

## EVOLVING PARADIGMS OF INTERNATIONAL ORDER: CHINESE CATEGORISATION OF FOREIGN RELATIONS

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses how the People's Republic of China has approached categorising relations with other countries and supranational and international organisations over the past decades. The study aims to consider the implications of this approach for conceptions of order. China's foreign policy framework has gradually shifted from a low-profile approach to a more assertive stance in response to international and domestic dynamics. As a consequence, there has been a more proactive engagement with the global order. Against the backdrop of China's evolving role in world politics, a new multifaceted approach to categorising foreign relations is emerging. While terms such as "all-weather" and "no limits" partnership and "iron-clad" friendship and brotherhood have been increasingly used in English language media to describe China's bilateral relations with different countries, there is a lack of understanding of the significance of these notions and little academic scholarship on their overall context. Through a critical lens of geopolitical competition for relational legitimation and normative power, this study aims to take stock of the linguistic, cultural, and political aspects of the Chinese categorisation of foreign relations, primarily partnerships, using the case of ties with Europe as an example. A comprehensive overview of the terms used is given based on official documents and statements, media texts, and previous research, including indications of differences in use and mutual connections. The study argues that Chinese partnerships are one element of a relational foreign policy approach conducive to sustainable bilateral ties. The given analysis is also discussed in the context of its theoretical implications in an attempt to provide a conceptual tool for comprehending the complexities of China's foreign policy and diplomatic strategies. A better understanding of the Chinese categorisation of foreign relations provides a nuanced perspective on the evolving paradigms of international. It also facilitates better navigating the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly multipolar world.

**Keywords:** China, foreign policy, partnership, order, bilateral relations.

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## THE EVOLVING FOREIGN POLICY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Since the start of this century, and especially in the past decade, there has been a shift in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) approach to foreign policy. Likely responding to international and domestic dynamics, the PRC has replaced its low-profile approach with an assertive stance that engages more proactively with global order. Against the backdrop of China's evolving role in world politics, a new multifaceted approach to the way the PRC categorises its relations with other countries and supranational and international organisations is emerging. The notions of "all-weather" and "no limits" partnership and "iron-clad" friendship and brotherhood have been increasingly used in English language media, but there is a lack of understanding of the significance of these terms and little academic scholarship on their overall context. This research aims to take stock of the Chinese<sup>1</sup> categorisation of foreign relations, analysing in depth the linguistic, cultural, and political aspects of ties with Europe as an example. In this section, the key aspects of the PRC's foreign policy relevant to this study are presented, followed by the methodological approach. The next section delineates, first, the Chinese approach to partnerships, including an overview of previous research, then an empirical analysis of the case of Europe, and, lastly, the difference between formal and informal categorisation, i.e., terms. Finally, the findings are discussed in the context of evolving paradigms of international order and the related challenges and opportunities in an increasingly multipolar world.

There have been several studies outlining the development of the PRC's foreign policy approach since 1949, aiming to provide insights into its history but also the key guiding factors and influences, especially foreign, that shaped it (see, e.g., Garver, 2015; Shambaugh, 2020; Zhang, 1998). These studies state that in the first decades after it was established, the PRC focused on ideology and (re)gaining international recognition. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the PRC adopted a more pragmatic. The main focus was on modernising the domestic economy with a policy of non-

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<sup>1</sup> Considering the complexity and polysemic nature of this term, it should be noted that it is used here to refer to a categorisation promoted by the PRC government but at the same time embedded in what is considered Chinese traditional thought on politics and society, rooted in ancient China.

interference on the foreign front. As China became more stable and developed, it gradually started exploring a new multifaceted approach to international relations, which became more pronounced as its economic and military power grew. The various aspects of foreign policy, which combine theories based on ancient Chinese approaches to politics and society with those rooted in the European academic tradition, began to take shape as a strategy, especially as the Scientific Outlook on Development approach developed under Hu Jintao from 2002 to 2012. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, this was further codified as a new school of thought and added in the preamble of the PRC's constitution in 2018 as the Xi Jinping "Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (NPC, 2018).

In the past decade, China has demonstrated this new, more assertive stance in international affairs through its global initiatives, primarily the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. However, there are also more recent initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), announced in 2021, which aims to support the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda; the Global Security Initiative (GSI), proposed in 2022 and aimed at building a sustainable global security infrastructure that promotes peace; and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), put forward in 2023 and focused on mutual learning and cultural exchange to foster the diversity of civilisations but also common values of humanity. The GDI, GSI, and GCI are yet to be implemented on a wider scale and researched, but there is a large body of scholarship on the BRI. It ranges from analyses that look into the logic of the BRI in the context of Xi Jinping's "Thought" (e.g., Liu, 2017; Wang, 2016), analyses researching it from the angle of political science (e.g., Leandro & Duarte, 2020) or international political economy (e.g., Li, 2018), to studies interpreting the BRI as part of China's ambition to expand its influence and promote its vision of regional order (e.g., Amineh, 2022; Rolland, 2017). The BRI is primarily an economic initiative, but it has been clear from its start that it is also closely connected with foreign policy. Through it, the PRC's proactive and multifaceted approach to international relations was crystallised—to maintain the national economy and safeguard national interests, China has become a global power, i.e., a major country in a multipolar world. A key element of this approach is partnerships, which are synergistically intertwined with Chinese initiatives such as the BRI (Li &

Vicente, 2020) and will be discussed in detail in the next section. Here, it should be noted that previous research has already stated that the term “partnership” is used in a general, non-specific sense in international relations overall—for alliances, economic cooperation, and even rivalries—but that some countries have defined specific meanings for the term in their foreign policies. These meanings differ around the globe (Li & Ye, 2019). However, while Chinese partnerships are specific and a key part of the so-called major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics that has evolved over the past decade, they can also be interpreted through a more general theoretical lens as outlined below.

To place the Chinese approach to foreign policy in a common framework that can be used to draw broader inferences, this study builds on previous work (Gledić, 2021) that advances Christian Reus-Smit’s theory on cultural diversity (2018). Reus-Smit’s theory deals with the role of culture in international relations and demonstrates how proactively managing cultural differences can contribute to order-building and the sustainability of established orders. A core concept of this theory is a diversity regime, which is the system of norms and practices defining and sustaining authorised forms of cultural difference, for example, recognised ethnic groups in a society. If this is applied to international relations, diversity regimes would be the systems that govern and reify the mutual relations between different entities (states, international organisations, etc.). A country can adopt a current, globally accepted mainstream approach to international relations or define its own diversity regime in its foreign policy approach. This paper argues that Chinese partnerships are a diversity regime governing foreign affairs. As such, if proactively managed as part of the PRC’s pragmatic engagement in multipolar geopolitics, they could be an enduring and sustainable new model of international relations.

This study examines previous research on Chinese partnerships, official documents and statements, and media texts. For the empirical analysis of the case of Europe, the main source is the Chinese-language website of the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which provides information on bilateral relations with countries and international organisations. All 46 entities listed under the region labelled Europe are included (45 states and one organisation, the European Union (EU)). The terms applied to partnerships are extracted primarily from the Chinese language (Mandarin, simplified

characters) versions of official documents. They are presented in the analysis and translated into English by the author in line with official or commonly used English translations where they exist, with adjustments in cases where these translations do not reflect nuances of the terms in Chinese. All terms are presented alongside the original Chinese language form. Within the context of overall bilateral relations, the main focus of the analysis is ties that can be considered part of the Chinese partnership diplomacy, as outlined in the next section.

### CHINESE PARTNERSHIPS

The first partnership the PRC established was with Brazil in 1993. Their number continued to grow, with several major leaps in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Li & Ye, 2019). Today, half of the countries with which the PRC has diplomatic relations are labelled partners, as well as several regions and regional and international organisations, such as ASEAN and the EU, totalling more than 100 partnerships (Xiang, 2023). Their importance was recognised in the English language scholarship with the increased coordination between China and Russia (Wilkins, 2008) and China, India, and Russia (Nadkarni, 2010) in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After they became a central part of the PRC's diplomacy under Xi Jinping, there has been increasing scholarly (e.g., Feng & Huang, 2014; Li & Ye, 2019; Men & Liu, 2015; Strüver, 2017; Yue, 2018) and journalistic (BBC CN, 2023; Chen, 2024) interest. While previous studies provide valuable insights into the nature of the PRC's approach to partnerships, this study addresses several shortcomings. Firstly, instead of looking only at the PRC's partnership network or focusing only on strategic partnerships, this research takes an in-depth view of bilateral relations within one region, analysing partnerships in the context of overall cooperation and contacts. Secondly, the importance of language is stressed in the analysis, including considering the verbs used in agreements related to partnership and related labels given to bilateral relations. Most importantly, this study takes an ontologically different perspective and argues that there is currently no general hierarchical framework of the Chinese partnership network but that it is part of a relational approach to bilateral relations, i.e., a diversity regime. This section first presents the main characteristics of the PRC's approach to partnerships in the past decade and then gives the empirical analysis of the case of Europe.

### Regulating the approach

After following a policy of non-alignment since the 1950s, i.e., not being formally aligned with or against any major power bloc, in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the PRC started the diplomatic practice of building partnerships, as mentioned above. Chinese partnerships have become part of the PRC's more assertive foreign policy approach, a characteristic of diplomacy under Xi Jinping. They are built on the five principles outlined in the PRC's constitution: "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" (NPC, 2018), and were mentioned as a diplomatic strategy as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in 2012. Promoting friendly and partner relations with its neighbours had been a familiar element of the PRC's foreign policy, but in his report, when talking about international relations in general, Hu Jintao notes that "countries should establish a new type of global development partnership that is more equitable and balanced, stick together in times of difficulty, both share rights and shoulder obligations, and boost the common interests of mankind" (Hu, 2012). This was further echoed by Xi Jinping at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in 2014, when he "urged China to make more friends under the principle of non-alignment, so as to build a global network of partnerships" (SCIO, 2020). At the next National Congress in 2017, he continued building on this, elaborating the notion of a community with a shared future for mankind, which should be built with "a new approach to developing state-to-state relations with communication, not confrontation, and with partnership, not alliance" (Xi, 2017: 53). He further noted that "China has actively developed global partnerships and expanded the convergence of interests with other countries" and will "promote coordination and cooperation with other major countries and work to build a framework for major country relations featuring overall stability and balanced development" (Ibid.). Finally, at the latest National Congress in 2022, Xi reported that the PRC has "worked actively to build a global network of partnerships" and "is committed to promoting a new type of international relations, deepening and expanding global partnerships based on equality, openness, and cooperation, and broadening the convergence of interests with other countries" (Xi, 2022). He also mentioned the

principles for building relationships, slightly amended from the report at the previous National Congress (emphasised by the author in *italics*): with major countries (“*peaceful coexistence*, overall stability, and balanced development”), China’s neighbours (“amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness”), and developing countries (“sincerity, real results, affinity, and good faith”) (Ibid.).

The outlined approach to partnership has been mentioned in many other speeches and statements in the past decade beyond the given key documents, tying it with the PRC’s global initiatives. For example, Xi Jinping talked about how the “North and the South need to work in the same direction to forge a united, equal, balanced, and inclusive global development partnership” in the context of China’s GDI when chairing the High-level Dialogue on Global Development in 2022 (SC, 2022). While partner relations existed before Xi Jinping became the leader of the PRC, under his direction, the approach became regulated.

Based on the above, Chinese partnerships can be defined as a form of relations that are 1) primarily pragmatic, i.e., focused on shared interests; 2) relative to the parties involved, i.e., different governing principles; and 3) conducive to global peace and stability. They are based on trust and can entail cooperation in the domains of economy, science and technology, culture, politics, etc. Chinese partnerships are also defined as markedly different from alliances, seen as dividing relationships with either friends or enemies. That is in line with a relational approach to foreign policy (see Qin, 2018) and embedded in Confucian thought on relationships (cf. Ferguson, 2021). An illustrative way to understand the specificity of Chinese partnerships is to examine briefly the term partner in different languages. Most European languages use words that can be connected to either Latin (*partitio*) or Ancient Greek (*koinonos* or *hetairos*) roots, both indicating being part of one whole and sharing. On the other hand, in the Chinese language, the term is said to originate in a Wei dynasty (4-6 century a.d.) practice of ten soldiers forming two lines around a fire to cook—they were called fire companions (火伴), which later became the word for a partner, pronounced in the same way but written with an added element, i.e., radical, in one of the characters denoting that it relates to a person (伙伴). Previous research notes the term’s origins (see, e.g., Xiang, 2023), but its significance is made clearer in comparison. The Latin and Ancient Greek

terms arguably centre on a state of being or belonging, i.e., identity. The Chinese term is focused on an action fulfilling a need, i.e., interest. This highlights the pragmatism and situational, i.e., the relational nature of Chinese partnerships.

Finally, as previously stated, this paper aims to show that there is no consistent hierarchy of different types of partnership relations in the PRC's foreign policy approach. The PRC uses the common internationally accepted terms for levels of diplomatic relations (MoFA PRC, 2024a), but it has developed an elaborate number of terms for partnerships—currently more than 20. Previous studies aimed to categorise them in line with the words used in the terms and sometimes seem to establish a hierarchy, i.e., levels of partnerships. This is in line with early writing on their place in the PRC's major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics (see, e.g., Pan & An, 2014; cf. Xiang, 2023) and explanations of the meanings of individual elements of the terms when specific partnerships were established (cf. Li & Ye, 2019). However, while this approach can seemingly help to understand Chinese partnerships, its explanatory potential is limited as it can lead to ontological misunderstandings. Firstly, it can lead to an essentialist understanding of partnerships. The PRC is willing to establish partnerships with all countries (Li & Ye, 2019), but that might not be mutual, so their foreign policy envisions other forms of relations that can be considered equally close. As Xiang notes, “those who are not called “partners” are also friends” (‘不叫 “伙伴”，也是朋友’) (2023). Secondly, looking at the terms only provides a static view of Chinese partnerships, whereas a key characteristic of the PRC's approach is dynamic relationality. Thirdly, claiming that there are fixed levels that countries can climb in their bilateral relations with the PRC supports an image of a China with ambitions to be a global hegemon, contrary to their official view on major countries' roles and responsibilities on the world stage. The study of the case of Chinese partnerships within Europe, outlined in the next section, also supports this claim empirically.

### **The case of Europe**

This section presents an in-depth analysis designed in line with the outlined methodological framework. The main focus was the ties that can be considered part of the Chinese partnership diplomacy. Those are, of



course, once-named partnership relationships (伙伴关系). However, due to the complexities discussed above, a more comprehensive approach was taken. In addition to ties named partnerships, all those changes that give a new term to the overall relationship (not area-specific) and are expressed in joint statements or communiques on the bilateral relations were examined. Most previous studies examine the terms only and distinguish the establishment and upgrading of partnerships. However, as the ontological starting point of this research is that there is no set hierarchy, the analysis is centred around both the terms and the actions, i.e., verbs preceding them. Finally, the overall bilateral relations were also included in the analysis.

The PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs lists 45 countries and the EU under the section Europe (MoFA PRC, 2024b). All the listed countries have established diplomatic relations with the PRC except Vatican City. Around one-third did so immediately or a few years after 1949. Another third established diplomatic relations in the 1970s, after the PRC was recognised as the only lawful representative of China to the United Nations and established the rapprochement with the United States of America. Finally, the last third were mostly newly independent countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, which established relations with the PRC in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Of the 45, 27 have joined the BRI (Nedopil, 2023). A total of 29 of these countries have some type of formally established relationship with the PRC, in addition to diplomatic relations, as does the EU. Most have had just one term applied to the relationship (12 countries), followed by two terms (8), three (3), four (4), and five (2). The EU has had four different terms applied to its relationship with the PRC. Comparing these figures, whether a country is part of the BRI and Europe's general political and socio-economic map does not indicate any clear pattern (Figure 1). The same goes for the period when diplomatic ties were established. Participation in the BRI seems to align with the PRC's efforts through the mechanism of cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries launched in 2012 as the so-called 16+1. However, not all countries that are part of the BRI have specific terms for their relationship with the PRC, i.e., they would erroneously not be considered part of the Chinese partnership network if only the terms were observed. There is also no apparent consistency between the number of terms with participation in the BRI, position in Western or Eastern Europe,

former socialist countries, nor other factors that one would expect to correlate if the different terms were indeed levels of a relationship. While Russia and Belarus have the highest number of terms applied, it is only one more than, for example, the European Union.

**Figure 1. Number of terms formally applied to bilateral relationships with the PRC, in addition to diplomatic relations and participation in the BRI**



(data extracted from: MoFA PRC, 2023b; Nedopil, 2023)

When one looks deeper into bilateral relations, there are many other markers regarding the nature of the ties with the PRC. For example, Sweden has no formal term indicating a partnership. However, it has signed numerous memoranda of understanding and issue-based strategic documents with the PRC, the same as, for example, Denmark or Iceland, which have only one term formally defining the relationships. Some countries have several-year strategies for developing their partnership with the PRC in addition to the official term for the relationship, like Finland (for 2019-2023) or Italy (for 2024-

2027). Finally, some have special mechanisms, such as special intergovernmental consultations with Germany every few years since 2011, followed by joint statements. Even an initial overview indicates the complexity of the Chinese partnership network, i.e., it confirms that terms used for partnerships are only one part and do not comprise a hierarchical structure applied systematically to bilateral relations. This is further confirmed and clarified when the specific terms are examined.

This study found 66 terms denoting a relationship with the PRC in addition to diplomatic relations for the 29 European countries, and 43 of those are different if we include the action, i.e., verb. As previously noted, Chinese partnerships are usually discussed in terms of their establishment and upgrading. However, analysing the verbs used in the documents elucidates a more multifaceted approach. There are 18 different actions, including verbs modified by adverbs or used in combination. All terms are presented in Tables 1-5, divided by actions. The most common action is *establishing* a relation (Table 1), noted in almost half of the terms (19/43). However, when it comes to what is usually considered upgrading, there are several different actions, the most frequent being *deepening* (Table 2), which can also be *further deepening* and *comprehensively deepening*. However, there is also *strengthening* (Table 3) and *developing* (Table 4), which also appear with adverbial modifiers, as well as some actions that appear in single cases, such as, for example, *building* and *opening up* (Table 5). Most importantly, while a majority of the countries start with the establishment of a particular type of relationship (24/29), in five cases, they start with *deepening* (*mutually beneficial cooperation*, Croatia; *traditional friendly relations*, Albania; *comprehensively...bilateral cooperation*, Iceland); *continuing to strengthen* (*comprehensive cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, Moldova); and *consolidating and promoting* (*friendly cooperation*, North Macedonia). These terms do not contain the word partner but share the same characteristics as Chinese partnerships, as outlined above. However, of the five countries, only one (Croatia) has also established a (*comprehensive cooperative*) partnership with the PRC several years after the first document, i.e., term. The key point is that these types of relationships do not have a document/term outlining their establishment. There are such cases—for example, *establishing comprehensive friendly cooperation* between the PRC and Ukraine a decade before the establishment of their *strategic partnership*.

Table 1. Terms denoting *establishing*  
a type of relationship with the PRC

Term (no. of times used if more than 1) <i>In chronological order of first use</i>	Partner (year) <i>Year bold if first term for partner</i>
<b>Action: Establishing / 建立</b>	
Strategic partnership of coordination / 战略协作伙伴关系	Russia ( <b>1996</b> )
Comprehensive partnership <sup>2/3*</sup> / 全面伙伴关系	France ( <b>1997</b> ); United Kingdom ( <b>1998</b> ) (*China-UK comprehensive partnership); EU (2001)
Long-term and stable constructive partnership for the 21st century / 面向21世纪的长期稳定的建设性伙伴关系	EU ( <b>1998</b> )
Comprehensive friendly cooperation / 全面友好合作关系	Ukraine ( <b>2001</b> )
Comprehensive strategic partnership <sup>11</sup> / 全面战略伙伴关系	EU (2003); Italy ( <b>2004</b> ); United Kingdom (2004); Portugal ( <b>2005</b> ); Spain ( <b>2005</b> ); Greece ( <b>2006</b> ); Denmark ( <b>2008</b> ); Belarus ( <b>2013</b> ); Poland (2016); Serbia (2016); Hungary (2017)
Partnership with global responsibility (within the framework of the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership) / (在中欧全面战略伙伴关系框架内) 具有全球责任的伙伴关系	Germany ( <b>2004</b> )
Friendly cooperative partnership / 友好合作伙伴关系	Hungary ( <b>2004</b> )
Comprehensive friendly cooperative partnership <sup>2</sup> / 全面友好合作关系	Romania ( <b>2004</b> ); Bulgaria ( <b>2014</b> )
Comprehensive cooperative partnership / 全面合作伙伴关系	Croatia (2005)
Strategic partnership <sup>6</sup> / 战略伙伴关系	Serbia ( <b>2009</b> ); Poland ( <b>2011</b> ); Ukraine (2011); Czechia ( <b>2016</b> ); Bulgaria (2019); Cyprus ( <b>2021</b> )
Comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination based on equality, trust, mutual support, common prosperity, and generational friendship / 平等信任、相互支持、共同繁荣、世代友好的全面战略协作伙伴关系	Russia (2011)

Strategic Partnership for Mutually Beneficial Cooperation / 互惠战略伙伴关系	Ireland ( <b>2012</b> )
All-round strategic partnership (between China and Germany) / (中德)全方位战略伙伴关系	Germany (2014)
Open and pragmatic comprehensive cooperative partnership / 开放务实的全面合作伙伴关系	Netherlands ( <b>2014</b> )
Comprehensive strategic partnership of mutual trust and win-win cooperation / 相互信任、合作共赢的全面战略伙伴关系	Belarus (2016)
Innovative strategic partnership / 创新战略伙伴关系	Switzerland (2016)
Friendly strategic partnership / 友好战略伙伴关系	Austria ( <b>2018</b> )
All-weather comprehensive strategic partnership / 全天候全面战略伙伴关系	Belarus ( <b>2022</b> )
All-weather comprehensive strategic partnership for the new era / 新时代全天候全面战略伙伴关系	Hungary (2024)
<b>Action: Establishing and promoting / 建立和推进</b>	
Future-oriented new-type cooperative partnership / 面向未来的新型合作伙伴关系	Finland ( <b>2017</b> )

(data extracted from: MoFA PRC, 2023b)

Table 2. Terms denoting *deepening* a type of relationship with the PRC

Term (no. of times used if more than 1) <i>In chronological order of first use</i>	Partner (year) <i>Year bold if first term for partner</i>
<b>Action: Deepening / 深化</b>	
Mutually beneficial cooperation <sup>2</sup> / 互利合作关系	Croatia ( <b>2002</b> ); North Macedonia (2007)
Traditional friendly relations / 传统友好关系	Albania ( <b>2009</b> )
Bilateral cooperation (in the new circumstances) <sup>2</sup> / (在新形势下) 双边合作	Romania (2013); Hungary (2014)
Strategic partnership / 战略伙伴关系	Serbia (2013)
All-round friendly cooperative partnership / 全方位友好合作伙伴关系	Belgium (2014)
Comprehensive strategic partnership / 全面战略伙伴关系	Greece (2014)
Comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination in the new era / 新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系	Russia (2023)

<b>Action: Further deepening / 进一步深化</b>	
Strategic partnership / 战略伙伴关系	Ukraine (2013)
<b>Action: Comprehensively deepening / 全面深化</b>	
Bilateral cooperation / 双边合作	Iceland ( <b>2013</b> )
<b>Action: Deepening and upgrading / 深化和提升</b>	
Comprehensive strategic partnership and building of the China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era / 全面战略伙伴关系、构建新时代中塞命运共同体	Serbia (2024)

(data extracted from: MoFA PRC, 2023b)

Table 3. Terms denoting *strengthening*  
a type of relationship with the PRC

Term (no. of times used if more than 1) <i>In chronological order of first use</i>	Partner (year) <i>Year bold if first term for partner</i>
<b>Action: Strengthening / 加强</b>	
Comprehensive strategic partnership <sup>3</sup> / 全面战略伙伴关系	France (2010); Greece (2016, 2019); Italy (2019)
Comprehensive strategic partnership in the new period / 新时期全面战略伙伴关系	Spain (2018)
<b>Action: Continuing to strengthen / 继续加强</b>	
Comprehensive cooperation (in the 21st century) / (在21世纪) 全面合作	Moldova ( <b>2000</b> )
<b>Action: Further strengthening / 进一步加强</b>	
Comprehensive strategic partnership / 全面战略伙伴关系	Portugal (2018)

(data extracted from: MoFA PRC, 2023b)

Table 4. Terms denoting *developing* a type of relationship with the PRC

Term <small>(no. of times used if more than 1)</small> <i>In chronological order of first use</i>	Partner (year) <i>Year bold if first term for partner</i>
<b>Action: Developing / 发展</b>	
Comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination in the new era / 新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系	Russia (2019)
<b>Action: Further developing and deepening / 进一步发展和深化</b>	
Comprehensive strategic partnership / 全面战略伙伴关系	Belarus (2015)
<b>Action: Further developing / 进一步发展</b>	
Bilateral all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership (in the new era) / (新时代) 两国全天候全面战略伙伴关系	Belarus (2023)

(data extracted from: MoFA PRC, 2023b)

Table 5. Actions related to a type of relationship with the PRC that occur only once in the examined case

Term <small>(no. of times used if more than 1)</small> <i>In chronological order of first use</i>	Partner (year) <i>Year bold if first term for partner</i>
<b>Action: [Signing of] Treaty of / 条约</b>	
Good neighbourliness and friendly cooperation / 睦邻友好合作	Russia (2001)
<b>Action: Consolidating and promoting / 巩固和促进</b>	
Friendly cooperation / 友好合作关系	North Macedonia <b>(2002)</b>
<b>Action: Comprehensively advancing / 全面推进</b>	
Strategic partnership / 战略伙伴关系	Germany (2010)
<b>Action: Comprehensively improving / 全面提升</b>	
(The level of) China-Ukraine friendly cooperation / 中乌友好合作关系 (水平)	Ukraine (2010)

Action: Opening up / 开创	
(A new era of) close and lasting China-France comprehensive strategic partnership / 紧密持久的中法全面战略伙伴关系 (新时代)	France (2014)
Action: Building / 构建	
Comprehensive global strategic partnership for the 21st century / 面向21世纪全球全面战略伙伴关系	United Kingdom (2015)

(data extracted from: MoFA PRC, 2023b)

Tables 1-5 also clearly show that there is no linear matrix for establishing and then upgrading a type of partnership consistently across countries. For example, the most frequent phrase is a *comprehensive strategic partnership*, which appears in 15 of the 43 terms, and the most frequent term is *establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership*, used in 11 of the 66 cases—for ten countries and the EU. Two of the ten countries had previously had a *strategic partnership* (Serbia and Poland), one had a *comprehensive partnership* (United Kingdom), and one had a *friendly cooperative partnership* (Hungary). For six of them, this was the first term (Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Denmark, and Belarus, in order of establishment). Then, the *comprehensive strategic partnership* was *strengthened* for three of the 11 countries (Greece, Italy, and Spain, with the addition *in the new period*). It was also strengthened with France, which had previously had a *comprehensive partnership* established. Also, with Greece, it was first *deepened* and then *strengthened*. In one case, it was *further strengthened* (Portugal) without previous strengthening, and in several cases, new phrases were added as new types of *comprehensive strategic partnerships* were established (e.g.,...*of mutual trust and win-win cooperation*, Belarus; *all-weather...for the new era*, Hungary). This clearly shows that the same term used for different countries does not mean the same thing. Rather, they are relative to the specific bilateral relation and should be analysed in that specific context and never mutually compared. This also shows that stating that a partnership was established or upgraded is not so straightforward, which is not surprising considering the complexity of international relations. Since bilateral ties are developed in a geopolitical context, many factors can influence them, so the development is unlikely



to be linear. Rather than being a hierarchy of levels imposed by the PRC that one can climb, Chinese partnerships are part of a diversity regime regulating bilateral ties in a context-specific way. The commonality is in the proactively governed approach rather than the terms used—general overall principles and specific areas of common interest. The terms appear to be formed from a somewhat limited vocabulary, as discussed below in more detail, but they should not be seen as comparable. Interestingly, the only specific reference to upgrading has been used in a term this year (*upgrading the comprehensive strategic partnership and building of the China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era*, Serbia). While this study shows that there is currently no apparent hierarchical structure of partnerships, the PRC's approach in the future should continue to be observed as this recent term might signal a new direction.

While more than half of the analysed terms are unique, i.e., used only once (36/66), the used core words are mostly similar. In addition to the analysed verbs, they include the nouns indicating the objects of the actions—most often *partner relationship* and, in a few cases, *cooperation* or *friendly relationship*. The most frequent adjective describing the relationship that appears in just over half the terms is *strategic* (25/43), followed by *comprehensive* (22/43), and the same Chinese word also appears several times as an adverb (*comprehensively*) describing the action, i.e., verb. Accordingly, around one-fifth of the terms are related to a strategic partnership (8/43) and around one-third to a *comprehensive strategic partnership* (13/43). This likely led to the conclusion that the two represent levels in a relationship, which has been challenged above. The remaining words used in the terms are not repeated as often, once or only several times, but they mostly have general meanings—*cooperative*, *mutual*, *friendly*, etc. Some words can be connected to the PRC's specific foreign policy discourse, for example, *win-win cooperation*. Others are obvious translations of phrases that sound more natural in Chinese, for example, *all-weather* and *all-round*, which are sometimes inconsistently translated as *comprehensive*. The terms very rarely include the names of the involved parties. Several include phrases with a specific or vague temporal focus, for example, *for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, that is, *for the new era*. Almost all of the terms are declared through the titles of the joint statements or communiques (e.g., statement on [term]). Overall, the terms follow what can be proposed as a general formula: action (common verb)

+ specific nature and scope (unique combination of adjectives) + relationship (common noun). That is, they define the start of a new era in the ties with a specific nature and scope unique to the historical development of that bilateral relationship. Hence, the terms should be analysed as unique units of a common system rather than common terms.

### Formal versus informal terminology

The final part of this section briefly deals with the informal terminology related to the Chinese partnership network. Some countries are mentioned in statements of officials and media as the PRC's *friends* (朋友) and the bilateral ties as *friendships* (友谊).<sup>2</sup> However, the presented terms found in official documents only mention various types of *friendly* (友好) relations. Friendships are usually mentioned in the context of countries that are politically close to the PRC, and they also happen to have close partnerships (see, e.g., BBC CN, 2023). However, the above-quoted sentence from previous research puts friendship beyond politics and economy, stating that even those who are not partners are (or, more likely, can be) friends (cf. Xiang, 2023). Rather than being a term with a fixed meaning that can be mutually compared, *friendships* with the PRC are likely also part of the diversity regime governing the Chinese partnership network. Furthermore, previous research has already explained the PRC's so-called "iron friendship" with Serbia through Reus-Smit's theory applied in this study (Gledić, 2019).

Looking at the countries examined in the case of Europe, it is illustrative to explore the example of Russia and compare it to the said "iron friendship" with Serbia. Media reports mention a "no limits" partnership or friendship between the PRC and Russia. There was even research on their bilateral relations published with titles centred around that term (e.g., "The Limits of the No-Limits Partnership", Kim, 2023; "Russia and China Beyond "No Limits" Friendship", Ivanov, 2023). However, when one examines the claim that the "no limits" relationship was established in

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<sup>2</sup> There is even the notion of a *brotherhood*, but as this concerns primarily Asian countries in the PRC's neighbourhood (for example, Pakistan), it is beyond the scope of the case examined in this study.

February 2022, it finds a joint statement not on the bilateral ties but on “International Relations and Global Sustainable Development in the New Era” (MoFA PRC, 2023c). The document deals primarily with global issues and seems to be aimed at promoting peaceful international relations. More than midway through the document, which is more than seven thousand characters long, there is the only mention of a word that can be translated as limit or end (止境), and it reads, “There is no end/limit to the friendliness between the two countries, and no restricted areas for cooperation; the strengthening of strategic coordination is not directed against any third country, nor will it be affected by any third country or changes in the international situation” (‘两国友好没有止境，合作没有禁区，加强战略协作不针对第三国，也不受第三国和国际形势变幻影响’, *Ibid.*). This in no way fits into the approach of the PRC’s partnership diplomacy detailed above, i.e., it does not represent a declaration of the establishment of a “no limits” relationship of any kind. However, based on this, numerous media outlets and even scholars started discussing the “no limits” relationship, especially following the launch of Russia’s military operations in Ukraine, shortly after the above joint statement was published. Even after the PRC’s ambassador to the EU tried to clarify the misunderstanding in an interview for the New York Times (Stavis-Gridneff & Erlanger, 2023), titles such as, for example, “Putin to visit China to deepen “no limits” partnership with Xi” continued to appear in mainstream global media outlets such as Reuters (Faulconbridge & Chen, 2023). Journalists and scholars continue to use the term as an informal term for the PRC’s relationship with Russia. On the one hand, the informal term for the relationship with Serbia is tied to actual cooperation projects—iron is used both in the sense of iron-clad, i.e., close, and indicating the cooperation in metal manufacturing (Gledić, 2019), and it is widely used in official statements but not in official documents. On the other hand, the supposed informal term for the relationship in Russia results from the misreading of a document and, in essence, misunderstanding of the Chinese partnership diplomacy. Viewed as a diversity regime, the PRC’s approach is likely to take steps aimed at enhancing bilateral ties that are simultaneously conducive to sustainable and peaceful global order. Accordingly, the PRC has been trying to remain neutral in relation to Ukraine and has not declared its unlimited support to Russia. This example underscores the significance of enhancing the understanding of Chinese partnerships.

## DIVERSE PARTNERSHIPS FOR A DIVERSE WORLD

This study provides a nuanced perspective on the complexities of the PRC's foreign policy approach to bilateral relations. It also provides a theoretical-conceptual tool to understand better the Chinese partnership network—viewing the various terms used as part of a diversity regime proactively governing bilateral relations, i.e., part of a common system rather than common terms that can be mutually compared. The analysis stresses the significance of acknowledging the linguistic subtleties of the terms used with overall indicators of cooperation, not just whether there is an officially declared type of partnership. The examined case of Europe shows that there is no consistent hierarchical matrix of terms applied across countries for their bilateral relationships with the PRC. Rather, the terms applied seem to be devised in a manner specific to each relationship's historical development and current situation. The recent first use of the word *upgrading* might indicate a potential new direction, which should be followed in future research.

It has long been discussed whether and how China's rise as a global power will transform international relations and the current visions of world order (see, e.g., Breslin, 2010; Wang & Zheng, 2008). The PRC's approach to bilateral ties is a key part of that discussion (cf. Liu & He, 2023). While it might be unlikely that a so-called "Chinese model" will be fully adopted globally (see, e.g., Dreyer, 2018), it is worthwhile considering whether some aspects are more conducive to peaceful and sustainable order than what is currently considered the mainstream global norm. The Chinese partnership network is insufficiently understood, and there are some similarities between this case and the research on the PRC's development (cf. Rolf, 2021). The results of this study and its novel ontological approach support efforts to better comprehend the PRC's governance of bilateral relations and potentially identify a paradigm of proactive, systematic governance—i.e., a diversity regime—that can be generally applied. An approach to bilateral relations that provides a common framework and vocabulary that is simultaneously inherently tailored to specific situations might be the relational, dynamic solution suited for an increasingly diverse and multipolar world, which is at the same time more connected than ever before in history.

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