

How to Build a New Model of Major Power Relationship Between China and the United States

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At the fourth round of the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue held in Beijing in 2012, one of the main topics for discussion was the commitment to jointly build a new China-proposed model of major power relationship between China and the United States based on mutual respect, mutual benefit and win-win. This proposal reflected the significant progress made between the two countries and suggested a potentially bright future for the bilateral relationship. To conduct bilateral in-depth discussion and common exploration and practice, and thereby to promote the universal establishment of a new model of relationship different from those between major countries in the past, is of great and far-reaching positive significance, not only for the future development of the Sino-US relationship, but also for the future development of the world.

I. Proposition and Its Significance

In fact, at the opening session of the first round of the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue held in 2009, Dai Bingguo, State Councilor of the People's Republic of China, actually put forward this proposal¹ in his speech. It was a pity the United States did not give a positive response to this suggestion at that time. China's proposal is not without foundation, but rather based on the important recognition of the following three aspects.

The first is the understanding of the international situation and the nature of major power relationships. After the end of Cold War, Chinese perspectives on the international situation and structures and changes of major power relationships have continuously developed. China has put forward a range of views from the end of the bipolar world to the continuous strengthening of multipolarisation and globalisation, from the formation of a world structure of "one superpower and many great powers" to the presentation of new features of major power relationships (the initial summary is that major power relations include competition

¹ See remarks by Dai Bingguo, State Councilor of the People's Republic of China at the opening session of the first round of the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue held on 25 October 2009, "We are part of the efforts to make history in the 21st century, where countries of different social systems, ideologies, cultural traditions and development stages come together to meet challenges. We are part of the efforts to build a new model of relationship between two major countries, a relationship rooted in mutual respect, harmonious coexistence and win-win cooperation in an age of globalisation. Can we make it happen? If we do our best, then "Yes, we can!"

and cooperation, mutual restriction and mutual reliance, and that common interests and interdependence are obviously deepening), from the group rise of emerging major countries to the irreversible development of multipolarisation, globalisation and informatisation in the world. These judgements and perspectives have shaped China's basic understanding of changes in the world, especially the importance of major power relationships.

The second is the exploration and understanding of China's development pathway (this article mainly focuses on its foreign policy). After the end of Cold War, China has put forward different propositions, from adhering to the strategy of reform and opening-up, and an independent and peaceful foreign policy to the concept of a peaceful rise in this century, adhering to the path of peaceful development and cooperation, from building a harmonious world to promoting peaceful development and win-win cooperation and achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. These propositions reflect the continuous refining of China's understanding and positioning of its own development pathway, especially its relationship with the outside world.

Finally, the nature of the Sino-US relationship. After a serious deterioration in Sino-US relations in the summer of 1989, China's propositions changed from "Sino-US relations must be improved"² to "enhancing trust, reducing trouble, developing cooperation and avoiding confrontation"³; from "neither enemy nor friend, and like enemy like friend"⁴ to "commitment to build a constructive and strategic partnership in the 21 century" (1997); from "stakeholder" (this wording was put forward by the United States, and China accepted it, but thought it was not comprehensive enough) and "constructive partnership" in the new century to "developing a positive, cooperative and comprehensive Sino-US relationship"; from "developing a partnership to address common challenges" to "jointly building a partnership based on mutual respect, mutual benefit and win-win"⁵. This was a pathway defined by China to understand and position the Sino-US relationship. China was initially determined to avoid confrontation and safeguard the bilateral relationship, and later realised that the Sino-US relationship was in a state

² Deng Xiaoping: "Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping", Volume III, the first edition, published by People's Publishing House in October 1993, Page 350.

³ This guideline was put forward by Jiang Zemin on 30 November 1992, when he met with the delegation of US House of Representatives in China. See "People's Daily" published on 1 December and 4 December 1992.

⁴ With regard to the policy of "Comprehensive Engagement" towards China put forward by Bill Clinton Administration, Wang Daohan, the then Chairman of China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait, presented this view, which was widely accepted by the participants, at the seminar on Sino-US relations held by China Foundation for International Strategic Studies in 1995. At that time the participants also reached an important point that the engagement policy was not equivalent to the containment policy, although some of them still covered certain containment factors.

⁵ "Sino-US Joint Statement", 19 January 2011.

of transition. In 1997, China and the United States jointly aimed to establish a bright future, but this soon turned to a more low-key position, emphasising constructive development (which reflected the fact that the cooperation between the two countries increased rapidly during the Bush Administration, but the differences were very pronounced). The latest positioning prominently reflected the considerable development of the bilateral relationship and the strong desire of both sides to strengthen cooperation in the face of significant global issues and challenges.

In short, it is the development of understanding and practising of the three aspects mentioned above that laid the foundation for China to propose to build a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States. Particularly in the last two years, with the major changes in the balance of power between China and the United States (the comprehensive strength of the United States has relatively declined following the war on terrorism, especially the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the world financial crisis. China's total GDP has also leapt to become the world's second highest and its political and military influence continues to rise) as well as the US' strategic pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region, there has been a significant increase in bilateral strategic distrust and the Sino-US relationship again stands at a crossroads. At this moment, China has once again proposed to build a new model of major power relationship with the United States, which is more focused on the future development of bilateral relations. That is to say, China will not only adhere to the path of peaceful development and cooperation, but also hope to jointly explore a new path with other major countries in the world, especially the United States, to break the historical cycles that mean the rise and fall of the great powers inevitably leads to confrontation and war, and instead to build a new relationship between major powers based on mutual equality and active cooperation. This time, it has been encouraging that China's proposal has been positively received by the US leadership.

It is worth noting that the concepts of "building a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States" and "building a partnership based on mutual respect, mutual benefit and win-win between China and the United States" are not alternatives, but complement each other. The former is based on the latter in terms of content, while the latter takes the former as its target and direction. Such a combination of positioning and direction is clearly beneficial, more attractive and also is a better reflection of the times compared with various previous positions.

II. Necessity and Possibility

To analyse the necessity and possibility of building a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States can provide a better understanding of why China and the United States intend to jointly conduct this exploration. Furthermore, only when we have a deep understanding of these two issues, can we remove the mentality of hesitation and unswervingly push this exploration forward.

The first is necessity. China is an emerging major power while the United States is an established major power (and the world's superpower). In a certain sense, China and the United States are the countries with greatest influence in the world. However, in the eyes of the United States, China is the country most likely to challenge its position in the future and cause it most worry. Historically, power shifts have often brought great conflicts and wars between great powers, and posed serious suffering and destruction to national, regional and even global peace and development, especially during the two World Wars and the Cold War. Therefore, for China, only through building a new model of relationship with the United States based on mutual benefit and win-win can it break the historical cycle, and by learning the lessons from Germany, Japan and Soviet Union, achieve sustainable development and peaceful rise, and set an example in developing relations with other major countries. For the United States, only in this way can it avoid the sufferings from the rise and fall of major powers in history, and avoid conflicts with a rising China (this is the prospect that will certainly or most likely appear in great power conflicts and wars under new historical conditions). For the world, only in this way can it maintain peace and development for a long time, extend the human civilization, protect our planet and overcome the common challenges confronted by the human race.

The second is possibility, including the objective and subjective conditions, which can be summarised as the following five points.

1. The emergence of a new era and new international environment. The colonial system is no longer in existence and the historical practice of 'colonial scramble' has completely disappeared. With the further development of multipolarisation, globalisation and informatisation in the world, interdependence among all countries, especially among the major powers, is continually deepening. The international community is increasingly becoming mutually inclusive. Confronting the increasingly serious global challenges, all countries are in the same boat, so rather than remaining isolated, they must help each other.

2. The progress and development of human society. The consequences of the two World Wars and the Cold War have taught profound lessons to the human race and the international community. The great destructive power of nuclear weapons and the fact that the major powers possess these weapons have acted as a strong deterrent and prevented conflicts and wars between major powers. Even though major powers wage conventional and so-called more humane wars, the cost remains significant. The power which starts wars will not only find it difficult to gain the support of its own people, but will also encounter strong opposition from the international community. Compared with political, economic and diplomatic means, the role of war and military means to achieve objectives is continuously and gradually decreasing. Meanwhile, the multilateral security mechanism, with the United Nations as its core, is sustainably developing and gradually growing in stature.

3. The new features emerging in the rise of major powers. The number (it is generally acknowledged that the number of developing major powers has reached 17) and the speed with which emerging powers rise is unprecedented. The emerging major countries are integrating into, rather than undermining and challenging, the existing international order. Most of them are countries with vast territory and large populations, or national alliances (such as EU and ASEAN, a concept of major power in a broad sense), eager for long-term development. Among them, China with the fastest rate of development is determined to pursue the path of peaceful development, which is of great importance.

4. The new characteristics emerging in major power relations. Firstly, the major power relations include competition and cooperation, mutual restriction and mutual reliance, mutual vigilance and mutual attraction and the common interests and interdependence are obviously deepening. Major powers compete with each other but without breaking their relations, and generally establish a range of partnerships. Secondly, the strength of the United States as a superpower has relatively declined, but it still has a strong ability to address this. The balance of power among major powers is gradually developing towards a more balanced direction. Thirdly, major power relations are no longer (or are no longer clearly) hostile and confrontational.

5. The history and current situation of the Sino-US relationship. Historically, both countries had experiences of good engagement and active cooperation, such as the alliance during the World War Two and the strategic cooperation during the late Cold War. Although both countries have very different cultural traditions, there are still some similarities, for example, the thoughts of peace and harmony and the

thoughts of Mencius in Chinese culture and the inclusiveness and institutional hegemony in American culture. In reality, both countries have built important political, economic, security and cultural ties after long-term development, and established comprehensive and multi-level dialogue mechanisms (there are more than 90 formal dialogue mechanisms between the two governments). In addition to the new positioning of partnership and the desire to jointly explore the establishment of a new relationship, the Sino-US relationship is significantly different from the Soviet-US relationship in those years.

III. Basic Characteristics

Exploring the establishment of a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States should have the following basic characteristics:

1. The two countries should no longer be hostile and confrontational. This should be reflected in the long-term development of bilateral relations. Both countries should avoid serious military conflicts and wars due to the new change in balance of power and their partial difference of interests. Correspondingly, “containment” and “anti-containment” will be excluded from the policy options of both countries.

2. The two countries should adhere to mutual respect and healthy competition. The relationship should include equality and mutual non-discrimination in politics, rather than conducting vicious competition in violation of WTO rules in trade, not embarking on a military arms race, and embracing all aspects of cultural cooperation. Both sides should promote fair competition in values, soft power, multilateral international rule-making, development patterns and other aspects, and learning from each other and making up for their deficiencies.

3. The two countries should focus on cooperation and coordination and jointly assume greater international responsibility. In addition to economic cooperation, both countries should jointly meet the global challenges, and promote extensive cooperation and build partnership based on mutual benefit and win-win in non-traditional security fields and global commons, in various multilateral mechanisms at global and regional levels, and in key international issues and key areas (such as the Asia-Pacific region). This partnership is not G2 but C2 (cooperation and consultation)⁶.

⁶ The view that China and US should build C2 but not G2 was put forward by Dai Bingguo at the fourth round of the China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue.

4. Both countries should establish the necessary bilateral strategic trust. Both sides should at least mutually respect each other's core interests, clearly know and not challenge each other's bottom lines. In the areas with more differences and frictions, both sides should constantly strengthen the establishment of CBM, always maintain strategic communication, significantly reduce mutual misunderstanding, avoid strategic misjudgement, and establish the basic framework of strategic stability⁷.

5. The bilateral relationship should be kept stable. Both sides should comprehensively and sustainably develop various dialogues and exchanges at senior, working, government and civil levels in political, economic, military and cultural fields. There are no obvious areas of weakness between the two countries. Both sides should neither suspend dialogues due to friction over a short period or due to a single incident nor stop contacts and exchanges for a longer period.

In fact, the above-mentioned basic characteristics are also the main objectives of building a new Sino-US relationship. Among these five points, the first three are the most important and the last two are the extension and reflection of the former three and guarantee delivering results.

IV. Difficulties and Obstacles

To build a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States is an unprecedented exploration, and its difficulty is obvious. Both countries need have a clear understanding of and make full mental preparations for these difficulties and obstacles. This is like climbing the Himalayas. If there is no adequate estimation of the difficulties and obstacles on the way in advance, it is very difficult to make the venture a success.

These difficulties and obstacles exist in history and in reality, and in idea and in action. I don't classify them here and only list them one by one.

1. China and the United States retain a strong memory of the history of the rise and fall of major powers in modern history. This memory has been deeply imprinted on the politicians' and the public's minds of both countries (especially the United States), which will make them difficult to believe that conflicts and wars can be avoided in the process of the rise and fall of major powers in the future, and doubt that major powers can

⁷ This concept specially refers to strategic nuclear relation.

build up new relations distinct from the historical ones.

2. The realism theory and power transition theory consistent with historical experience are still the dominant theories of international relations. This is an academic, theoretical historical memory, which will have significant and far-reaching influence on the strategic research community, diplomatic community and academia of both countries. It is more difficult to change this memory than to change the historical memory of the general political figures and the general public.

3. There are wide gaps in political system, ideology and values between China and the United States. This is a deep structural contradiction. After the end of Cold War, the “Theory of Democracies Without War” prevailing in the western countries excluded China from the democratic countries. This structural contradiction is one of the basic reasons that cause the long-term existence of Sino-US strategic distrust⁸.

4. The Cold War mentality and the mentality starting from worst-case scenario are still prevalent between the two countries. At this point, the United States is more prominent. One example is that the United States is still continuously strengthening its military alliance system (a product of the Cold War). The mentality starting from worst-case scenario is somewhat reasonable, especially for the military forces of the two countries, which is determined by its main task. But if this becomes the mindset and dominant ideology, its negative effects will be apparent. For a long time, the military relationship between China and the United States has been the biggest weakness. According to the Barrel Theory, it will ultimately determine the capacity of bilateral relations. Can this situation be changed in the future?

5. The United States is still attempting to maintain its global hegemony. Hegemony and leadership are two distinct concepts. In recent years, although the United States has put more emphasis on “maintaining its leading position”, and therefore increasingly puts more emphasis on developing soft and smart powers, its tendency to overweight hard power, especially military power, insist on interventionism and pursue absolute security for itself still remains entrenched and is reflected in all aspects of its policies. Competing for leadership between the major countries can potentially avoid military conflict, but competing for hegemony can only lead to Cold War or warfare. Even if the United States really wants to transform from “maintaining hegemony” to “maintaining leadership”, it will be a very difficult and painful process.

⁸ See “Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust” coauthored by Wang Jisi and Kan Lieberthal, published in March 2012.

6. China has not yet achieved complete national reunification and there are still a number of disputes over territorial and maritime rights and interests. These will bring greater uncertainties to China's future policy and development. If these problems exist for a long time, or even intensify into conflicts, they will pose a serious obstacle to China's peaceful rise, and cause severe interference and challenge to China's policy of peaceful development and win-win cooperation.

7. In recent years, with the escalation of territorial and maritime disputes between China and other countries, the expansion of China's overseas interests (covering resources, market and development etc.), the rise of China's military power, especially sea power, and the giant stride of China's space and network capabilities, the "China Threat Theory" has appeared again and the "China Toughness Theory" and "China Devilishness Theory" has become more widespread. Meanwhile, China's internal nationalism and populism are also growing rapidly, both of which are building up into a major issue.

8. New changes have taken place in the respective strengths of China and the United States, and the United States has made strategic adjustments and implemented its strategic pivot into the Asia-Pacific region. Against this background, the bilateral strategic distrust has reached a new level. Correspondingly, the frictions and competition in the Asia-Pacific region have increased significantly, resulting in the increased likelihood of a potential crisis. The two sides are more likely to be involved in a future crisis and conflict due to a third party.

V. Pathways and Means

To build a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States is an unprecedented exploration. If successful, it will be a big step forward in history, but its process will certainly be extremely difficult and tortuous. Only if one side wishes it to work it will not succeed and both sides (including the governments, research communities and the people of both countries) need to work together. China and the United States should focus on the necessity and possibility, promote this exploration pragmatically, steadily and target these difficulties and obstacles, gradually creating a positive and healthy interaction. Among them, China must handle various relations appropriately including theory and reality, theory and practice, activeness and passiveness, struggle and compromise, and giving and taking, and should set short-term, middle-term and long-term targets. I put forward some initial ideas and suggestions on the pathways and means as follows.

1. The research communities of both countries should start the necessary theoretical discussion and research on building a new model of major power relationship. This research should include concept definition, feasibility study, methodology research and pathway research etc. Its purpose is to establish a discourse system different from the traditional theory of rise and fall of great powers and power transfer.

2. As the proponent, China should strengthen the desire of the United States to jointly explore this issue with China through gradual, meticulous and diverse efforts. China should propose and establish the direction not only between the leaders, governments and diplomatic services of the two countries, but also in the research and public opinion communities. Meanwhile, China must put an end to the practice of doing with a sledgehammer, adhering to the dichotomy (not only recognising the necessity and possibility, but also understand the difficulties and obstacles) and start from making concrete efforts, rather than expect to restrict the future development of bilateral relations with the new principles and wording.

3. Building a new model of major power relationship is a theoretical issue and even more a practical issue. China should set an example, adhere to a series of basic policies including peaceful development, not seeking hegemony, not seeking expansion, not pursuing an arms race and non-alignment (referring to military alliances), adhere to the policy of creating a secure, amicable and prosperous neighborhood, strive to achieve the balanced development in hard and soft power, and take the initiative in doing away with the Cold War mentality, zero-sum game and the policy dominated by the worst-case scenario. Facing this new task and new exploration, China should first achieve unity in thinking and reach common ground internally.

4. China and the United States should address the fact that mutual distrust is rising and that both sides are implementing the principles of “hedging” and “two-handed strategy to two-handed strategy”. Both sides should take the reduction of misunderstanding and misjudgement, effective control of differences and prevention of the ups and downs of bilateral relations as the primary objective. Both sides can conduct special dialogues on strategic distrust among governments and think tanks. For China, its urgent task is to make an objective and accurate interpretation of US pivot back into the Asia-Pacific region, and to provide more explicit and a clearer declaration of its own national interests and policies (such as further defining its core interests and their correlation, and determining a variety of policies and measures of safeguarding these core

interests⁹).

5. China should adhere to the principle of “competing but without breaking the relations”, energetically strengthen the crisis management mechanism between China and the United States, and enhance the cooperation in international security crises, so as to effectively respond to the potential mutual crisis and the crisis likely caused by a third party (if critical issues such as the North Korean and Iranian nuclear issues and the Syrian crisis are not solved properly, it is likely to make China and the United States involved in even greater crises). This crisis management includes crisis prevention and control. It involves safeguarding their own interests as far as possible and cooperation (to prevent the crisis from escalating into a military conflict) of both sides in crisis. At present, the establishment of crisis management mechanisms between the two countries has lagged behind and this must be changed as soon as possible. If there is a frequent crisis between China and the United States and it is difficult to manage effectively, how will China and the United States build a new model of major power relationship?

6. China must solve the issues of maintaining and strengthening bilateral military exchanges and cooperation. Since the end of Cold War, because of the critical incidents and the existence of three major obstacles¹⁰ and three major differences¹¹, the bilateral military relationship has been the weakest aspect of the Sino-US relationship (the exchanges have been stopped or suspended up to six times), and severely lag behind the development of overall relations between the two countries. Building a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States also requires building a new model of the military and security relationship. These two aspects cannot be separated. In fact, from a dialectic perspective, the bilateral military relationship is most underdeveloped, but has the largest potential and scope for improvement. China should now make the best of good momentum in bilateral military exchanges in the last two years, and continue to promote the development of Sino-US military relations.

7. In the medium-term, China should strive to build a bilaterally inclusive and cooperation-dominated framework with healthy competition in the Asia-Pacific region, where both sides frequently coordinate on key issues. In particular, China needs to solve the issue of

⁹ See the author’s article of “Thoughts on China’s National Interests”, published on “Strategic Research”, Volume 2, the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, February 2012.

¹⁰ Refer to US arms sales to Taiwan, US military reconnaissance along China coast and US National Defense Authorization Act 2000 (US unilaterally regulated various restrictions on bilateral military exchanges).

¹¹ Refer to the difference in strength between the two armies, different leadership systems and different roles of the army (US armed forces are deployed globally and PLA focuses on national defense).

transformation from a land-power country to a sea-power country. On the one hand, China should persist in expanding its maritime interests and developing its sea power. On the other hand, China should show by practical action that China will never follow the western powers' "Gunboat Policy" and never compete for maritime hegemony with the United States, but instead will form partnerships in the Pacific and Indian Oceans with major powers including the United States, Japan and India, and act as an important force to keep the international sea lanes free, safe and unobstructed.

8. We must all strive to engage in every possible form of cooperation actively and steadily in all fields with common or overlapping interests, especially in economic and trade fields and non-traditional security fields. It is crucial¹² that bilateral cooperation should also expand to the global commons (except the above-mentioned sea-lanes, also covering outer space and network security). Both sides should also realise the concept of opportunity management because the opportunities for cooperation may be ephemeral. Both sides should try to avoid influencing or stopping the bilateral cooperation due to their differences and frictions. When the bilateral relations are good and the differences are not prominent, both sides should especially seize the opportunity to actively promote and expand cooperation.

9. While upholding and deepening dozens of dialogue mechanisms including the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue (of which the newly established strategic security dialogue platform in 2011 is very important) and Consultation Mechanism on Asia-Pacific affairs, China will further expand the fields and ways of dialogues with the United States. With regards to the dialogue on nuclear weapons, outer space utilization and network security urged by the United States, China can gradually develop or separately advance and deepen them. China should seriously consider trilateral security dialogues (such as a China-US-Japan dialogue and China-US-India dialogue) including the United States, and engage in bilateral contacts and dialogues with US-led bilateral military alliances. The above-mentioned issues can not be avoided in building a new model of major power relationship between China and the United States. Some of the dialogues can be undertaken bilaterally and merged with one-way dialogue.

¹² In the traditional security fields, large differences and conflicts of interest have existed between China and US. In the non-traditional security fields, the common interests of both sides are principle and have a large space for cooperation. The nature of global commons stands between the former two fields. In this field, it is likely for both sides to carry out major cooperation and encounter serious conflict. Therefore, it may be predicted that the direction of bilateral relations in global commons will possibly and ultimately determine the direction of bilateral security relations.

10. China will strive to maintain stable and sustainable relations with other major powers. Especially in Asia, the Sino-Japan and Sino-Indian relationships should be handled discreetly. For China's peaceful rise, if these two hurdles can not be overcome, how will it develop its relationship with the United States? To build a new model of major power relationship is an overall concept and should not only be restricted to between China and the United States. Some people say the Sino-Japan relationship is different from the Sino-US relationship, but I disagree with this view. At least from the current perspective, this view is untenable. If the Sino-Japan relationship completely collapses and heads towards confrontation in the future, the Sino-US relationship will certainly not be any better.

11. Based on assuming more international obligations, China will make efforts to strengthen coordination and cooperation with the United States under the international and regional multilateral mechanisms, and meanwhile actively enhance China's voice and rights to make rules and institutions, and promote soft and healthy competition. This will be an important sign of bilateral relationship moving towards maturity.

12. China will adhere to the principle of "peaceful reunification and one country, two systems" to solve the Taiwan issue, uphold national unity, accelerate economic development and solve the Xinjiang and Tibet issues and stand upon peaceful negotiations and a series of principles and policies such as "shelving disputes and seeking common development" to solve the issues of maritime territory and interests with neighboring countries. In the long run, any positive progress made in these issues will be beneficial to reducing the political and security tensions between China and the United States, so as to create important and favorable conditions for building a new model of major country relationship¹³.

(This article is rewritten according to the speech outline at the "Seminar on International Situation and China's Foreign Affairs 2012" hosted by the China Institute of International Studies and finalized on 9 December 2012.)

¹³ The issues of Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet are China's internal affairs. The disputes over sovereign and maritime rights and interests with neighboring countries are also affairs between China and other countries. These issues and disputes do not directly concern the US. However, the US has always attempted to interfere and intervene. On these issues, China must make preparations for the long friction and struggle with US until they are finally resolved.