

Chinese politics & policy

'Speed dating' with Xi: China shows off its new friends at Beijing Winter Olympics

Beijing touts 'solidarity' with partners such as Moscow in face of US-led diplomatic boycott



Xi Jinping has shaken off a US-led diplomatic boycott of the Games to hold a series of meetings with foreign leaders © Ng Han Guan/AP

Edward White in Seoul 4 HOURS AGO

As Argentina's president Alberto Fernández backed out of Beijing's Great Hall of the People, his ambassador delivered a final message to Chinese leader Xi Jinping: "Without the Communist party, there would be no new China!"

The jingoistic line — the title of a famous revolutionary song — was received warmly. "Well said, well said," Xi responded last week from behind a surgical mask embossed with the red flag of the People's Republic of China. "Thank you for your support."

The exchange — later broadcast by Chinese state media — was one of a series of meetings held between China's leaders and more than 30 autocrats, democratic leaders and royals on the sidelines of the Winter Olympics.

They came to Beijing despite US calls for a [diplomatic boycott](#) in protest at Xi's crackdowns on [Xinjiang](#) and [Hong Kong](#) and highlighted China's new standing in the international order, according to former government officials and China foreign policy experts.

"The vision of foreign heads of state speed dating with Xi Jinping in Beijing is something to behold," said Nadège Rolland, a former senior adviser to the French defence ministry, who compared it with the ancient Chinese tributary system.

The visitors included Vladimir Putin of Russia, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's

president, as well as Imran Khan, Pakistan's prime minister, Aleksandar Vucic, president of Serbia and the leaders of each of the five central Asian former Soviet states.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had been scheduled to travel to Beijing but cancelled, but Saudi Princess Reema bint Bandar, who is also the kingdom's ambassador to the US, did attend, along with Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto leader of the United Arab Emirates, and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar's emir.

Their warming ties with Beijing clashed with US president Joe Biden's aims to rebuild American partnerships in response to China's rising military assertiveness and expanding global influence.

China has also [offered support for Moscow](#) as the west opposes Russia's military build-up on the Ukraine border, deepening Beijing's divide with Washington.



Xi joined Russia in opposing Nato expansion after a summit in Beijing with President Vladimir Putin, a significant step up in China's backing for Moscow © Aleksey Druzhinin/Sputnik/Reuters

The Olympics, according to Dawn Murphy, a foreign policy expert at the US Air War College and author of *China's Rise in the Global South*, has illustrated that "China has a lot of friends in the international system" after years of building stronger economic and political bonds, particularly in the developing world.

"Many of these countries have a deep appreciation for China's non-interference and

non-intervention stance, associated with sovereignty,” she added.

The meetings have been used to unveil a number of initiatives, including Xi backing Putin’s [opposition to Nato expansion](#) and new Sino-Russia gas deals. Argentina joined the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi’s flagship infrastructure building programme, paving the way for [waves of investment](#) into South America. Analysts expect new Chinese arms sales to Pakistan to follow Khan’s meeting with Xi.

Rolland, now with the National Bureau of Asian Research, a US think-tank, noted that in exchange for trade and investment the leaders paid “homage” and offered “deference” to Xi, and have endorsed the Chinese governance model.

Such exchanges are part of an “older worldview, that is actually deeply ingrained in the way that Chinese elites are thinking about their own role on the global stage right now”, she said.

Xi’s meetings with the leaders of Muslim-majority countries, such as Khan, spotlighted their [silence](#) over China’s actions in Xinjiang, the north-western region where more than 1mn Uyghurs have been interned.

“Part of them not wanting to criticise China is because they don’t want to bring themselves criticism of their own internal human rights issues,” Murphy said, adding: “Many Arab countries do not necessarily see the Uyghurs as being ethnically the same as them because they come from Turkic origins.”

The number of leaders and dignitaries in Beijing was still well below the more than 80 present inside the Bird’s Nest stadium for the opening of the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008, which included former US president [George W Bush](#) and Nicolas Sarkozy of France.

The stark difference in mood, according to Paul Haenle, a former senior US security and China adviser who travelled with Bush to the Games, reflected that the world was “dealing with a very different China today”.

“There is an excitement for the athletes and for the competition. But it is not an excitement for China,” said Haenle, now director of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, a think-tank.

In 2008, there was hope over China’s integration into the international system. But “China feels they’ve integrated into the system as far as they want to and it’s about the international order accommodating to China’s differences and preferences”.

Xi's burst of face-to-face diplomacy marked a change for the Chinese leader, who has not left his country since the start of the pandemic two years ago.

China's media has attempted to portray the meetings and limited [international boycott](#) — nine governments, including the UK, Canada and Australia joined the US-led effort — as an act of “solidarity”. Beijing has also touted the “close friendship” between Xi and Putin.

“The presence of the guests, despite the US-led farce of a so-called ‘diplomatic boycott’ of the Games, attests to another flop of the US,” one commentator wrote for Xinhua, the state news agency.

However, despite signs of closer Sino-Russian ties Haenle questioned the enthusiasm in the halls of power in Beijing for [Xi's “bromance” with Putin](#).

“When I talk to Chinese government officials about Russia policy, I don't get the sense that there's a great deal of shared culture and warmth between the two peoples,” he said.

Additional reporting by Lucinda Elliott in Buenos Aires and Samer Al-Atrush in Jeddah

**This article has been updated to reflect that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman did not attend the Beijing Winter Olympics.*

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