	Medio	Fecha
	https://thediplomat.com/	08/02/2025 09:58:05
		Valorización
		US $ 0.00

PROHIBIDA SU REPRODUCCIÓN Y/O DIFUSIÓN

ADVERTISEMENT

Subscribe for ads-free reading

FLASHPOINTS | DIPLOMACY | EAST ASIA

How the US Could Undermine Its Biggest Advantage Over China

The U.S. alliance network is its greatest advantage in the competition with China. But Washington can hardly count on its allies if it treats them worse than the way it treats its systemic rival.

By Antonio José Pagán Sánchez
February 07, 2025

Credit: Depositphotos

ADVERTISEMENT

Subscribe for ads-free reading

2025 began with unexpected news for the balance of power between Washington and Beijing in the technological field. DeepSeek, a Chinese AI company, went public with a model similar to ChatGPT-4, casting doubt on the United States' international leadership in this field. And technology isn't the only area where the U.S. has seen its relative advantage over China shrink. Economically, China has been the world's largest economy by purchasing power parity (PPP) since 2017, and even militarily, the certainty of a U.S. victory in any potential conflict over the Taiwan Strait has diminished.

Despite these shifts, the United States still holds a key advantage that's often overlooked: its system of alliances. After World War II, the U.S. became an "empire by invitation," as historian Geir Lundestad described it, forging an alliance network in Europe that eventually was also applied – mostly on a bilateral basis – in the Asia-Pacific region. In this regard, allies like South Korea and Japan have bilateral defense treaties with the United States, while countries such as the Philippines and Thailand are designated as Major Non-NATO Allies. Nowadays, the U.S.-led system of alliances includes 46 allies across all five continents, and combined they account for more than half of the world's GDP. Thirteen of the 20 largest economies in the world are part of this network.

China, on the other hand, has struggled to build and maintain a comparable alliance system. Its alliance with the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1960s, and today its only formal ally is North Korea. Chinese leaders have rejected the idea of forming alliances with other nations, fearing that such commitments might restrict their international maneuverability or embroil them in external conflicts.

Of course, having an alliance network doesn't guarantee that all members will always align with U.S. strategy toward China. There have been several instances of discord. For example, in 2005 Robert Zoellick, then deputy secretary of state under President George W. Bush, criticized the European Union's proposal to lift its arms embargo on China, saying it was like "painting bull's-eyes on the backs of U.S. troops." Similarly, in 2015 the Obama administration tried – and failed – to prevent its allies from joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was seen as a tool for increasing China's influence in multilateral development in Asia. Still, one of the strengths of the U.S.-led alliance system is its flexibility: Allies agreed to disagree on certain points without breaking the overall alliance, making it a more durable model than the rigid Warsaw Pact.

There are also notable successes in mobilizing this alliance system against China. In 2022, for instance, the United States persuaded NATO to label China as a "security challenge" for the first time. The previous year, the AUKUS pact – linking Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – was announced to bolster military positioning in the Asia-Pacific. Washington has also managed to get countries like the Netherlands and Japan to limit their chip exports to China, strengthened its alliance with Tokyo, and formed a military intelligence-sharing agreement with the Philippines, enabling the nation – entangled in the South China Sea dispute with Beijing – to access more advanced weaponry. Furthermore, most U.S. allies have vetoed the deployment in their territory of Huawei's 5G networks, which is seen by Washington as a national security risk. This has significantly hampered Huawei's global reach.

The importance of U.S. alliances in countering Beijing was underscored by former U.S. Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns. In his final days in office, Burns pointed out that the key difference between the two powers is that the United States has allies while China does not. He even singled out the loyalty of nations like Canada and Denmark.

The specific mentions of Canada and Denmark were far from accidental. Even before taking office, new U.S. President Donald Trump made headlines by threatening to seize Greenland from Denmark and floated the idea of Canada shedding its sovereignty to become part of the United States. Such statements challenge the principle of territorial integrity that has underpinned the international liberal order – an order the U.S. has championed since the end of World War II. Moreover, once in power, Trump imposed a 25 percent tariff on Canadian products (later suspended after discussions with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau) and threatened a similar 10 percent tariff on the European Union.

This spiral of protectionism could eventually hurt U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific as well. For example, the Daiwa Institute of Research estimated that Japan's GDP might drop by 1.4 percent over the next three years due to tariffs imposed by Trump early in his term. There's also a risk that future tariffs could target these countries directly – Trump's previous tariffs on Japanese steel and aluminum and threats against South Korea during his first term are stark reminders of that possibility.

Since President Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia – and especially as tensions between the United States and China have escalated since the mid-2010s – the rise of China has become the primary international concern for the United States. Today, China is a far more formidable rival than the Soviet Union was during its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is the only power that could potentially displace the U.S. economically and diplomatically in third countries.

However, the United States can hardly count on its allies if it treats them worse than the way it treats its systemic rival. After all, these allies are the nations that the new U.S. administration has threatened with 25 percent tariffs (while China has only faced 10 percent) or whose territorial integrity has been openly questioned. Such behavior is already yielding results: a recent YouGov poll found that 46 percent of Danish citizens view the United States as a threat – higher than the percentage that sees North Korea (44 percent) or Iran (40 percent) as such.

The next four years will serve as a crucial test for the U.S. alliance system. Will the Trump administration limit itself to voicing reasonable criticisms – such as urging allies to boost their defense spending or to pursue a more balanced economic relationship? Or will it escalate tensions by launching a new trade war or even disengage from these alliances that over the past decades have underpinned Washington's international position?

If the latter happens, it could amount to self-sabotage of U.S. interests and a significant blow to its soft power among long-time allies. Not only might these allies be less inclined to unite against China in the future, but they could also be pushed toward a hedging strategy, deepening their ties with Beijing and viewing the Asian country as a more predictable partner. Maintaining its current major advantage over its systemic rival is ultimately a choice the United States must make. The ball is now in the White House's court.

Selected by actirise

You have read 1 of your 4 free articles this month.

Enjoying this article?

Consider supporting *The Diplomat*'s independent journalism with a subscription.
Subscribe today to continue having full access to our extensive coverage of the Asia-Pacific.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

VIEW SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS

Already have an account? Log in.

AUTHORS

GUEST AUTHOR

Antonio José Pagán Sánchez

Antonio José Pagán Sánchez is a postdoctoral researcher at the Universidad del Pacífico's Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies. He received a Ph.D. in International Relations from Nankai University's Zhou Enlai School of Government. Previously, he obtained a Master's Degree in Chinese Studies from Pompeu Fabra University and a Bachelor's Degree in History from the University of Murcia.

TAGS

Flashpoints | Diplomacy | East Asia | China | United States | burden-sharing in U.S. alliances | Trump alliances | U.S. alliances in the Asia-Pacific | U.S. allies | U.S.-China Competition

ADVERTISEMENT

Subscribe for ads-free reading

Dreaming of a career in the Asia-Pacific?
Try The Diplomat's jobs board.

FIND YOUR ASIA-PACIFIC JOB

© 2025 DIPLOMAT MEDIA INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.