

A ‘new type of great power relations’? Hardly.

by Brad Glosserman

Brad Glosserman (brad@pacforum.org) is executive director of Pacific Forum CSIS.

Concerned about the ‘inevitability’ of a clash between the world’s sole remaining superpower and a fast rising challenger, China says it seeks a “new type of great power relations.” Look closely, however, and China seems to want a very traditional type of great power relationship, one characterized by the familiar notion of spheres of influence. While Beijing doesn’t use that term, its logic and actions lead to that conclusion.

This special relationship is reserved for a distinct class of countries – great powers. The US plainly qualifies, but it isn’t clear who else makes the list. There is no talk about a need for a new type of relationship when Beijing discusses ties with Russia, India, or Japan. They may be new poles in a multipolar world – along with fellow BRICS Brazil and South Africa – but they don’t seem to merit consideration as or rise to the level of “great powers.”

Former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi provided some insight into who else might make the cut and the criteria being used when he warned participants at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact.” So too did a column in last week’s *China Daily* – the mouthpiece for the Chinese leadership – that excoriated Europeans for considering sanctions against Chinese solar panel exports. “Times change and power rises and falls. Still this has not changed the deep-rooted, haughty attitudes of certain Europeans.” It looks like the definition of a “great power” is straightforward and is rooted in traditional conceptions of national power.

This emphasis on raw power seems to undermine another core element of Chinese diplomacy, Beijing’s much vaunted “five principles of peaceful coexistence.” It is especially difficult to square Yang’s comment with principle number four, “equality and mutual benefit.” His “facts” – and certainly his tone – challenge the very notion of equality among states.

It’s hard to see what’s “new.” China continues to reject the G2, but this “new type of relationship” has echoes of the US-Soviet Union duopoly, even though every Chinese interlocutor reflexively recoils from the thought of a Cold War framework for the US-China relationship. After all, it is based on two countries with “special responsibilities” reaching an agreement on rules of the road to minimize the possibility of a conflict or confrontation.

While the informality and unscripted nature of the Obama-Xi summit last week were a welcome departure from most US-China meetings, atmospherics are no substitute for substance. Parsing Chinese comments on what this “new relationship” would include – and commentary, as opposed to exhortations, is very thin – provides some insight into the nuts and bolts of this “relationship.” The centrality of trust to the bilateral relationship is a constant in every discussion of US-China relations. Former President Hu Jintao made this point in opening remarks to the May 2012 Strategic & Economic Dialogue, in which he emphasized “to build a new type of relations between China and the United States, we need to trust each other.” That this relationship is built upon trust, rather than distrust, distinguishes it from the Cold War.

But the burden for building trust falls primarily on US shoulders. In an article written before he became ambassador to the United States, then Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai and foreign ministry colleague Pang Hanzhao explained that “China has never done anything to undermine the US core interests and major concerns.” In contrast, “what the United States has done in matters concerning China’s core and important interests and major concerns is unsatisfactory.”

China’s “core interests” have traditionally been defined as Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang; recently there is debate whether the concept has been expanded to include the South China Sea and the Senkaku/Daioyu Islands. Either way, there is a geographic consistency that sheds light on what “a new type of great power relations” looks like, and the emerging contours resemble the Monroe Doctrine: a Chinese sphere of influence where Beijing gets the first and last word on developments of importance in Asia. (If other “great powers” could be identified, this arrangement would look like an old-fashioned Concert of Power. New? Hardly!) President Xi hinted at this arrangement in his remarks last Friday in Sunnylands, when he said “the vast Pacific Ocean has enough space for the two large countries of China and the United States.” This also illuminates the meaning of “mutual respect” in US-China relations. In Chinese eyes, “respect” means “deference” to Chinese wishes when discussing issues of concern to Beijing.

What *is* new is China’s reluctance, despite being a great power, to assume responsibilities typically associated with such status. When pressed to act on the international stage, Beijing insists that it is still a developing nation, preoccupied with internal issues. The most potent contribution it can make is getting its own house in order and ensuring that it doesn’t contribute to instability beyond its borders. The US cannot and should not accept this premise. China’s very size gives it disproportionate international impact.

China’s demand for status is rooted not just in its size, but also in a national identity that mirrors that of the US. Both

countries consider themselves exceptional countries, profoundly different from others. China is the Middle Kingdom, while the US is the City on the Hill. That identity, along with the historic declaration of a US sphere of influence, no doubt feed Chinese efforts to gain more influence over its neighborhood.

Unfortunately for China, other countries in its “neighborhood” worry about Beijing’s ambitions and engage the US to help defend themselves. They may not be “great powers” but they are important nevertheless. US-China relations are critical, but Beijing cannot expect “a new type of great power relations” with Washington to constitute a blank check to China in Asia.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.