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International Alignment between Interests and Ideology: The Case of China's Partnership Diplomacy

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Abstract

This paper examines the determinants of alignment in bilateral partnerships. While it was impossible to think about international cooperation without referring to the term “alliances” during much of the Cold War period, strategic partnerships have taken a central place in many states’ diplomatic toolkits over the past two decades. This paper sheds light on such international alignment decisions by examining the case of China’s partnership diplomacy in the period from 1990 to 2014. Theoretically, the analysis draws on scholarly insights about alliance formation and international cooperation to formulate two broad assumptions about partner choice, which are based on interest-driven and ideology-based rationales of alignment. Binary regression estimations highlight the importance of economic interests in explaining partnership onset. In contrast to common arguments about alliance formation, partnerships seem to be less driven by shared domestic ideologies. In fact, bilateral partnerships help bridge ideological gaps, enabling the partners’ pursuit of economic gains and diplomatic preferences, at least in the case of China.

Keywords: China, foreign policy, international cooperation, strategic partnerships

JEL Code: N/A

Background to the paper:

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1 Introduction

With the end of the bipolar system of the Cold War period and against the backdrop of an emergent international order which can be best described as polycentric, states are expected to rely less on coercion and more on negotiation to manage asymmetric relations. In such a "multinodal" world, increased opportunities for interaction and greater flexibility with regard to the choice of partners in regional and global politics should favour "cooperative and regulatory frameworks in order to further common interests and to avoid crises" (Womack 2014: 267; see also Womack 2015: 122–123, 135). The building of strategic partnerships offers

one possibility for entering into such flexible interstate ties intended to serve the pursuit of political, security, and economic objectives in a globalised world. In fact, over the past two decades many countries have been embracing partnership diplomacy to an increasing extent.

The United States under the Bush administration, for instance, started to use strategic partnerships and dialogues to secure support for the global fight against terrorism and the management of relations with emerging powers (Hamilton 2014: 8–9). Envisioning a “multi-partner world” with traditional allies and emerging countries, the Obama administration has been making even stronger use of the partnership vocabulary. Observers argue that by building a web of partners, the United States seeks to stabilise intergovernmental ties within important regions such as the Asia-Pacific and to “advance U.S. values and interests and promote what the U.S. believes would constitute a stable and legitimate international order” (Hamilton 2014: 7; see also Tellis 2014). Recent examples of US partnership diplomacy at the bilateral level include the newly established strategic or comprehensive partnerships with Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Vietnam; the elevation of Israel's status to that of a “major strategic partner”; and the establishment of strategic dialogues with Tunisia and Liberia (Hamilton 2014; Parameswaran 2014). The United States is not alone, however, in building strategic partnerships around the globe. The other key nodes of the polycentric world, above all China, are keeping pace.¹

In his address at the Chinese Communist Party's last Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in November 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping called on China to “develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of a major power.” Building and cultivating partnership relations with major powers and important developing countries is central to this approach. In the years to come, China should “make more friends [...] and build a global network of partnerships,” Xi said (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2014). Such partnerships are not new in Chinese diplomacy. Having established the first strategic partnership with Brazil in 1993, China not only has a long history of using partnerships to organise its bilateral relations but is also the country with the largest number of such alignments. According to official statements, China has established partnership relations with 67 individual countries and five regions or regional organisations over the past 20 years (Wang 2014). Moreover, the strong emphasis placed on partnership diplomacy in recent official discourse is unprecedented and leads to the assumption that partnerships might play an even bigger role in the structuring of China's external relations in the years to come (Swaine 2015: 7–8).

1 In addition to the United States and China, several countries and regional organisations have engaged in building partnership relations over the past years. For instance, alongside the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue, India refers to its ties with more than a dozen countries as strategic (Kumar, Pradhan, Sibal, Bedi, and Ganguly 2011; Sibal 2012). The European Union has established strategic partnerships with 10 countries, mainly between 2003 and 2010, and two regions (Africa, Latin America). Currently, the EU is planning to elevate ties with ASEAN to a strategic level (EU External Action Service 2014; Gratius 2011).

Despite this surge of partnerships in contemporary international politics, important questions about, for instance, the determinants of partnership onset, the choice of partners, and the associated costs and actual benefits of partnerships remain largely untackled. While these questions have been raised and thoroughly studied in the case of interstate alliances (e.g. Snyder 2007: 43), scholarly answers with regard to strategic partnerships are still rare. Although a number of single-case studies on individual partnerships or specific state actors' strategies exist, more comprehensive analyses that define and locate partnerships under the broader concept of alignment or that develop analytical frameworks have only recently become available (e.g. Chidley 2014; Nadkarni 2010; Parameswaran 2014; Wilkins 2008; 2012). Moreover, empirical insights from larger cross-national comparisons are virtually absent.

This study makes an initial step towards filling this gap. It sheds light on the determinants of partner choice from a macro-level quantitative perspective by drawing on the case of China's partnership diplomacy. Using logistic regression estimations and a newly compiled data set on Chinese partnerships between 1990 and 2014, it tests interest- and ideology-driven explanations of partnership onset, which have been derived from international cooperation theory and in particular from scholarly insights on the determinants of alliance formation. While the empirical findings strongly support economic interest-driven rationales for partnership formation (e.g. market access and the supply of natural resources), notions of ideological affinity appear to be less powerful predictors of China's choice of partners. In fact, Beijing tends to align with more democratic states. Yet the results indicate that alignment is also more likely when countries have comparable positions on the liberal world order. In sum, this study's findings support arguments that there is a higher probability of autocrats cooperating with democracies (e.g. Mattes and Rodríguez 2014), as well as those regarding Beijing's rather pragmatic and interest-driven foreign policy behaviour (e.g. Kastner and Saunders 2012).

To develop these claims, the paper begins by laying out the key constitutive elements of partnership relations. Drawing on international cooperation theory in general and insights from the study of alliances in particular, the following section formulates two general assumptions about the determinants of alignment under the partnership framework. These are empirically tested in the third section using the case of China's partnership relations and employing logistic regression estimations. Since the data on China's partnerships has been newly compiled for this paper, a more extensive presentation of the development of China's partnership portfolio from 1993 to 2014 precedes the quantitative analysis. The results are then discussed in relation to writings on strategic partnerships as well as on China's foreign policy priorities. The paper then concludes by suggesting areas for future research.

2 Coming to Terms with Strategic Partnerships

Strategic partnerships have only in recent years entered the broader international relations (IR) debates. Similarly to other forms of international alignment, they constitute one of many types of cooperative interstate behaviour.² Broadly speaking, the term partnership describes a “diplomatic instrument that allows for hedging against all eventualities while allowing for the common pursuit of mutual interests” (Nadkarni 2010: 46, see also p. 48). To this end, they usually entail closer ties between states than normal “ad hoc” bilateral relations and adhere to a “goal-driven” rationale of alignment (Wilkins 2012: 361). The type of partnership relations envisioned by the Chinese government focuses in particular on “building stable relations without targeting any third party” (e.g. Goldstein 2005: 134). This stands in stark contrast to “threat-driven” forms of alignment such as military alliances – defined as “formalized international cooperation focusing on national security matters” (Ward 1982: 5) – which primarily aim to aggregate military capabilities in order to balance military power, confront external threats, or actively oppose third parties.

Strategic partnerships go beyond security alignments. By invoking a conceptual understanding of alignment that has security as its core element, some authors locate strategic partnerships in the security realm. They argue that (traditional) security issues, rather than economic objectives, constitute the key drivers of any meaningful strategic partnership (Wilkins 2008: 360; 2011: 123–124; 2012: 68). However, this study takes a step back from this assumption and takes a “value-neutral” and “content-neutral” notion of alignments as a starting point (Chidley 2014: 154). This is of particular importance in the case of China because setting aside security collaboration as a necessary condition extends the range of applicability of the partnership term to interstate alignments that lack such a distinct security component.³

In terms of defining the object of investigation, this study draws closely on the conceptual work by Wilkins and Parameswaran (2014: 263–264; 2012: 67). The authors describe partnerships as a structured framework for the collaboration between two or more parties, which is organised in a loose and non-binding way, aims to enable the pursuit of shared interests and the addressing of common challenges in different issue areas, and facilitates (future) cooperation. Based on this understanding, four characteristics of strategic partnerships stand out. First and foremost, partnership relations entail a structured framework for collaboration between states that goes beyond normal diplomatic interaction and provides for regular ex-

2 Wilkins (2012), for instance, suggests a taxonomy of alignment that distinguishes between seven subtypes of alignment, including alliances, coalitions, security communities, and strategic partnerships. On the use of alignment as an umbrella concept, see also Snyder (1991) and Chidley (2014).

3 This modification is of particular importance in the context of this study as Chinese partnerships are generally “not treated as quasi-military alliances, which involve extensive security and military cooperation” (Medeiros 2009: 82). For further conceptual and theoretical arguments on why we should abstain from basing the concept of alignment on security, refer to Chidley (2014).

change between different government departments and agencies.⁴ The institutional makeup of these links varies on a case-by-case basis and is “usually embedded in the joint statements which identify areas of cooperation, the main agencies involved and the mechanisms created to advance collaboration” (Parameswaran 2014: 264; see also Wilkins 2008: 365). Chinese partnership agreements, for instance, regularly involve opening up additional channels for intergovernmental communication and “routinizing official visits, especially military-to-military exchanges and regular summit meetings between government leaders” (see also Cheng and Zhang 2002: 239; Goldstein 2005: 134). Concrete examples of this include “the regularized meetings between foreign and defense ministers as well as state executives” within the framework of the China–Russia partnership (e.g. Wilkins 2008: 371), the annual meetings of the China-Brazil High-Level Coordination and Cooperation Committee, and the High-Level Mixed Commission between the Chinese and Venezuelan governments (e.g. Niu 2010; Strüver 2014).

Second, partnership relations are characterised by high levels of flexibility. They fall short of the formally binding commitments inherent to interstate alignments such as treaty-based alliances or coalitions. Because such partnerships are not highly institutionalised, the costs associated with entry and exit are relatively low and symbolic rather than substantive in nature. John Ciorciari (2010) has argued that “in a Post-Cold War world, most developing countries prefer this kind of ‘limited alignment’ because it allows them to reap the rewards, such as economic or security assistance, without the attendant risks such as the loss of autonomy” (see also Nadkarni 2010: 46; Parameswaran 2014: 264). In other words, states seek to avoid the costs associated with, for example, interstate alliances – not only in terms of autonomy but also in terms of their “potential to provoke those targeted or excluded” from partnership relations (Wilkins 2008: 364). This applies particularly in the case of China. In recent years, Beijing has not wearied of emphasising that partnerships are a “‘new type of state-to-state relations – non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not directed against any third party’” (Goldstein 2005: 136; see also Medeiros 2009: 87).

Third, coming back to the notion that strategic partnerships are “goal-driven” rather than “threat-driven” alignments, partnership can be seen as a manifestation of the participating actors’ willingness to commonly pursue joint interests and mutual goals while leaving aside more conflictive issues. China’s official understanding of partnerships, for instance, does not anticipate the absence of competition or the presence of “purely cooperative relations.” In fact, potential conflicts due to diverging national interests or political ideologies are anticipated (see also Cheng and Zhang 2002: 239–240; Goldstein 2005: 131, 134–135). Partnerships are regarded as the commitment to “muting disagreements about domestic politics in the interest of working together on matters of shared concern in international diplomacy” (Gold-

4 The following paragraphs build on Wilkins (2008: 360–361), Nadkarni (2010: 48–49), and Parameswaran (2014: 264–265), who provide detailed accounts of strategic partnerships’ key components.

stein 2005: 134).⁵ The interests and topics at stake issue include various areas. Generally, partnership frameworks comprise “co-operation between and among states around, primarily, non-military elements, such as fostering people-to-people contacts, business co-operation, economic, cultural and scientific co-operation and/or health and welfare co-operation and could, though not necessarily, include security co-operation” (Chidley 2014: 154). The same applies to partnership agreements involving China as one party. They usually entail a number of sectors for collaboration such as economics, politics, security, science and technology, and culture (Medeiros 2009: 86). Of these different areas, several authors (Goldstein 2005: 175; Medeiros 2009: 86) concede that the promotion of economic ties involving access to markets, investment opportunities, and natural resources are of central importance for the Chinese government.

Fourth and finally, in contrast to alliances, partnerships exhibit a stronger behavioural disposition and are rather process oriented: they often represent a means of interstate cooperation “formed in pursuit of co-operation, for the purpose of co-operation” (Chidley 2014: 154). A key aspect in this regard is their ability to reduce uncertainties, not only vis-à-vis the international environment (Wilkins 2008: 363–364) but also among partners. This ability to reduce uncertainty between two states without directly confronting other actors within the international system is not trivial, particularly in a “multimodal” world (Womack 2015). As is the case with international alignments in general, the set-up and the performance of partnerships provides information not only about the degree of cooperative behaviour one might expect from the other, but also about potential issues and structures for collaboration. In other words, partnerships create “learned expectations of nations [...] as to how much cooperation to expect from other actors in the international system” (Sullivan, 1973: 101–102). They have the potential to reduce uncertainty through repeated exchange, to foster and deepen interstate trust, and thus to facilitate future cooperation. This is particularly true if we adopt a relational approach to governance, emphasising the process of social relations and the accompanying practices, which are key to Chinese thinking (Qin 2011). From such a relational perspective, the establishment and maintenance of ongoing relations comes first, and not the achievement of immediate and tangible results or rule-based cooperation. However, we still have little comparative knowledge of the factors that help to explain the establishment of partnerships, or on the question of who joins with whom in the first place.

5 Examples of shared concerns in international politics include “adopting common foreign policy positions, such as at the U.N.; cooperation on nontraditional security issues; enhancing the influence of multilateral organizations; the mutual endorsement of U.N. principles and the rule of law in international relations; and promoting China's concepts of ‘democracy and equality in international relations’” (Medeiros 2009: 86).

3 The Determinants of Alignment under the Partnership Framework

Despite the growing importance of strategic partnerships for many states and particularly for China as a diplomatic instrument for organising external relations, little comparative knowledge exists on the determinants of partnership onset. Nevertheless, much can be learned from the literatures on international cooperation and, in particular, alliance building. While the notion of alliance formation is a good starting point, some amendments are necessary to grasp the particularities of the choice of peers in strategic partnership relations, since the situational contexts of cooperative behaviour in traditional security relations differ from those of cooperation in other issue areas (e.g. Lipson 1984).

Against this background and in light of the above-mentioned properties of strategic partnerships, this study engages with two lines of argument in order to theoretically approach the topic of partnership formation and partner choice. First, as strategic partnerships are conceived of as primarily "goal-driven" alignments that rest upon a common set of goals shared by the governments involved (Wilkins 2012: 68), it is assumed that partner choice will follow the involved states' self-interests – that is, their "needs and wants [...] in the international society" (Levi 1970: 3). In the context of strategic partnerships, it has been argued that actors aim to identify desirable partners based on mutual interests. Complementary resources bring an especially worthwhile capability or benefit to the envisioned partnership (Wilkins 2008: 364).

According to this view, one would expect that China's core interests in external relations are also good predictors of China's choice of partners. Several authors have argued that China's diplomacy is guided primarily by "the need to secure energy and commodity resources, to search for new markets for Chinese exports and investment, to isolate Taiwan internationally, and to project China's image as a responsible and peaceful power" (Zhu 2010: 6; see also Heath 2012: 64). Since the mid-1990s, the new "energy diplomacy" has been a particular driving force behind China's relations with several world regions (e.g. Currier and Dorraj 2011; Zhu 2010). Hence, economic interests should be among the most important drivers of China's alignment choices. This interest-based rationale would make trade/economic gains, access to natural resources, and inroads into world regions good predictors of China's partner selection.

Second, studies on international conflict and cooperation and on alliance formation in particular invoke theoretical approaches focusing on the role of regime type. They argue that domestic and international ideologies – broadly understood here as "a set of normative values and relatively enduring beliefs" (Levi 1970: 4) – are a further basis of international alignment. According to this view, compatible and receptive partners are identified on the basis of shared values or ideology in order to reduce uncertainty (Wilkins 2008: 364). This ideology-

related explanation of partner choice is based on two lines of argument.⁶ One is related to a state's domestic institutions. In the words of Owen (2005: 74), ideology can encompass "a plan for public order within a state that implies certain domestic institutions." He thus understands domestic institutions as "predominant rules regulating relations between government and the governed," which are hence "markers of ideology." With regard to domestic institutions, the literature on international cooperation and military alliances postulates that democratic states are generally more attractive partners for cooperation since they are generally regarded as more credible and reliable due to their greater public accountability, limited decision-making flexibility, and transparency (e.g. Leeds 1999; 2003; Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Lipson 2005; Mattes and Rodríguez 2014). While other authors have found that countries with similar regime types (including autocratic dyads) are more likely to align (Lai and Reiter 2000), there is more evidence pointing towards democracies as the primary alliance partner choice. We can thus expect that China will tend towards democratic countries in its partnership selection.

The second line of argument relates to countries' common ideological legacies and shared visions of international order. With regard to ideological legacies, partnerships can be located theoretically within the range of "alignments of identity." Instead of being threat-based, these alignments develop around an identity-driven "relationship between two (or more) states based on a common understanding of each other's likeness or similarity" (Chidley 2014: 154).⁷ The rationale behind this argumentation is that "trusted relationships are a function of shared identity among potential cooperators" (Hoffman 2006: 41). Hence, China should be drawn to countries that share similar ideological legacies, particularly its peers in the post-socialist camp. However, since trust-building is especially important with regard to military alliances that involved traditional security issues in the Cold War era, it might be expected that this aspect is less relevant for strategic partnerships that are built more on economic and diplomatic interests and less on traditional security issues (cf. Nadkarni 2010: 23). In the latter type of alignment, it might instead be like-mindedness with regard to the norms and values that should guide international politics as well as foreign policy preferences in general that determine the choice of partners (cf. Gibler and Rider 2004). Thus, shared views of global politics – understood as the "primary institutions" of international society, which form the basic foundation of global order – might be of more relevance for the formation of strategic partnerships.

6 This argumentation draws on Horowitz and Tyburski (2015), who have proposed and applied a comparable distinction in their study of alignment patterns among post-socialist countries.

7 As stated by Chidley, the distinction between alignments for and of identity is based on the works by Ted Hopf (2002).

4 A Quantitative Test of the Determinants of Alignment: China's Partnership Diplomacy

To test the propositions on the determinants of partner choice, the paper's empirical section employs regression estimations and uses a time-series cross-sectional data set at the monadic level of analysis covering all sovereign countries except China for the period 1990–2014. In measuring the dependent variable, *partnership onset*, this study draws on a newly compiled list of China's bilateral partnerships. The data inventory has been coded on the basis of a variety of sources, including the English and Chinese versions of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' webpage, news agency reports (e.g. Xinhua, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts for the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa), and open web searches for all countries in the international system. It includes all state-to-state relations labelled "partnership" by China and is divided into three categories: partnerships, strategic partnerships, and comprehensive strategic partnerships.⁸ Since the data on partnerships has been newly compiled, the next subsection provides a short overview of the development of China's partnership network and the coding of this study's dependent variable before turning in greater detail to the empirical strategy and the explanatory factors.

4.1 China's Evolving Partnership Network: The Dependent Variable

First of all, the data shows that partnership diplomacy has in recent years become a major foreign policy tool for the Chinese government, beginning with Beijing's entry into the China–Brazil "long-term and stable strategic partnership based on mutual benefit" in November 1993 and its upgrading of Sino–Russian cooperative relations with the "partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and benefit" in April 1996. Since then, the number of partnerships has increased continuously, reaching 67 at the end of 2014 and, according to official quotes, 75 in mid-2015 (Wang 2015: 10). While China's partnership diplomacy initially concentrated on major powers and the regional neighbourhood, the geographical focus has broadened considerably since the turn of the century. Under the leadership of President Hu Jintao, for instance, the Chinese government started to place stronger emphasis on the development of bilateral relations with important countries in the Global South as well as on seeking partners in all world regions (Gill 2007: 58; Goldstein 2005: 130ff, 175 fn 94). These developments made Asia and Europe, and to a lesser extent also Latin America, major "partner regions" of China, with high absolute numbers of partnership agreements and larger shares of strategic and comprehensive strategic partnerships (see Table 1).⁹ In recent years, bilateral ties with several of the Soviet Union's successor states have been elevated to the strategic level, meaning that Central Asia is also an important regional partner for China, not just multilaterally (e.g. Shanghai Cooperation Organization) but also bilaterally.

8 The final list has been checked against several partial compilations of strategic and comprehensive strategic partnerships already provided in the secondary literature (Feng and Huang 2014: 18–19; Gill 2007: 59–60; Medeiros 2009: 83–85; Mitchell 2007: 126–127; Zhang and Zhou 2011: 49).

9 The table excludes China's multilateral partnerships with regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (since 1997), the European Union (since 1998), and the African Union (since 2006).

Table 1. China's Partnership Network, End of 2014

	Comprehensive strategic partners		Strategic partners		Partners		Total	
	No.	Col. %	No.	Col. %	No.	Col. %	No.	Col. %
Africa	2	6.9	2	10.5	4	21.1	8	11.9
Americas	5	17.2	2	10.5	2	10.5	9	13.4
Asia	9	31.0	9	47.4	5	26.3	23	34.3
Europe	10	34.5	4	15.8	7	36.8	21	31.3
Middle East	1	3.5	2	21.1	0	0	3	4.5
Oceania	2	6.9	0	10.5	1	5.3	3	4.5
Total	29	100.0	19	100.0	19	100.0	67	100.0

Note: The different types of partnerships are grouped into three categories. The first two groups include all partnerships in which the term “strategic” or “comprehensive strategic” are part of the partnership’s official name. The group of “partners” includes all remaining types of partnership relations. For examples of each category see Table A-1 of the appendix.

In terms of temporal development, the data shows that China’s partnership portfolio has grown continuously since 1993, with sharper increases in the period 2003–2006 and since 2012 (see Figure 1). Besides the growth in absolute numbers, an increase in the share of comprehensive strategic partnerships since 2003 is also apparent (see the grey areas in Figure 2 depicting the percentage share of the three different types of partnership). This has resulted, on the one hand, from the conclusion of entirely new comprehensive strategic partnership agreements with Algeria, Belarus, Egypt, Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as several European countries and, on the other, from Beijing’s upgrading of several already-existing partnerships. For instance, in 2014 alone, Argentina, Australia, Germany, Mongolia, and Venezuela agreed to elevate their strategic partnerships with China to comprehensive strategic ones. Simple partnerships, in contrast, have been of declining relative importance in recent years.

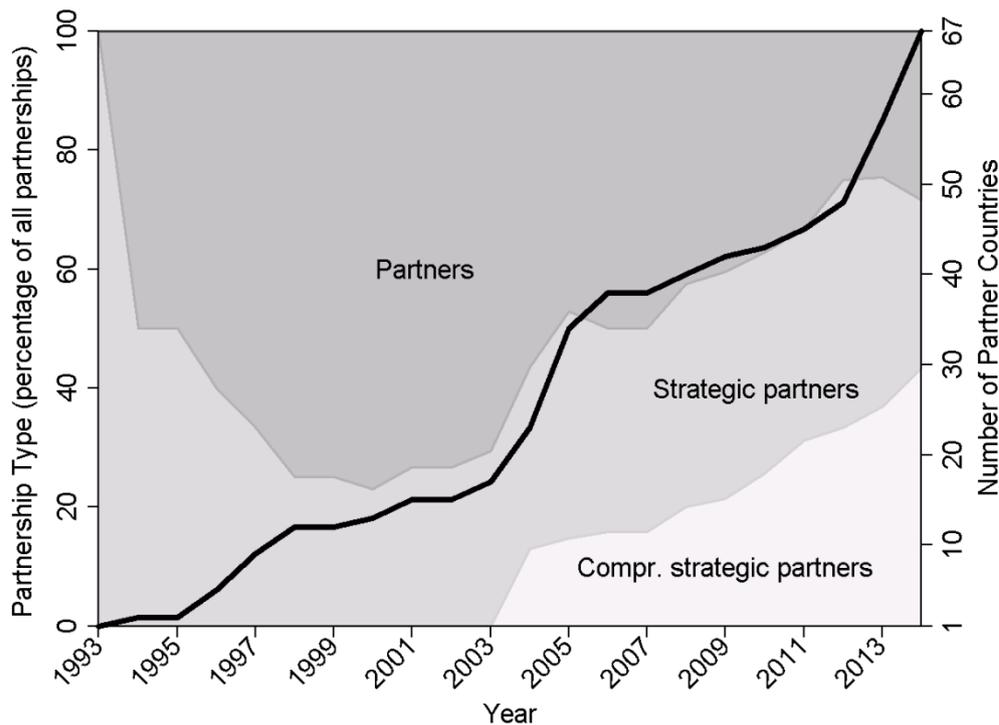
These shifts in the makeup of China’s partnership portfolio illustrate one important aspect of the country’s partnership diplomacy: partnership relations usually need time to develop and pass through different stages.¹⁰ A large number of the strategic alignments started out as “friendly cooperative partnerships” or “comprehensive partnerships” – grouped together in the partnership category throughout this study – and only later evolved into “strategic partnerships” or “comprehensive strategic partnerships.”¹¹ The recurring goals cited by the Chinese government in the establishment and upgrading of partnerships are the achievement of stable bilateral relations, including regular exchanges between high-level of-

10 Not all partnerships listed in Table A-1 of the appendix went through these stages. This is, for example, the case for China–Brazil partnership relations, which started under the strategic label and leapfrogged the phase of cooperative relations. At this stage of research, however, it cannot be ruled out that in other cases such a pattern could be the result of a lack of recorded data on partnership relations.

11 It is, however, important to note that this grouping of partnerships is tentative in nature and based on the partnerships’ official names and the development paths of relations. It is not based on a structured comparison of the content of all available partnership agreements.

ficials from different branches of government; the facilitation of economic exchange and cooperation; the foregoing of interference in domestic affairs; a focus on shared interests; the coordination of foreign policies in international affairs within, for example, the United Nations; and, finally, the promotion of China's "concepts of 'democracy and equality in international relations'" (Goldstein 2005: 134; Medeiros 2009: 86).

Figure 1. China's Partner Countries by Type of Partnership, 1993–2014



Yet it is important to note not only that China usually attaches higher levels of symbolic significance when shifting a relationship to the comprehensive and strategic end of the spectrum, but also that the related agreements involve increasing degrees of formalisation and specification. In general, cooperative relations are characterised by a relatively low level of interaction and a limited scope of topics for collaboration. These agreements are often guided by a desire to place the future relations on more solid footing. In comparison, the labels "strategic partnership" and "comprehensive strategic partnership" generally go hand in hand with broader agendas and more formalised mechanisms of cooperation. Agreements in the latter group in particular often include rather detailed agendas for bilateral collaboration and provide for the establishment of specific communication channels in order to facilitate regular exchange between the heads of state and high-level representatives of different government units (Feng and Huang 2014: 9–10; Strüver 2014: 141–143).

Given this relative diversity in China's partnership portfolio, one might wonder whether any common denominators exist among selected partners. In order to identify possible explanatory factors behind China's choice of partners and to test the theoretical assumptions

on partnership formation outlined above, the dependent variable *partnership onset* has been coded on the basis of the data presented. The variable takes a value of 1 in the year in which a country entered into its first partnership with China. It uses all three categories of partnership type because, as argued above, partnerships also have to be considered as an initial step in a process leading to closer bilateral relations.

4.2 Explanatory Factors: Interests and Ideology

In order to shed light on alignment decisions made under the partnerships framework, the empirical section tests several quantitative measurements related to the interest- and ideology-driven explanations of partner choice.¹² As argued above, economic and strategic interests lie at the core of partnership diplomacy. Thus, it can be expected that variables related to a country's attractiveness as a potential commercial partner as well as its position to provide diplomatic inroads into other regions will have a positive impact on partnership decisions. To account for such interests, the analysis considers four variables.

First of all, the potential attractiveness of countries' markets for Chinese companies is captured by the variable *market potential*. It measures the size of national economies relative to their distance from China and is calculated by dividing national GDP figures by the geographical distance in miles. The GDP data, in current US dollars, has been taken from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) and the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSTATS), while the information on distances between national capitals comes from the Correlates of War Project (Bennett and Stam 2000; Small and Singer 1982).¹³ Second, the models include a measurement of countries' importance as global suppliers of strategic minerals. Based on the combined national production figures for petroleum and for six strategic metals, the variable *oil and metal production* specifies the country's average yearly production ratio relative to world production.¹⁴ Third, to operationalise the concept of regional gateways, the models include a measurement of a country's material power capabilities relative to the total capabilities in its respective subregion. The variable *capabilities* draws on data on military expenditures from the Correlates of War project (Singer 1988; Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972). This is updated with information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database for recent years.¹⁵

12 The descriptive statistics of the variables are reported in Table A-2 of the appendix.

13 The data can be accessed online at <<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/databases.aspx>> (WDI; 28 September 2015) and <<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnlList.asp>> (UNSTATS; 1 October 2015).

14 The composite ratio draws on production figures from the oil and gas data set, compiled by Michael L. Ross and provided in the Quality of Government Standard Data Set 2015 (Ross 2013; Teorell et al. 2015), and the World Mineral Statistics Data by the British Geological Survey (BGS), which is available online <www.bgs.ac.uk/mineralsuk/statistics/home.html> (17 August 2015). The minerals included are bauxite, copper, iron ore, manganese, nickel, petroleum, and uranium (cf. Kastner and Saunders 2012: 170).

15 As the National Material Capability data set does not cover the most recent years of the observation period, I have carried forward the latest available capability scores for the years 2008 to 2013 and then replaced the values for

Finally, bilateral trade relations are considered in all models through the inclusion of measurements of a nation's *trade importance* for China as well as its *trade dependence* on China. In both cases, data on the volume of imports and exports have been obtained from the Correlates of War Trade Dataset, which relies largely on the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Direction of Trade Statistics yearbooks as a source (Barbieri and Keshk 2012; Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins 2009). Since the original data only covers the period until 2009, the more recent years have been accounted for by using data from the IMF's Direction of Trade Statistics database. While the former variable measures a country's share of China's overall trade, the latter accounts for the proportion of a nation's total merchandise trade accounted for by China.¹⁶

The role of ideological affinities is tested using a second set of variables. As argued above, the analysis differentiates between two aspects of a broader notion of ideology: domestic regimes and beliefs on the one hand, and the normative values upheld in the international society on the other. To capture the institutional effects of domestic regimes on the propensity for alignment, the analysis includes the Polity IV Project's *polity2* variable (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2014). The *polity2* score measures institutional and procedural aspects of regimes and ranges from -10 (strongly autocratic) to +10 (consolidated democracies). In addition, the models include the variable *socialist/communist laws* in order to account for the impact of historical legacies and a country's location within the former socialist camp. The variable takes a value of "one" if a country has a legal tradition based on socialist laws and of "zero" otherwise. It is coded based on information on national legal origins as presented in La Porta et al. (1999) and provided by the Quality of Government Standard Data Set 2015 (Teorell et al. 2015).

To operationalise the notion of normative positions towards the basic foundations of the international order, the study draws on national voting behaviour within the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). To this end, the variable *FP similarity (IPE)* quantifies the level of similarity between China's and another country's foreign policy preferences in international politics.¹⁷ It is based on state ideal point estimates (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2015). Ideal point estimates (IPEs) have been introduced to the study of voting positions in the UNGA as an alternate measurement to the prevalent dyadic indicators of voting similarity between states such as S-scores or chance-corrected agreement indices (e.g. Häge 2011; Signorino and Ritter 1999). The major advantages of these state-preference estimates include the ability of

these years with information from SIPRI where available. The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database is available online <www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database> (10 November 2015). The regions are coded according to the 22 geographical subregions used by the UN Statistics Division.

16 The variables trade importance and market potential are highly correlated. For this reason, the models presented below primarily use the latter variable due to the better data coverage.

17 The level of similarity is calculated by generating the absolute difference between China's and a country's ideal point estimate, multiplying the difference by -1, and subtracting the maximum possible absolute IPE difference from the result. The resulting indicator ranges from 0.000000217 (highly divergent revealed preferences towards the international liberal order) to 4.378 (highly similar positions).

IPEs to measure single-dimensional positions vis-à-vis the US-led liberal order and to allow for distinctions between agenda changes and preference changes (Bailey et al. 2015: 2).

4.3 Empirical Strategy

The goal of the regression analysis is to estimate the effects of the interest- and ideology-related predictors on partnership formation with China. The regression analysis uses a time-series cross-sectional data set at the monadic level of analysis that covers all sovereign countries except China for the period 1990–2014. Subsequent country-years are deleted from the models, since the analysis focuses on the likelihood of onsets. Since the outcome is a binary variable, the probability of “success” is estimated using a non-linear model. To address time dependence, the models include a simple polynomial of *no event/peace years* (Carter and Signorino 2010). The analysis starts with standard logistic regressions that include only the independent variables mentioned above. To account for heteroscedasticity and arbitrary correlation of observations within groups, all the models use robust standard errors clustered at the country level. Subsequent logit models distinguish between the absolute values of the two predictor variables trade dependence and FP similarity (IPE), which change substantively over time, and the effect of the variables' year-on-year change in order to assess whether or not increases/decreases have a separate impact on the likelihood of partnership formation.

One issue with the use of logit models to study the explanatory factors behind China's choice of partners might arise from the small number of positive cases ($n=63$).¹⁸ King and Zeng (2001) warn that logistic regressions run the risk of underestimating event probabilities when the sample size is small or the events are rare. To correct for the small number of events and to at least approximate unbiased coefficients, the main model is re-estimated using rare-event logistic models. In addition, a random-effects model that includes year effects is estimated in order to include country-level variation and model heterogeneity across countries (Gelman and Hill 2007). As a further control for time-invariant and unobserved effects at the country level that might bias the results, a correlated random-effects model that includes the country-level means of two important independent variables is estimated (Bell and Jones 2015). In order to facilitate the interpretation of results, marginal effects at observed values are reported for the main model (Royston 2013; Williams 2012). Moreover, the main model is re-estimated with subsamples that distinguish between observations within developing countries and within advanced economies using information on membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).¹⁹

18 Due to missing data, the analysis includes only 63 of the 67 recorded partnership onsets. Not included are the establishment of partnership relations with Afghanistan (2006, comprehensive cooperative partnership), Timor-Leste (2014, comprehensive cooperative partnership), the Maldives (2014, future-oriented comprehensive friendly and cooperative partnership), and New Zealand (2014, comprehensive strategic partnership).

19 The accession dates of OECD member states have been retrieved from the OECD webpage <www.oecd.org/about/membersandpartners/list-oecd-member-countries.htm> (13 May 2014).

5 Estimating the Choice of Partners: Empirical Findings

What factors most often explain the Chinese government's choice of partners in international politics? Table 2 reports the main findings of the regression estimations. At first glance, the results suggest that the measurements related to an interest-driven rationale for alignment choices are, overall, better predictors of China's choice of partners. Throughout the different model specifications, the coefficients are all positive and yield satisfactory levels of statistical significance. Only the positive effect of a country's *market potential* disappears when we control for the small number of positive outcomes (Model 4) and model heterogeneity across cases (models 5 and 6).

Table 2. Logistic Regressions on Partner Choice

	(1) Logit	(2) Logit	(3) Logit	(4) Rare-event logit	(5) RE logit	(6) Correlated RE logit
Market potential	0.438+ (0.226)	0.447* (0.225)	0.439+ (0.226)	0.493 (0.391)	0.472 (0.409)	0.556 (0.424)
Oil & metal production $t-1$	10.54+ (6.006)	10.68+ (6.012)	10.53+ (6.007)	9.988+ (5.487)	11.99* (5.114)	12.48* (5.477)
Capabilities _{regional ratio}	4.744*** (0.849)	4.741*** (0.841)	4.742*** (0.850)	4.606*** (0.930)	4.899*** (0.812)	5.415*** (0.872)
Trade dependence $t-1$	2.857* (1.317)	2.821* (1.323)	2.906* (1.440)	2.910* (1.354)	2.646 (1.736)	15.03*** (3.108)
Trade dep. $t-1$, year-on-year change			-0.304 (2.581)			
Polity2 $t-1$	0.0856* (0.0374)	0.0860* (0.0373)	0.0856* (0.0373)	0.0825* (0.0384)	0.0983** (0.0370)	0.0654 (0.0404)
Socialist/communist laws	0.311 (0.396)	0.321 (0.395)	0.310 (0.396)	0.332 (0.386)	0.760 (0.475)	1.271** (0.489)
FP similarity (IPE) $t-1$	0.631+ (0.333)	0.658+ (0.338)	0.632+ (0.333)	0.617+ (0.345)	0.806* (0.351)	-0.141 (0.707)
FP sim. (IPE) $t-1$, year-on-year change		-0.332 (0.671)				
Constant	-15.10** (4.659)	-15.56*** (4.638)	-15.10** (4.657)	-13.74** (4.339)	-71.96+ (42.05)	-71.88+ (42.54)
Year effects	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Mean of trade dependence/ FP similarity	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	3062	3062	3062	3062	3062	3062
Area under ROC	0.8872	0.8871	0.8871	-	-	-
McFadden's adj. R^2	0.183	0.180	0.180	-	-	-
McFadden's pseudo R^2	0.252	0.252	0.252	-	-	-

Note: The table displays the results of the standard logistic regression (models 1 to 3), rare-event logit (Model 4), and the random-effects model (models 5 and 6, including dummy variables for year effects). All regressions include no-event polynomials to model time dependence as well as regional and period dummies to control for the respective effects. Robust standard errors clustered by country are reported in parentheses for the standard logistic models. Asterisks denote the levels of statistical significance: + $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The data suggests that, at least in the case of China, it is each partner country's attractiveness as an economic partner and, even more importantly, its alleged relative importance within its subregion, as measured by its share of regional military capabilities, that are strong drivers of alignment decisions.²⁰ This reflects the assumed trend that the Chinese government is seeking special relations with major countries in all world regions while paying special attention to establishing closer ties with important target markets in order to further economic exchange and make diplomatic inroads into potential regional gateways. Partnerships are also strongly driven by other core interests related to China's national economic development, such as securing access to natural resources. As the positive and significant coefficients of the variable *oil and metal production* indicate, China is more likely to enter into partnership relations with countries that have large producers of petroleum and/or strategic industrial minerals within their territory.

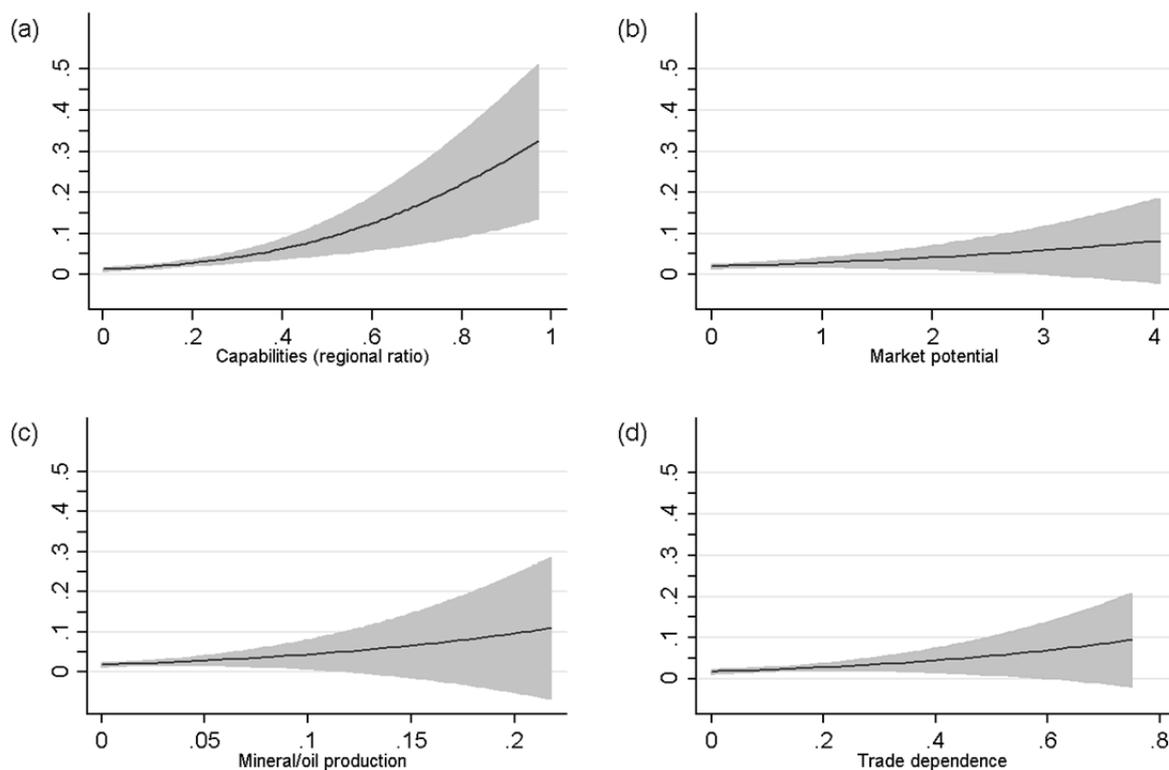
The "successful" forging of a cooperative or (comprehensive) strategic partnership is further influenced by the partner country's own trade dependence on China. Throughout all the models, the variable *trade dependence* is positively associated with the onset of partnerships and, with the exception of the random-effects model, this correlation also yields conventional levels of statistical significance. It is further suggested by the data at hand that it is less year-on-year gains in trade dependence but rather the long-term trajectory of commercial relations that accounts for this finding (cf. models 1 and 3 of Table 2). The foreign policy effects of trade, which have been shown to be relevant in prior studies explaining China's increasing international influence (e.g. Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Kastner 2014), can thus be substantiated by this study's findings. This might, on the one hand, indicate that Beijing tends to intensify intergovernmental links with countries that are already strongly geared towards China in economic terms. Other countries' trade dependence on China, however, might also translate into a greater readiness on the part of their governments to consent to the establishment of partnership relations in particular and to Chinese interests in general. This may be of particular relevance in relations characterised by marked power asymmetries.

Turning to the role of regime characteristics and ideological affinities, there is evidence linking domestic institutional characteristics with alignment formation. Models 1 to 5 of Table 2 find a relationship between consolidated democratic institutions in a country and the likelihood of being chosen as a partner by the Chinese government. Arguments on the positive effects of democratic institutions on alliance formation, and on the likelihood of international cooperation in general, seem to be valid in the case of China's partner choice. According to the data, Beijing is generally more inclined to establish cooperative ties with democracies than with authoritarian peers. In addition, a straightforward "ideological dividend" of shared socialist/communist legacies cannot be demonstrated with the data used. However,

20 In fact, a country's actual trade importance for China – i.e. the share of China's total merchandise trade that a country's trade with China accounts for – is not a robust indicator. This might suggest that it is less the actual trade importance but rather the market potential that drives the formation of bilateral alignments.

ideological affinities seem to play a role in national preferences regarding the norms and values directing international society. As models 1 to 5 of Table 2 demonstrate, the variable *FP similarity (IPE)* is positively correlated with the onset of partnerships, indicating that the Chinese government tends to align more often with states that are equally critical of the established liberal international order. As is the case with *trade dependence*, this finding is also determined by the overall level of similarity in foreign policy preferences and not by yearly changes in the run-up to the establishment of partnership relations.

Figure 2. Marginal Effects of the Main Independent Variables on Partner Choice



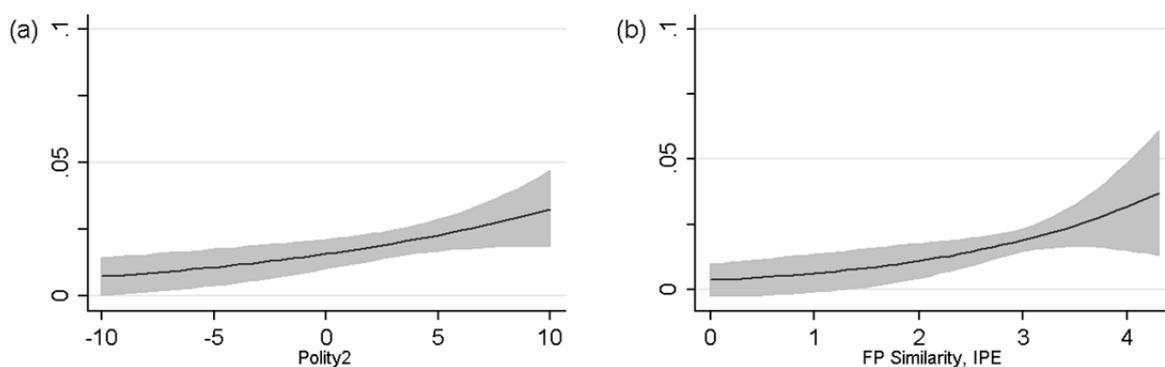
95% confidence intervals shaded in grey.

In sum, the empirical findings support the notion of a rather pragmatic foreign policy outlook on the part of the Chinese government, which is focused on building stronger ties mainly with powerful and economically attractive partners in different world regions. This becomes even clearer when we consider the marginal effects of the significant independent variables in the main model (Model 1 of Table 2). As shown in Figure 2, the probability of *partnership onset* increases with higher levels of the interest-related covariates. This is particularly the case with the measurements of national capability ratios in relation to subregional scores and the ratios of national mineral and petroleum production. Moving from the minimum to the maximum of *capabilities*, for instance, increases the probability of partnership formation from 1.2 percent to 32.4 percent, on average. In the case of *mineral/oil production* the average probability increases from 1.7 percent to 10.9 percent. Also, strong market potential and a high level

of trade dependence make *partnership onset* between four and five times more likely, respectively.

Compared to this, the statistical and substantive significance of the relationship between ideology-related variables and the establishment of partnerships is less pronounced (see Figure 3). While moving from the minimum to the maximum of the variables *polity2* and *FP similarity (IPE)* is also associated with an approximately four- and tenfold increase, respectively, in the variables' marginal effects, in both cases the covariates account on average for a maximum increase of only 3 percent in the probability of *partnership onset*, thus demonstrating that the relationship between the variables and the outcome of interest is far from deterministic.

Figure 3. Marginal Effects of Ideological Affinities on Partner Choice



95% confidence intervals shaded in grey.

Finally, the main model is re-estimated by splitting the sample into two subsamples according to OECD membership. The objective is to compare the effects of the explanatory factors on a group of developing countries and on a group of advanced economies. It should be noted that due to the reduced number of positive outcomes in both groups, one should interpret the results with caution and they should be regarded as tentative rather than authoritative. Nevertheless, proceeding this way suggests that the explanatory power of the factors influencing the likelihood of partnership formation differs according to the sampling of countries (see Table 3). Comparing both country groups indicates, for instance, that economic interests play the dominant role in explaining China's partnership diplomacy towards advanced economies. Interestingly, China appears to be more inclined to align with those OECD countries where democratic institutions are not fully consolidated (see models 4 and 5 of Table 3). In the non-OECD world, however, democratic institutions remain positively associated with *partnership onset*. In addition, national positions within regional power hierarchies seem to be a good predictor of partnership formation among developing countries, suggesting that China seeks to establish closer links with important developing countries and other emerging powers in particular. Finally, it is interesting to note that the overall positive effect of *FP similarity (IPE)* is driven by the developing countries in the full sample. Political positions regarding

the norms and values of the global order thus seem to play a bigger role in China's choice of partners in the developing world, while economic interests drive closer alignment with advanced economies. Although this sounds plausible against the background of China's actual foreign policy outlook, as stated above these results should not be over-interpreted from a statistical perspective.

Table 3. Logistic Regressions on Partner Choice: Developing vs. Developed Countries

	All countries	Non-OECD countries		OECD countries	
	(1) Logit	(2) Logit	(3) Rare-event logit	(4) Logit	(5) Rare-event logit
Market potential	0.438+ (0.226)	0.760 (4.936)	4.527 (5.261)	1.744*** (0.479)	1.284* (0.586)
Oil & metal production $t-1$	10.54+ (6.006)	12.12 (8.544)	10.16 (8.086)	5.090 (18.35)	5.176 (15.32)
Capabilities regional ratio	4.744*** (0.849)	4.936*** (0.898)	4.431*** (1.030)	1.822 (3.069)	1.861 (3.178)
Trade dependence $t-1$	2.857* (1.317)	2.714* (1.334)	2.717+ (1.402)	19.52 (16.48)	15.56 (15.30)
Polity2	0.0856* (0.0374)	0.113** (0.0394)	0.104* (0.0420)	-1.012* (0.516)	-0.868+ (0.521)
Socialist/communist laws	0.311 (0.396)	0.815 (0.689)	0.974 (0.634)	-0.319 (0.957)	-0.112 (0.934)
FP similarity (IPE) $t-1$	0.631+ (0.333)	1.103* (0.528)	0.961+ (0.551)	-1.332 (0.916)	-1.046 (0.799)
Constant	-7.109* (2.771)	-16.87*** (4.622)	-14.73** (4.525)	-19.51* (9.613)	-10.60 (8.878)
Observations	3062	2571	2571	491	491
Area under ROC	0.8872	0.8938	-	0.8789	-
McFadden's adj. R^2	0.183	0.163	-	0.099	-
McFadden's pseudo R^2	0.252	0.259	-	0.314	-

Note: The table displays the results of the standard logistic regression (models 1 to 3), rare-event logit (Model 4), and the random-effects model (models 5 and 6, including dummy variables for year effects). All regressions include no-event polynomials to model time dependence as well as regional and period dummies to control for the respective effects. Robust standard errors clustered by country are reported in parentheses for the standard logistic models. Asterisks denote the levels of statistical significance: * $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Several robustness checks support the validity of the overall statistical findings. As shown above, re-estimating the main model using rare-event logit yields qualitatively similar results (cf. Model 4 of Table 2). The same applies for the random-effects model, which additionally controls for unobserved effects at the country level and includes year dummies (see models 5 and 6, Table 2). The step-by-step inclusion of the independent variables into the main model and likelihood ratio tests as well as a comparison of the reported areas under the ROC curve indicate that adding the variables improves the overall model-fit in a statistically significant

way. Furthermore, correlation matrices and the variance inflation factor (*VIF*) suggest that the reported coefficients are unlikely to be biased due to multicollinearity.²¹

6 Discussion of Results

The study's main objective has been to assess the determinants of alignment choices under the partnership framework. It has argued that strategic partnerships do not follow a threat-based alignment rationale but result instead from economic and strategic interests, as well as ideological affinities. In a nutshell, the statistical analysis shows that in the case of China, partnerships are best described as interest-driven alignments.

Whereas military alliances are organised around traditional security concerns and are designed to serve the aggregation of material capabilities in order to balance against military power and/or threats (e.g. Snyder 2007 [1997]; Walt 1987), the rationale behind partnerships appears to lie in the aggregation of economic and, to a certain degree, diplomatic capabilities. China, for instance, seeks to collaborate with countries that have significant economic and strategic clout in their region and/or beyond. Important economic determinants of alignment are the partner countries' ability to provide markets and natural resources. However, connecting with countries that are more important regionally might also provide gateways to other actors in a region, again to further diplomatic and economic interests. At the global level of politics, the benefits of having various (powerful) partners stem from the weight that these partners can contribute to China's bargaining power in international negotiations, which may not only increase the legitimacy of Chinese foreign policies but which may also be conducive to China's international status aspirations. The latter observation, however, seems to apply mainly to developing regions. China seeks closer ties with important developing countries in particular in order to facilitate (future) collaboration in specific areas where these countries' governments share Chinese views of the basic norms and visions of the global order. The data thus suggests that the design of partnerships as loose and flexible forms of alignment can facilitate cooperative behaviour between states with dissimilar domestic political ideologies, since partnerships help build mutual interests without requiring overly strong commitments from the actors involved. This relates to "[o]ne of the most important features of relational governance," which is "the maintenance of dynamic processes, even without tangible results at the moment" (Qin 2011: 38). This is arguably at the heart of Chinese thinking about the management of social relations.

In fact, the findings imply that explanations of alignment, which can be summarised with the notion of "ideological solidarity," are not easily applicable to interstate ties that take the form of strategic partnerships. Arguments about the positive effects of shared domestic political traits on alignment decisions and on threat perceptions in general, as put forth by, for in-

21 The results of these tests are available upon request.

stance, the literature on alliances and international cooperation (Garcia-Retamero, Müller, and Rousseau 2012; Snyder 2007: 131–133; e.g. Walt 1987: 33–35, 181), not only do not hold for the Chinese case but also even work in the opposite direction. In line with studies showing the positive effects of democratic institutions on the likelihood of intergovernmental cooperation – due to democracies' allegedly greater reliability in complying with commitments (e.g. Leeds et al. 2009) – authoritarian China also seeks alignment with democracies rather than its non-democratic peers or states that share a socialist/communist legacy. China's choice of partners thus supports recent findings on authoritarian cooperation in general. Mattes and Rodríguez (2014), for instance, have shown that country pairs consisting of a democratic regime and a single-party regime such as China or of two single-party regimes tend to cooperate more often than other mixed autocratic–democratic dyads and the majority of pure autocratic dyads. They argue that in addition to democracies, single-party regimes should also be more reliable cooperation partners “given their relatively higher levels of leader accountability, limited policy-making flexibility, and possibly greater transparency” (Mattes and Rodríguez 2014: 534).

7 Conclusion

While it was impossible to think about intergovernmental alignments without referring to the term “alliances” during much of the Cold War period, labels such as “strategic,” “comprehensive,” and “partnership” have seeped into the vocabulary of many countries' foreign policymakers over the past two decades. On the one hand, scholars have argued that military alliances could, “in a world in which the use of force in interstate disputes is likely only to complicate the achievement of the status aspirations,” even impede a country's ability to achieve its diplomatic, security, and economic goals (see also Keohane and Nye 1977; Nadkarni 2010: 46). On the other hand, the increasingly polycentric arrangement of the international system now provides state actors with more interaction opportunities and more flexibility with regard to the choice of partners both at the regional and the global level (Duncan and Siverson 1982: 512). In such a multipolar world, it is argued, “relationships will [...] become more selective and situational” and interstate cooperation increasingly issue-specific (Haass 2008; see also Rosecrance 1966). Against this background, strategic partnership relations have emerged as a viable alternative by providing a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy tool for organising bilateral relations, pursuing shared economic and diplomatic interests, and seeking international status.

The IR literature, however, has not kept pace with the development of these new forms of interstate alignments. This study's primary aim has been to contribute to the emergent body of writings on strategic partnerships by shedding light on the determinants of alignment under the partnership framework from a macro-perspective and by drawing on the case of China's external relations. The empirical findings suggest that partnerships are best de-

scribed as interest-driven alignments. In a nutshell, the Chinese government fosters ties with regionally important countries, attractive markets, large producers of natural resources, and like-minded countries in international affairs through partnerships. The results – while showing that domestic ideological affinities do not influence alignment decisions – corroborate international cooperation theory's assumptions regarding the positive effects of democratic institutions on the formation of international alignments.

Many interesting directions for future research exist, and much more quantitative and qualitative work is needed to better understand this type of intergovernmental alignment. As strategic partnerships vary highly with regard to the actors involved as well as the issue areas and collaboration mechanisms, more detailed comparisons of the existing, and diverse, partnership agreements are needed. For instance, comparisons of China's (or other actors') partnership relations could be made in terms of the hierarchical connections and functional areas of bilateral ties, or analytical frameworks could be employed to study partnerships' life cycles (Parameswaran 2014; e.g. Wilkins 2008). A comparison of China's partnership diplomacy with the diplomatic approaches of democratic countries such as the United States or India could be particularly fruitful as it would allow for a broader discussion of the explanatory factors that determine which bilateral alignments take the form of partnerships. Moreover, this would also shed light on possible differences in these countries' approaches.

Given the doubts about whether or not partnership diplomacy matters and whether strategic partnerships are more “than nice titles to relationships without substance” or “simply talk shops” (Hamilton 2014: 21; Wilkins 2012: 67), studies that distinguish between real and false partnerships – that is, between alignments of words or action and also between a country's different regional approaches – could generate important insights. This could involve studies on not only the associated costs of partnerships but also their measurable benefits in terms of helping states to fulfil their external political, economic, and security goals. In other words, once agreed upon, to what extent do strategic partnerships have an observable effect on the main aspects of bilateral relations? Finally, as this paper has argued from the perspective of the more powerful country in a partnership, it could be worthwhile to explore smaller/less powerful states' rationale for entering into partnership relations with China – for example, from the perspective of patron–client relations in international politics (e.g. Carney 1989; Ciorciari 2015).

Whatever concrete directions the future research may take, there is reason to expect that the study of partnerships can contribute in important ways to our understanding not only of the factors facilitating cooperative behaviour between states for the common pursuit of interests in a “multinodal” world, but also of how states can manage relations and reduce uncertainty about each other's behaviour without directly confronting other actors.

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Appendix

Table A-1. China's Partner Countries, 1993–2014

Region	Country	Year	Short English Name of Partnership	Type
Africa (8)	Algeria	2014	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Angola	2010	strategic partnership	SP
	Ethiopia	2003	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
	Kenya	2013	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
	Nigeria	2005	strategic partnership	SP
	Senegal	2014	long-term friendly and cooperative partnership	P
	South Africa	2000	partnership	P
		2004	strategic partnership	SP
		2010	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Tanzania	2013	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
Americas (9)	Argentina	2001	21 st -century-oriented comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2004	strategic partnership	SP
		2014	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Brazil	1993	strategic partnership	SP
		2012	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Canada	1997	21 st -century-oriented comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2005	strategic partnership	SP
	Chile	2004	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2012	strategic partnership	SP
	Jamaica	2005	friendly partnership for common development	P
	Mexico	1997	cross-century comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2003	strategic partnership	SP
		2013	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Peru	2005	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2008	strategic partnership	SP
		2013	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	US	1997	constructive strategic partnership	SP
	2011	cooperative partnership of mutual respect and benefit	P	
Venezuela	2001	strategic partnership	SP	
	2014	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP	
Asia (23)	Afghanistan	2006	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2012	strategic and cooperative partnership	SP
	Bangladesh	2005	comprehensive partnership of cooperation	P
	Cambodia	2006	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2010	comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation	CSP
	India	1996	constructive cooperative partnership oriented towards the 21 st century	P
		2005	strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity	SP
	Indonesia	2005	strategic partnership	SP
		2013	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Japan	1998	partnership of friendship and cooperation for peace and development	P
	Kazakhstan	2005	strategic partnership	SP
		2011	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Kyrgyzstan	2013	strategic partnership	SP
	Laos	2009	comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation	CSP
	Malaysia	2013	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Maldives		future-oriented comprehensive friendly and cooperative partnership	P
	Mongolia	2003	good-neighborly and mutual trust partnership	P
		2011	strategic partnership	SP
		2014	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Myanmar	2011	comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership	CSP
Nepal	1996	21 st -century-oriented good neighborly and friendly partnership	P	
Pakistan	1996	21 st -century-oriented good neighborly and friendly partnership	P	

Table A-1. China's Partner Countries, 1993–2014, *cont'd*

Region	Country	Year	Short Name of Partnership	Type
Asia (23)		2005	strategic cooperative partnership	SP
	South Korea	1998	21st-century-oriented cooperative partnership	P
		2008	strategic cooperative partnership	SP
	Sri Lanka	2005	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
		2013	strategic cooperative partnership	SP
	Tajikistan	2013	strategic partnership	SP
	Thailand	2012	comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership	CSP
	Timor-Leste	2014	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
	Turkmenistan	2013	strategic partnership	SP
	Uzbekistan	2005	friendly cooperative partnership	P
		2012	strategic partnership	SP
Vietnam	2008	comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership	CSP	
Europe (21)	Belarus	2013	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Belgium	2014	all-around friendly and cooperative partnership	P
	Bulgaria	2014	comprehensive friendly cooperative partnership	P
	Croatia	2005	comprehensive cooperative partnership	P
	Denmark	2008	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Finland	2013	future-oriented new-type cooperative partnership	P
	France	1997	comprehensive partnership	P
		2004	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Germany	2004	partnership in global responsibility	SP
		2014	all-around strategic partnership	CSP
	Greece	2006	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Hungary	2004	friendly cooperative partnership	P
	Ireland	2012	strategic partnership of mutual benefit	SP
	Italy	2004	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Netherlands	2014	open and pragmatic partnership for comprehensive cooperation	P
	Poland	2004	friendly cooperative partnership	P
		2011	strategic partnership	SP
	Portugal	2005	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Romania	2004	comprehensive friendly and cooperative partnership	P
	Russia	1994	constructive partnership	P
		1996	partnership of strategic cooperation	SP
	2011	comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination	CSP	
Spain	2005	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP	
Ukraine	2011	strategic partnership	SP	
UK	1998	comprehensive partnership	P	
	2004	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP	
Serbia	2009	strategic partnership	SP	
Middle East (3)	Egypt	2014	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Qatar	2014	strategic partnership	SP
	United Arab Emirates	2012	strategic partnership	SP
Oceania (3)	Australia	2013	strategic partnership of mutual trust and mutual benefit	SP
		2014	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP
	Fiji	2006	important cooperative partnership	P
	New Zealand	2014	comprehensive strategic partnership	CSP

Source: Author's compilation based on the English and Chinese versions of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs webpage and multiple English and Chinese news reports.

Note: The table reports all of China's 67 partner countries in the period 1993–2014 and the evolution of partnership relations. The categories indicate whether a partnership is a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP), a strategic partnership (SP), or a partnership (P).

Table A-2. Descriptive Statistics

	Count	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Market potential (GDP/distance)	5004	.059992	.3040356	1.44e-06	4.559324
Oil & metal production (ratio of world production)	4739	.0129087	.0290606	0	.230241
Capabilities (regional ratio)	4692	.1118264	.1986224	0	.9830905
Trade dependence	4544	.060082	.0803688	0	.7539229
Trade dependence, year-on-year change	4363	.0043785	.0258662	-.3869492	.4890926
Polity2	4218	2.873874	6.768381	-10	10
Socialist/communist laws (legal origin)	5022	.1666667	.3727151	0	1
FP similarity (IPE)	4840	3.526662	.7700771	2.17e-07	4.378
FP similarity (IPE), year-on-year change	4615	.0026379	.2233783	-1.916	2.303

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