China's use of the concept, the phrase "mutual respect and trust" frequently comes to the fore⁹. As Georg Strüver has also emphasised, China's partnership diplomacy is more than a purely rhetorical gesture; it is a mechanism that measurably affects economic relations as well as the convergence of views on the international order¹⁰. For this reason, strategic partnerships do not merely confer a nominal title upon bilateral relations but also carry the potential to expand China's influence over international political outcomes¹¹.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL INSTRUMENTS

China's network of strategic partnerships has been built step by step since the 1990s; beginning in the mid-1990s, partnerships under various names were established with states such as Russia, South Korea, and India, and from the 2000s onward this network was expanded to cover Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe¹². The principle of "increasing mutual trust" forms a common ground across all of China's bilateral relations and functions as a preparatory stage that may eventually lead to the level of strategic partnership. In economically oriented relations, China tends to establish joint committees or dialogue mechanisms with its counterpart, while in military and political relations, strategic dialogue meetings and direct hotline

⁷Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, "China-EU Relations", <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zt/t101949.htm>, accessed 28 January 2021.

⁸Feng and Huang, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

⁹Feng and Huang, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁰Strüver, op. cit., p. 33.

¹¹Strüver, op. cit., p. 61.

¹²Feng and Huang, op. cit., pp. 3-4; Strüver, op. cit., pp. 40-45.

mechanisms have become an integral part of Chinese diplomacy¹³. At the level of public diplomacy, festivals, education programmes, and language institutes contribute to the institutionalisation of social and cultural relations¹⁴.

CASE STUDY: THE CHINA-RUSSIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The most developed application of China's strategic partnership mechanisms is its relationship with Russia. Within this framework, institutions have been established that bring heads of state and heads of government together on an annual basis: the "Regular Meetings Committee of Prime Ministers", the "Energy Negotiations Meeting", the "China-Russia Strategic Security Consultation", and the "China-Russia Friendship, Peace and Development Committee" are the principal such institutional structures¹⁵. Recent literature suggests that this relationship is characterised by pragmatic, interest-based partnership rather than an ideological alliance; that both parties seek to preserve their strategic autonomy while avoiding direct confrontation with the United States; and that the relationship can therefore be better explained through the concepts of "strategic ambiguity" and "limited coordination" rather than as an institutionalised alliance.

CORE INTERESTS AND THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP DIPLOMACY

China's strategic partnership diplomacy rests on a logic that combines both defensive and assertive elements. Among the "core interests" articulated in China's official discourse are state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, and national reunification¹⁶. Within this framework, relations with numerous states, foremost the United States, acquire strategic importance around the "One China Policy". While the principles of "good-neighbourliness and friendship" are invoked to reduce threats to regional integrity, joint strategic declarations developed with Central Asian states include commitments not to join any military alliance directed against either party and not to allow their territories to be used by third states for such purposes¹⁷. This, as in the case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, points to a diplomatic practice in which economic interdependence and security concerns are closely intertwined¹⁸.

A similar pattern is observed in China's relations with developing countries; Beijing positions the establishment of strategic partnerships with states seeking a multipolar international order as one of the cornerstones of its major-country

¹³Feng and Huang, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

¹⁴Feng and Huang, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

¹⁵Arzu Çetinkaya, "The Structural Dynamics of the Russia-China Strategic Partnership: Asymmetry, Uncertainty and the Alliance Debate", *Anadolu University Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2026, pp. 489-510.

¹⁶Information Office of the State Council of China, *China's Peaceful Development*, 2011, http://english.gov.cn/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354.htm, accessed 28 January 2021.

¹⁷Iram Khalid and Manzoor Khan Afridi, "Interdependence Politics: The Case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor", *Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, July-December 2016, pp. 659-671.

¹⁸Khalid and Afridi, op. cit., pp. 665-667.

diplomacy¹⁹. In this respect, the strategic partnership network is no longer confined to great powers alone but has become part of a multilayered foreign-policy architecture that is also integrated with large-scale projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF CHINESE DIPLOMACY

The PRC's strategic partnership diplomacy displays a number of distinctive features. Foremost among these are the importance attached to formality, the central role of head-of-state-level relations, and the incorporation of societal dynamics into foreign policy. It has been argued that the fact that China's own name means "central state" (Zhongguo) leaves traces of a certain self-centred approach in its diplomacy as well; within this framework, China tends to evaluate regional and global actors according to their degree of closeness to itself²⁰. This, however, does not eliminate China's effort to avoid discourse and behaviour that could be equated with imperialism. Another defining feature of Chinese diplomacy can be described as "strategic patience"; Beijing consistently upholds the principles of multipolarity, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for diverse development models.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP DIPLOMACY

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, is another large-scale foreign-policy instrument closely intertwined with China's strategic partnership diplomacy. Participation in the BRI takes place through memoranda of understanding signed between states and China, and these documents do not impose directly binding obligations on the parties; this low-cost model of participation facilitates states' decisions to join the initiative²¹. The same research shows that states with democratic governance tend to be more cautious about joining the BRI, because they perceive the political cost of participating in a China-led initiative as higher. This finding is significant in that it shows strategic partnership status to be related not only to economic factors but also to variables such as regime type and political affinity. The infrastructure, energy, and transport projects built within the BRI framework are concentrated in a geography that overlaps considerably with China's strategic partnership network, thereby filling these partnerships with concrete economic content²². In this sense, the Belt and Road Initiative functions as an implementation mechanism that translates the symbolic dimension of strategic partnership diplomacy into concrete investment and financing relations; the two mechanisms mutually reinforce one another.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT AND DISCUSSION

China's strategic partnership and Belt and Road diplomacy have not been received uncontroversially in the literature. One group of scholars argues that these

¹⁹Özlem Zerrin Keyvan, "The Transformation of Chinese Foreign Policy from the Beginning to the Present: Major Country Diplomacy", *Liberal Düşünce Dergisi*, Year 27, No. 106, Spring 2022, pp. 141-153.

²⁰Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, trans. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 65.

²¹Eleanor Atkins, M. Taylor Fravel, Raymond Wang, Nick Ackert and Sihao Huang, "Two Paths: Why States Join or Avoid China's Belt and Road Initiative", *Global Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2023, pp. 1-14.

²²Keyvan, op. cit., pp. 160-165.

instruments position China as a revisionist actor challenging the traditionally Western-centred international order and serve the pursuit of a "China-centric world order"²³. According to this critical approach, the relations of economic dependency created through infrastructure investment carry the potential to narrow the room for manoeuvre of recipient states. By contrast, and as in the case of the China-Russia relationship, other scholars approach the revisionist reading with caution, emphasising that strategic partnerships are flexible arrangements characterised by "strategic ambiguity" that preserve the autonomy of the parties rather than constituting institutionalised alliances²⁴. The tension between these two approaches shows that the academic debate over how to conceptualise strategic partnership diplomacy remains open, and that further empirical and comparative research on the subject is needed.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the PRC's strategic partnership diplomacy in its conceptual, institutional, and applied dimensions. The findings indicate that strategic partnership is, for China, both a discursive and a functional instrument, resting - unlike comprehensive cooperation - on an axis of long-term stability and mutual trust. The China-Russia case shows how this diplomacy is made concrete through institutionalised committees and regular summits, while the examples of Central Asia and the One China Policy demonstrate the extent to which strategic partnership is intertwined with China's sovereignty and security concerns. The connection with the Belt and Road Initiative, in turn, reveals how the strategic partnership network is carried from the discursive level to concrete economic investment. In conclusion, strategic partnership diplomacy can be regarded as the principal foreign-policy instrument through which China institutionalises its vision of world order - on the basis of multipolarity, mutual respect, and non-interference in internal affairs. Within this framework, the answer to the research question is that strategic partnership functions for China both as a discourse and as a foreign-policy practice supported by concrete institutional mechanisms, and that this practice operates in direct connection with the goal of protecting China's core interests - sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. Nevertheless, the question of whether strategic partnerships transform China into a revisionist actor or instead represent a flexible, autonomy-preserving form of cooperation remains contested in the literature. For future research, quantitative comparative analyses of the concrete economic and security outcomes of strategic partnerships are recommended.

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²³Iat Ara Jasmin, Imran Hosen and Ananda Kumar Biswas, "Geopolitical Chessboard: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Shifting Power Dynamics", *Discover Global Society*, 2025.

²⁴Çetinkaya, op. cit., pp. 495-498.

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