

# Dr Nick Smith

## The importance of bona fide friendships to international politics: China's quest for friendships that matter



Nicholas Ross Smith is an Associate Professor of International Studies at the University of Nottingham (Ningbo Campus). His research coalesces around the regional implications of great power competition, with a particular interest in EU, Russian, and Chinese foreign policies. He is the author of two books and his work has been published in journals such as *The Journal of Politics*, *Global Policy*, *International Relations*, and *European Security*.

Friendship is an important aspect of a state's ability to succeed when engaging in great power politics, especially with regards to international order reshaping or building. Through engaging with the extant literature on friendship in International Relations (IR), it is argued that while friendships tend to arise along strategic, normative, cultural, or historic dimensions, the most important (and enduring) friendships are bilateral relationships which encompass all four of these dimensions – what this article terms a bona fide international friendship. With China's rise continuing apace, the importance for it to have friends, especially powerful ones, in the international political arena is self-evident. This article examines the concept of friendship in the scope of China's foreign policymaking, identifying an increased effort – especially through cultural diplomacy – to cultivate friendships. However, this article argues that as it currently stands, China does not appear to have any significant bona fide international friends beyond Pakistan. Russia may yet emerge as a serious contender as a bona fide friend for China but substantial headaches may arise in that friendship in the coming decades. Thus, for China, building meaningful bona fide international friendships with prominent international powers is a critical task ahead because international orders underpinned by bona fide international friendships of important powers will be more resilient than those orders that are not.

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