

SUNGKYUN CHINA INSIGHT

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The Biden administration in the United States has continued and intensified the Trump administration's policies of confronting and containing China, leading some to dub it "Trump 2.0." Specifically, it has strengthened multilateral security and economic mechanisms to counter China, including elevating the status of the QUAD, a quadrilateral security dialogue involving the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia, to a summit level and launching the Australia-UK-US Security Partnership (AUKUS). Moreover, it established the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) with 13 countries and the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) with the E.U. and nine other countries. The administration is also working to establish the "Fab 4," an alliance among the U.S., South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan to secure semiconductor supply chains and reduce dependence on China.

While China has criticized the U.S.'s multilateral diplomacy as "bloc politics," it has also been expanding its own blocs. For example, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit last September, China allowed Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to become dialogue partners and virtually endorsed Iran's membership. During the BRICS foreign ministers meeting in May, China invited guests from nine countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The following month, when it hosted a BRICS summit, China invited representatives from 13 countries for a high-level dialogue, and after the meeting, Argentina and Iran applied for membership in the group. In December, during a state visit to Saudi Arabia, President Xi Jinping attended the first China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit and the first China-Arab States Summit, which respectively include six and 21 countries.

In addition to its focus on bloc politics, China has also been working to develop ties with U.S. allies. Specifically, it has devoted significant time and effort to enhancing its relationship with Saudi Arabia, a key player in the Middle East. In fact, according to a 2022 RAND report analyzing 12 Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia was the country Chinese senior political leaders visited most frequently between 2009 and 2018. In 2016, markedly, Xi Jinping made a trip to the country and agreed to elevate the bilateral relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” which was fulfilled during his recent state visit to the country.

China invested the largest share of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) funds in Saudi Arabia during the first half of 2022. This was partly due to the compatibility between the BRI and Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, an ambitious project to transform the Kingdom’s economic structure and public infrastructure. China is now Saudi Arabia’s largest trading partner, with trade between the two countries valued at US\$87.3 billion in 2021, which is more than three times the value of trade between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. (US\$24.8 billion).

China’s keen interest in Saudi Arabia is driven by its need for oil. China became a net oil importer in 1993, and its oil self-sufficiency rate is now less than 30%. Currently, almost a fifth of its oil imports come from Saudi Arabia, which in turn sends over a quarter of its oil exports to China.

Another key factor driving China’s engagement with Saudi Arabia is strategic competition with the U.S. Saudi Arabia is an important U.S. ally with around 3,000 U.S. troops on its soil and, its imports of weapons from the U.S. amounted to more than US\$17 billion, almost 73 times more than its imports of weapons from China. Nonetheless, its relationship with the U.S. has been strained since the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi columnist for the Washington Post, and a joint Saudi-Russian decision to reduce oil production. Taking advantage of the bilateral estrangement, China has sought to pull Saudi Arabia to its side and, at the same time, drive a wedge between the two allies. In fact, it has aligned with Saudi Arabia in opposing the “politicization” of human rights issues and interference in internal affairs. Besides, China has helped Saudi Arabia to develop 5G networks through Huawei, which has been sanctioned by the U.S., and reportedly assisted with the country’s development of ballistic missiles and civilian nuclear programs.

In addition to Saudi Arabia, China has also sought to deepen its ties with another American ally in East Asia: the Philippines. On the one hand, the Philippines has been responsive to U.S. requests. For example, it recently allowed the U.S. to open four additional bases in its territory according to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), signed by the two countries in 2014. Supposedly, the new locations will enhance U.S. capability to defend Taiwan and the South China Sea against China. On the other hand, despite the territorial dispute with China over the Spratly Islands, it took a pro-China (or anti-America) stance under Duterte and now seeks an independent foreign policy to be “a friend to all, an enemy to none,” quoting the current President Marcos Jr.

The Philippines’ diplomatic strategy of swinging between the United States and China, also known as hedging, has opened up opportunities for China to draw the American ally closer to it. Alternatively, it could be argued that this balancing act has prompted both superpowers to vie for the country’s favor, ultimately serving the Philippines’ national interests. In 2021, China played a crucial role in assisting the Philippines in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic by providing face masks, test kits, vaccines, and cash. In 2022, then Vice President of China, Wang Qishan, attended the presidential inauguration of Marcos Jr., and a week later, China’s Foreign Minister at the time and now director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Office, Wang Yi, met with him to express China’s willingness to deepen cooperation with the Philippines and usher in a “golden era” in their ties. Earlier this year, Xi Jinping invited Marcos Jr. to China to jointly declare their commitment to strengthening the “comprehensive strategic partnership” between the two countries and expanding cooperation in new areas, such as defense and security. China is the Philippines’ largest trading partner, and, as it did for Saudi Arabia, it has approved Huawei to build 5G networks in the country.

China's efforts to win over American allies appear to be yielding results to some extent. Surveys conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on the Saudi public reveal that since 2020, they have preferred China to the United States. In a poll conducted in June 2020, 49% of Saudis responded that a good relationship with China was important for their country, whereas 37% said the same for the United States. As for Filipinos, their perception of China is mixed. They prioritize "strong economic ties with China" over "territorial disputes with China," but their lack of trust in the country is still apparent. A survey conducted by Pulse Asia in June 2022 showed that only 33% of people in the Philippines trust China.

It remains to be seen how the U.S. perceives and responds to its allies using the "hedging" strategy and China's efforts to draw them closer. Observing this will be crucial for the Philippines and Saudi Arabia. And, the findings will be a useful reference for South Korea, which is also geopolitically positioned between and strategically sandwiched by the U.S. and China.

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