Does Chinaâ??s Growing Security Outreach Matter? Tracing Implications for Irregular Warfare and U.S. Security Cooperation

Description

Editorâ??s Note: This article highlights key findings from a recent piece the authors published in MITâ??s International Security Journal, titled â??Security without Exclusivity: Hybrid Alignment in the Indo-Pacificâ?•. The authors examine how states increasingly engage with both the United States and China for different forms of security cooperationâ??what they term â??security hybridization.â?• This evolving trend has critical implications for irregular warfare and U.S. security force assistance efforts. The authors will further explore these ideas in an upcoming episode of the Irregular Warfare Initiative podcast later this month.

Conventional wisdom has long viewed Asia, and to some extent the world, as functionally divided between the United States as the major security provider and China as the no-strings-attached economic partner. Recently, however, China has emerged as a global security provider to an increasing number of foreign governments. These states have evolving security relationships with both Washington and Beijing: many now seek security cooperation with both powers at once, but the type of assistance they obtain from each is different.

We term this emerging dynamic â??security hybridizationâ?• and explore its effects in a recent article published in the journal *International Security.* Increased security hybridization has important implications for policymakers, strategists, and practitioners, especially those focused on irregular warfare and security force assistance.

Beijing and Washington each provide security assistance that aligns with how they understand and address their own national security objectives. Generally, the United States prioritizes military power in pursuit of regional security. In contrast, China relies on law enforcement and internal security agencies to uphold internal regime security. U.S. partnerships often focus on deterring and combating external threats, while Chinaâ??s security relationships center on managing internal instability and controlling domestic challenges to a countryâ??s political order and leadership. While this is a phenomenon in grayscale rather than in black and white â?? the PLA conducts traditional military diplomacy and cooperation and the United States offers foreign internal defense and law enforcement capacity-building assistance â?? the distinction remains, and can meaningfully highlight differences in

relationship emphasis and resource allocation.

A growing number of countries simultaneously pursue defense cooperation with the U.S. and internal security cooperation with China. They selectively enlist two different security partners to address different needs. Neither China nor the U.S. demands exclusivity across the spectrum of internal to external security cooperation, so partners are not forced to chooseâ??at least not yet.

A Case of Security Hybridization: Vietnam

Vietnam is a prominent example of security hybridization. As we document in our*International Security* article, the United States has worked assiduously over consecutive administrations to expand its defense relationship with Vietnam. The United States has sought to work with the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense and the Vietnamese Coast Guard, in particular, to counter Chinese activities in the South China Sea.

At the same time, however, Vietnamâ??s internal security apparatusâ??led until recently by TÃ´ LÃ¢m, who has since become Vietnamâ??s leader and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnamâ??has actively increased cooperation with China as well. In contrast to American assistance, Beijingâ??s security cooperation with Hanoi focuses on combating the threat of so-called â??color revolutionsâ?• and protecting regime security to â??keep the red flag of socialism flying.â?•

Chinaâ??s internal security outreach to and interaction with Vietnam, often conducted at the ministerial level, far surpasses Washingtonâ??s interaction with Hanoi in both seniority and frequency. During Xi Jinpingâ??s most recent state visit to Vietnam in April 2025 (his fourth since 2013), TÃ´ LÃ¢m reiterated Hanoiâ??s interests in strengthening defense and security ties with Beijing despite ongoing tensions in the South China Sea; security cooperation was also one of the focal areas of Xiâ??s previous state visit, in December 2023. Beyond Vietnam, we observe similar interactions in corners of the world from Hungary to the Pacific Islands to the Persian Gulf.

Why Policymakers Should Care: Five Key Reasons

Why should policymakers, strategists, and practitioners working on irregular warfare and security force assistance care about these dynamics? We identify at least five reasons.

First, it is important to understand the landscape of asymmetric security competition in which the United States and China are now engaged, which involves not only military diplomacy through the Peopleâ??s Liberation Army and Central Military Commissionâ??s Office of International Military

Cooperation, but non-military security actors such as the Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of State Security, Central Political-Legal Commission, and Peopleâ??s Armed Police. Chinaâ??s provision of internal security assistance augments its presence, partnerships, and influence across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. This assistance provides something many leaders care deeply about: tools to secure their own political survival and their hold on power. Overlooking Chinaâ??s non-military security outreach in places like Vietnam could lead Washington to significantly overestimate its alignment with Hanoi and its leverage in the bilateral relationship.

Second, China is pursuing a global footprint that reflects its own conceptions of security. Observers and strategists would be mistaken to expect China to create relationships or a presence abroad that mirror that of the United States. Instead, efforts like Xi Jinpingâ??s Global Security Initiative envision the kind of footprint that presents an *asymmetric* security challenge to the United States. That challenge extends beyond the military balance to encompass other forms of security presence, assistance, architecture, and influence. The United States must be prepared to compete not only in regional defense and securityâ??where it has traditionally exercised its strongest advantageâ??but also across this broader range of domains.

Third, Chinaâ??s conception of security affects *how* Beijing defines and seeks to counter the threat posed by the United States. As both a democracy and the hegemonic security provider, the United States not only projects global military power, but also has historically influenced the normative contours of the rules-based international order. A high degree of linkage with powerful democracies like the U.S. tends to promote democratization â?? meaning that greater U.S. involvement with security recipients can generate pressure for expanded political freedom and liberalization of governing institutions. Chinaâ??s rhetoric, however, portrays these activities as promoting â??color revolutionsâ?• by foreign-backed â??black handsâ?• who seek to subvert and destabilize authoritarian rule, and Beijing offers assistance to counter those risks. (We are aware that the history of American security assistance and its effect on democracy is a complicated one, but understanding how China views this association is crucial, as it highlights a risk that may loom larger in the minds of Chinese leaders than is often recognized in the West.)

Linkage may be seen, particularly by Americaâ??s non-democratic security partners, as amplifying internal security risks â?? which could in turn generate increased demand for the kind of internal/regime security assistance that China provides. Regimes that fear political instability in a global environment shaped by U.S. hegemony may find in China a newly powerful partner who shares their threat perceptions, and can provide complementary and counterbalancing security goods that shore up authoritarian rule. This dynamic can create threat perception feedback loops that intensify and accelerate security hybridization once it begins.

Fourth, howeverâ??and equally important to noteâ??there are weak states without autocratic ambitions that may also find Chinaâ??s domestic and non-traditional security assistance appealing. While these leaders may not aim to undermine democracy, they may also not see any alternative method, other than Chinaâ??s offerings, to strengthen the stateâ??s monopoly on violence within its territory to achieve greater public safety for citizens â?? a legitimate goal for democratically-elected leaders. But this group of countries may nonetheless be at risk of democratic erosion if proper institutional safeguards are not erected against risks such as insufficient oversight of surveillance programs or the transmission of policing norms at odds with democracy and civil liberties.

It will be important for policymakers in Washington to identify which countries pursue security assistance from China because their leaders seek to erode democratic constraints, versus those that seek Chinaâ??s assistance for more legitimate reasons. In the latter category, opposing Chinaâ??s security engagement without offering a comparable substitute is likely to be counterproductive, and American foreign policy will need to weigh the benefits of Chinese assistance to recipients that can be accomplished with appropriate safeguards versus the risks of enhanced Chinese influence in those places and the corresponding impact of that on American interests. Either way, the two categories require different solutions.

Fifth, the United Statesâ?? inability to demand exclusivity from its security partners implies important lessons for security cooperation and security force assistance. This is not the Cold War, in which Washington and Moscow each provided both internal and external security to client states on their respective sides of the Cold War divide. Today, China and the U.S. are each weaker at offering the kind of security assistance that the other excels at, making exclusivity difficult and allowing countries to pursue â??non-monogamousâ?• security relationships with both Washington and Beijing.

As a result, the United States military and others involved in security force assistance may find themselves providing funding, training, and support to a countryâ??s military, while China simultaneously provides support, equipment, and training to its domestic security services. This dynamic presents potential counterintelligence and operational security risks exacerbated by such parallel presence. It could also create a kind of counterbalancing among security forces that, in autocracies or other weakly institutionalized political systems, can heighten internal instability and increase coup risk. Finally, increasing security force overlap could amplify localized competition between China and the United States, and increase the risk of conflict or heightened tensions and prolonged irregular competition.

Navigating the Complexities of Hybrid Security Relationships

Tracking and studying the effects of different types of overlapping security cooperation and assistance will be important for understanding the risk of conflict in different places around the globe, including those that are strategically important to the United States. A growing number of states are pursuing cooperation with both the United States and China, and paying close attention to how each great power can help them manage domestic security challenges and external threats. The emerging dynamics of security hybridization cannot be ignored. Navigating these complexities should also inform how the United States plans for, resources, trains, and equips its security force assistance brigades, individual military advisors, foreign area officers, special operations forces, and others involved in security cooperation and security assistance.

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