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## Predicting Allies' Choices in an Era of US-China Competition

### *Quick take:*

- *America's allies are increasingly faced with competing demands for allegiance by Beijing and Washington on a range of security and economic issues.*
- *As competition intensifies, hedging—an attractive choice for many countries—becomes less of a viable option.*
- *International relations expert Dr. Victor Cha has developed a model to predict allies' choices based on their degree of investment in the existing world order and faith in the US as protector of that order.*
- *While such choices might give the impression of disloyalty to Washington or fealty to Beijing, Cha said, they do not necessarily represent a fundamental strategic shift.*



*PhotoAlto-MilenaBoniek via Getty Images*

HONOLULU (Nov. 22, 2021) -- In today's environment of growing US-China competition, America's allies are increasingly faced with a series of what international relations authority Dr. Victor Cha calls "binary choices" between the two powers.

"Open competition in relations between the United States and China has dramatically changed the environment in which the US must operate," Cha said at a recent East-West Center webinar titled "[Difficult Choices: Alliance Decision-Making in Context of US-China Strategic Competition](#)." "Governments around the world have to contend with demands for allegiance by Beijing and Washington on a range of security and economic issues."

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How will different nations react to the growing pressure? Can we anticipate whether they will align with the US or China on a given issue, and in what ways traditional allegiances might shift? Cha, who is an East-West Center visiting fellow in addition to being Professor of Government and Vice Dean at Georgetown University as well as Senior Vice President at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has developed a model for predicting such scenarios.



### Three variables

Cha, who served as director of Asian affairs on the National Security Council from 2004 to 2007, examined six military treaty allies of the US—Australia, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Japan, and South Korea—who also are reliant on China as a trading partner. Analyzing more than 40 instances of binary choices between 2013 and 2020, he concluded that on any given issue, three variables affect whether an ally is likely to maintain strong links with the United States, delink from the US, or hedge its bet by pursuing links with both sides.

The first variable is that as competition intensifies, hedging—an attractive choice for many countries—becomes less and less of a viable option, since choosing one side inevitably alienates the other.

The second variable is whether the nation sees itself as what Cha calls a “shaper” or a “taker” in the international community. Shapers are large powers that are invested in maintaining the existing rules-based international order. Takers, by contrast, are often less influential on the world stage, so they are more likely to act in short-term self-interest. Takers, Cha said, are more likely to delink from the US than shapers.

The third variable is the ally’s perception of the US as a reliable guardian of the rules-based order. “States that have confidence in the United States as a guardian ... will be more inclined to resist binary choices imposed by China,” said Cha, “and those that do not will be more inclined to accommodate China.”

### **‘Quiet’ delinking**

Cha’s study found that some allies “quietly but persistently” delinked with the US and aligned with China—a departure from the conventional wisdom predicting more hedging or linking with the US as a response to growing Chinese influence. Among the cases he studied, Cha found only three instances of hedging.

Delinking with the US doesn’t necessarily represent ideological affinity with China, he said. Rather, he described these shifts as “a defensive reaction to the threat of Chinese economic retaliation, absent confidence in the resiliency of the patron ally.”

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These realignments also do not represent a rejection of the rules-based order, he asserted. In most cases allies delink on isolated issues—such as [Huawei](#), [protests in Hong Kong](#), or [joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#), among others—while honoring military and treaty commitments with the US. And so far China is not challenging those “staples of the alliance,” Cha said.

### **Linkers**

Australia is a “hybrid” between a shaper and taker nation, according to Cha. While it’s invested in the rules-based order, it depends on China economically. But clearly it retains strong faith in US as a reliable guardian, as the recent [AUKUS security alignment](#) demonstrates. Cha’s model anticipated, therefore, that Australia would link with the US more than delink.

The same is true for Japan, which sees itself as a shaper and has confidence in US guardianship. In practice, Cha said, both Australia and Japan more often “doubled-down on the relationship with the United States” when faced with a binary choice.

### **Delinkers**

Germany is also a hybrid shaper/taker state, but it has lost more faith in the US as a reliable guardian, according to Cha. As a result, his model accurately predicted it would delink on a range of issues.

Brazil and Chile, both takers that are skeptical of US leadership, were also predicted to delink and did. Even South Korea, a hybrid state that is still confident in US guardianship but is heavily reliant on China, delinked from the US more than it hedged or linked, Cha said.

### **Policy implications**

In this new environment, traditional allies will increasingly delink with the US on a range of smaller issues while maintaining core security commitments, Cha said: “Allies may accept Chinese invitations to join a bank like AIIB but will not accept Chinese demands to expel US military bases.” Nevertheless, he cautioned, taken together these choices have a gradual cumulative impact.

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Cha listed five policy implications of his model. The first is that the choice to delink may be “situational rather than dispositional.” While such choices might give the impression of disloyalty to Washington or fealty to Beijing, he said, they do not necessarily represent a fundamental strategic shift.

Second is the importance of reputation. Shaper states that value their reputation as supporters of the international order might be more willing to make difficult choices.

Third is America’s ability to demonstrate staying power as an international guardian. If the US consistently stands up to China, allies might be more willing to link with it, Cha said. Conversely, when US rhetoric casts doubt on its support for allies, it can have a “feedback effect,” turning “shapers into takers in the international system.”

Fourth is the importance of cooperation. “It’s much easier to deal with China as a group,” Cha said. “And it’s much easier to see oneself as a shaper when you’re dealing with China as group than when you are dealing with China alone.”

Lastly, the reality of allies delinking with the US should be factored into policy planning. “If we think we’re winning the competition on supply chains but at the same time our allies are quietly accommodating China,” he said, “that’s a liability.”

<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/news-center/east-west-wire/predicting-allies-choices-in-era-us-china-competition>

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