

Opinion **Geopolitics**

America, take heed – China is winning the diplomacy race

Beijing has invested in on-the-ground presence in crucial developing nations

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The extent of China's diplomatic network reflects the breadth of its global ambitions © Pedro Pardo/AFP via Getty Images

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In America and China's contest for global primacy, relative power is often judged through the lens of economic or military resources. But in at least one often overlooked measure of global reach — the size of diplomatic networks — China has been in the lead for years.

In 2019, the Lowy Institute's [Global Diplomacy Index](#) revealed China had eclipsed the US in operating the world's most expansive diplomatic network. By the end of 2023, as Joe Biden attempted to reassert US global leadership, the gap had narrowed again to only three diplomatic posts separating China (274) and the US (271).

Thin as this margin may be, the pre-eminence of China's network reflects the breadth of its global ambitions.

Diplomacy is important because it is an enabler. When used effectively, it allows a country to advance its strategic objectives, capitalise on economic opportunities, safeguard the interests of its citizens or shape the international system to its benefit.

Physical presence does not guarantee influence. The effectiveness of any country's foreign service is, of course, a key variable. For example, China's abrasive "wolf warrior" diplomacy damaged its reputation in many countries, particularly western ones. Conversely, in those same countries, a key diplomatic advantage for the US has been its soft power — its ability to attract others to its ideas and values, including the notion of the "liberal international rules-based order".

But while that order still holds sway in the west, it isn't a central guiding force in much of the developing world. Many of these countries take a more pragmatic approach to balancing their interests. Most seek to avoid overtly choosing between the superpowers.

Diplomatic networks matter most in these countries. For them, a foreign post symbolises commitment and investment. Without an on-the-ground presence, it is harder for an external power to cultivate deep relationships with decision makers. In this light, the relative regional weight of the US and China's diplomatic networks is revealing.

China has a larger diplomatic footprint than the US in Africa (60:56 diplomatic posts), north-east and south-east Asia (44:27), the Pacific Islands (9:8) and central Asia (7:6).

Meanwhile, the US retains its lead in Europe (78:73), as well as North and Central America (40:24) and south Asia (12:10).

Both countries have an equal number of posts in the Middle East (17) and South America (15).

The strength of China's networks in Asia, Africa and the Pacific is no coincidence. These regions are the new focal points of great power competition, due to their strategic locations, resources and growing economic importance. China's diplomatic investments in these regions run parallel to Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, which, over the past decade, has channelled infrastructure loans to the same areas in a bid to build influence.

In south-east Asia — the geopolitical fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific region — China

has a convincing lead of 29 posts to America's 16, many of which are consulates. This gives depth as well as breadth to its regional diplomacy. While an embassy holds primary responsibility for managing the government-to-government relations in capitals, consulates deepen a country's reach through trade, business and cultural outreach.

In the strategically critical Pacific Islands, the margin is narrowing, with the US and China both announcing post openings recently that would bring them neck and neck. But the US is fighting to reassert itself as partner of choice, having promised and not delivered a "strategic pivot" of resources under Barack Obama.

Ultimately, diplomacy is a long game: it is an investment in relationships with a view to exerting influence when it counts. In regions that have become used to being courted by great powers, consistency matters.

Here, China has an inherent advantage. It has been able to steadily direct diplomatic resources into regions of strategic importance over time, without the ebb and flow of attention that has sometimes hampered the influence of liberal democracies, which are more susceptible to shifts in political priorities.

China's diplomatic advantage is not insurmountable. But contesting this lead will require deliberate and consistent American investments in diplomacy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. With a pivotal presidential election and wars in the Middle East and Ukraine stretching Washington's attention and resources, that is far from assured.

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