

The Path to a New Type of Great Power Relations

by Patrick M. Cronin

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Achieving a “new type of great power relations” with the United States is a cornerstone of China’s emerging foreign policy. But it remains a brittle one. Although first expressed by former President Hu Jintao, the term has achieved elevated status since President Xi Jinping’s summit meeting with President Barack Obama at Sunnylands, California, some four months ago. To some Americans, the concept seems as hazy as the Beijing air, and that’s even after lengthy discussions with myriad Chinese interlocutors. Indeed, the more one attempts to arrive at a rigorous (or at least less nebulous) definition of the phrase, the more one is bound to be frustrated.

At one level, that of stability, the phrase may be an attempt to arrest a slide in bilateral relations toward a zero-sum strategic competition. Peking University Professor Wang Jisi warned of such a trend. As Xi ascended to the leadership of China, he sought to find a way to stabilize major power relations, starting with the relationship between the world’s largest power and the world’s largest reemerging power. Confrontational relations with the US could undermine the realization of the “China dream,” another amorphous concept but one that can be economically benchmarked against two centennials: of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021 and of the People’s Republic of China in 2049.

At another level of analysis, however, the new type of great power relations could be an attempt to place the US and China on a fully equal footing; call this a search for parity. This argument is fueled by the pervasive and sometimes triumphalist Chinese perception that US decline is inexorable and China’s rise is unstoppable. Some Chinese scholars looking at the fundamentals of the US economy admit it has many strengths, and others looking at China’s economy detect in it serious hurdles. Yet the rising-China-until-it-overtakes-the-US scenario-by-the-middle-of-the-century is so compelling and popular a vision that Xi is trying to leverage it vis-à-vis the US while he can.

Added to these twin perspectives is a third interpretation for which rational US policymakers may find hard to accept: namely, that the phrase has no content and no clear destination in mind and is “ad hocery.” Chinese leaders, beset with so many challenges and so inwardly focused on order and stability may be deploying the phrase as little more than warmed-over peaceful coexistence theory. China may be famous for long-term strategic thinking, but today’s Chinese

leaders worry about the short-term environment and don’t have the luxury of grand strategy. Of course, this does not explain the future trajectory of a rising China increasingly interconnected with a globalized world.

Because a new type of great power relations can be read on so many levels, does not mean it lacks utility. China and the US do require a strategic framework in which to work on relations, building a stable, cooperative relationship to advance larger regional and global peace and prosperity. But while top-level officials mull over the framework, even more important and urgent is for the two governments and societies to fill in the contents. The agenda is now so broad and all-encompassing – from climate change, energy and the environment, to trade, investment and intellectual property rights – that it is easy to lose sight of those issues that could derail the China-US relationship with a single, swift crisis.

The uncertainty about the future of relations between the world’s greatest power and the great reemerging power is pivotal. The degree to which US-China relations are cooperative or conflicting will reverberate throughout the Asia-Pacific region and the globe – even in an increasingly multi-centric world.

Most Americans, while recognizing and generally applauding China’s modernization and economic and political development, believe that peaceful cooperation should be built on a foundation of common rules, norms, and respect. China will be allowed to be norm-maker and not just a norm-taker, too, but that will have to be worked out in an agreeable fashion over time and taking into account other countries as well. China’s foreign minister has talked about a new policy focused on justice and international law, and within those ideals there may be room for achieving a greater sense of common security.

But because the new type of great power relationship is at best aspirational and at worst a smoke screen designed to hijack any agenda that slows China’s rise, the US and China need to find a way to make progress on tough, hard-security challenges. They need to come together over the common goal of stability, building effective cooperation across a range of measures designed to reduce and manage risk and avert unnecessary strategic competition. This obviously would need to take place amidst a comprehensive agenda, with ample focus on economic, the environment, diplomacy, and people-to-people engagement. I focus on the hard security challenges because they pose a significant opportunity cost, heighten the risk of inadvertent conflict, and could make strategic competition a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Three steps should be taken on the hard security agenda.

First, the US and China need to double down negotiating maritime risk-reduction measures. China is probing to see if

Americans will accept that a litmus test of a new partnership is whether the US will “discipline” its “revisionist” ally, Japan and compel it to acknowledge a dispute in the East China Sea. Moreover, refocusing Chinese energies on improving relations with its neighbors, including through generous economic incentives, may have some general benefits, but it will remove the unease most of China’s neighbors harbor about a rising China’s future intentions. An approach designed to isolate Japan and the Philippines is both unhelpful and bound to fail.

Sovereignty disputes will not be resolved anytime soon and the best way to manage intractable differences is to ensure that all parties refrain from using force to alter the status quo. Numerous measures designed to reduce and manage risk in the maritime domain could help ensure that growing tensions around the South China Sea are kept in check. Even more importantly, they could help ensure that frequent Chinese incursions and Japanese countermoves around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands do not erupt into conflict (as one Chinese professor told me was bound to happen before 2020). Both bilateral mechanisms and support for ASEAN-centered multilateral institutions require heavy Chinese and US investment.

Second, the US and China need to stem the threat of nuclear proliferation. Kim Jong-un’s North Korea poses the gravest threat to peace in Asia. Beijing and Washington need to do more than go through the motions of returning to Six-Party Talks. If and when North Korea undertakes a fourth nuclear test, for instance, the two powers need to be prepared to mobilize their power and an international coalition to stop North Korea from deploying or exporting nuclear weapons. Similarly, in the Persian Gulf, China should understand that Iranian nuclear proliferation could lead to a number of unstable Gulf countries acquiring nuclear weapons – hardly the regional environment a China that is increasingly dependent on Gulf oil should want to see develop.

Third, US and Chinese officials should build on strategic dialogues and find new ways to limit strategic competition, including in domains such as cyber space or outer space. As the US seeks to further downsize its nuclear arsenal and China perhaps contemplates a great leap toward parity it is vital for the two countries to have a serious dialogue about how to avoid miscalculation and a largely avoidable element of an arms race.

With these actions, civilizations may not be fully harmonized and a new type of great power relationship may not be established. But we may be a step closer to forging a bilateral relationship that recognizes that the two largest powers have far more to gain through cooperation than conflict.

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