

A New Model of Great Power Relations

Many people in my country have a misperception about the state of U.S./China relations over the last 75 years. They assume it shared much with the Cold War that characterized the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during much of the last half of the 20th century. But China and the United States never faced each other as Cold War adversaries in the past and there is no reason that they should do so in the future. On the contrary, as we look forward from the vantage point of the present, the second decade of the 21st century, the two countries have every reason to engage in cooperation and to avoid confrontation.

As each of our countries pursues its own national objectives for increased prosperity and development, we can see that each country's ability to achieve its objectives is threatened by the same set of global challenges:

- A still sluggish global economic recovery;
- A weakened global financial system in need of further reform;
- Environmental pollution, the adverse affects of climate change, and extreme weather changes;
- Increased demand for secure energy, food, and water resources;
- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and
- Terrorism, piracy, and transnational crime.

Neither of our two countries can solve these problems by itself. And neither of our two countries can meet its own national objectives for increased prosperity and development if progress is not made in meeting these global challenges.

This fundamental reality gives both China and the United States an incentive to cooperate together in leading the nations of the world in the effort to solve these

global challenges. And it gives our two countries a disincentive to engage in confrontational behavior or conflict that would threaten this cooperation.

It is this fundamental reality that offers the real possibility that the United States and China could construct the “new model” of great power relations that our two Presidents discussed during their recent summit meeting in Sunnylands, California.

So let us spend some time today discussing:

- What would be the basic characteristics of this “new model” of great power relations?
- What is the basis for thinking that this “new model” could actually be achieved?
- What is most likely to threaten the realization of this “new model” of relations?
- What additional steps could be taken to increase the likelihood of achieving this “new model” in the relationship between the United States and China?

I. What would be the basic characteristics of this “new model” of great power relations?

I would propose the following:

- Acceptance by the United States of the “peaceful rise” of China as a global power;
- Acceptance by China of the continued U.S. role as a stabilizing presence in the Asia-Pacific and globally;
- Mutual recognition that the prosperity and success of each nation is in the best interests of the other;

- Mutual recognition that each nation's success is not "zero-sum" but "win-win" – that the success of the United States can contribute to the success of China and that the success of China can contribute to the success of the United States;
- Commitment by our two countries to build their relationship by constructing patterns of cooperation based on mutual interest, mutual benefit, and mutual respect; and
- Acting together to manage areas of continuing difference or dispute so that they do not undermine cooperation or degenerate into confrontation or conflict.

I think this is a pretty good starting point for defining this "new model" of great power relations. But we have to set realistic expectations on both sides. This "new model" does not mean that either nation is going to surrender its national interests – or simply give in on every issue to the wishes or demands of the other country. There will still be times when our two nations will have different interests and different views. We will sometimes disagree. We will continue to compete for markets, resources, and influence. We will each continue to hedge against potential adverse behavior of the other. Neither of us will cease to be great powers.

But there will be a difference – and it is this. If we achieve a "new model" of great power relations, cooperation will be the dominant element of the relationship. We will work together with the international community to solve the global challenges we all face. And we will work together to manage our differences so that they do not derail this cooperation and drive the relationship between our two countries in confrontation or conflict.

II. What is the basis for thinking that this "new model" of great power relations could actually be achieved?

There are reasons to be “cautiously optimistic” that the relationship between China and the United States can be different from the “great power” relationships of the past. This is in part because some of the traditional factors that led to great power confrontations are absent from the U.S./China relationship. For example, there are no competing territorial claims between China and the United States today. Nor is there a collision of colonial aspirations. Neither the United States nor China is an expansionist power in the 19th or 20th century sense.

More significantly, the existing great power (in this case, the United States) is not trying to exclude, isolate, or keep down the emerging great power (in this case China). I know many in China think that this is exactly what the United States is trying to do. But the facts do not support this conclusion. U.S. –China economic ties have expanded substantially over the last three decades. Total U.S.-China trade rose from \$5 billion in 1981 to \$536 billion in 2012. China is currently the United States’ second-largest trading partner, its third-largest export market, and its biggest source of imports. The United States has supported China’s entry into key international organizations. And every recent U.S. President has explicitly and publicly welcomed a strong, prosperous, and successful China. These are not the steps that the United States would take if it were truly seeking to encircle, isolate, or keep down China.

Similarly, at least for now, China is not seeking to supplant the United States or become a global hegemon. For a benign international environment will allow China to focus on its own internal development. But some of China’s neighbors are justifiably concerned that an empowered China will seek to impose its will on them. China can do more to reassure its neighbors and the United States that it seeks a peaceful international environment, free from controversies and confrontation with other states.

There is a second reason to be “cautiously optimistic” that the United States and China can avoid confrontation and conflict. There are new factors present in the

China/U.S. relationship that were less present in the great power relationships of the past.

The two nations are increasingly interconnected and interdependent economically, financially, and trade-wise. They are both members of a network of international organizations -- like the World Trade Organization, APEC, the East Asia Summit and the United Nations Security Council-- that offer avenues for resolving diplomatic, economic, or trade disputes without the need to resort to confrontation or military force. Indeed, any resort to military force would be self-defeating. For it would threaten the very economic, trade, and financial relationship on which the prosperity of both countries depends.

Perhaps surprisingly, as China continues to emerge as a global power, there may actually be a gradual convergence of interests between the two countries. Issues that have been sources of division and dispute may become the basis for cooperative action.

For example, China initially saw the protection of intellectual property as something imposed on China by the developed world. But as China made clear at the recent Sunnylands Summit, it now sees this as something China needs to do for itself in constructing an innovation-oriented country and pursuing its own economic and social development.

As China's economy has grown and become more integrated into the global economy and financial system, it has become a supporter of freer trade, more open investment, and a currency more responsive to market forces. This development has increased the likelihood of the kind of cooperation between China and the United States that is sorely needed to provide long-term stability to the global economy and financial system.

A similar evolution may occur on the issue of maritime access, freedom of navigation, and peaceful passage. China's navy is moving from a coastal patrol force to a blue-water fleet charged with protecting the sea lanes and the flow of trade and natural resources to China from all over the world. As this occurs, China's position on these maritime issues may increasingly align with that of the United States as the world's other global naval power, and could become an additional area of cooperation.

The two nations are also beginning to see the benefit of cooperation in dealing with the cyber threat. As China's economy continues to become more sophisticated and complex, it like the United States will increasingly depend on critical civilian infrastructure – things like the banking system, the electricity grid, and transportation networks. Cyber attacks on this infrastructure could devastate each of our economies – giving both nations an incentive to work together to figure out how best to safeguard this infrastructure from such attacks.

III. What is most likely to threaten the realization of this “new model” of relations?

The two biggest threats to realizing this “new model” of great power relations are lack of public understanding and support for it in both China and the United States, and potential confrontation between the militaries of the two countries – particularly their naval forces.

Obtaining public understanding and support may be the bigger challenge. Without such an effort, nationalistic impulses in both countries are likely to produce a competition for dominance and a “zero-sum” approach to the relationship. This is the opposite of the cooperative approach to finding “win-win” solutions to global problems that is at the heart of the “new model” for Chinese/American relations.

Americans are used to their country having a dominant – if not the dominant role in world affairs. There is certainly some fatigue among the American people with the burdens of global leadership and some public questioning of whether America needs to continue to bear them. That does not mean, however, that Americans will be comfortable with China emerging as a co-equal power on the global stage. Americans will have to be convinced that China and the United States working together on an equal footing with the rest of the international community to solve global problems is fundamentally in America's interest because it will make for a stronger, more prosperous America able to provide a better life for its people. I think most Americans can be persuaded on this point, but the case will have to be made by America's political leaders.

The Chinese people may see this “new model” of great power relations as part of an ongoing American effort to keep China down by burdening and entangling China in a web of international commitments and obligations. At least some in China will see it as an American plot to prevent China from assuming its rightful place in the world – a status commensurate with its growing economic and military power. The Chinese people will have to be convinced that the United States and China working on an equal footing with the rest of the international community to solve global problems is fundamentally in China's interest. For it is the only way that China can achieve its own objective of becoming a developed, prosperous country providing a better life for all of its people.

The second greatest threat to realizing this “new model” of great power relations is the potential confrontation between the militaries of the two countries – particularly their naval forces. Such a confrontation could lead to a military confrontation at least at sea, if not more broadly, and poison the whole relationship.

To avoid such an outcome, there needs to be dramatically increased transparency and cooperation between the militaries of the two countries. This will reduce the risk of military confrontation or conflict through misunderstanding,

miscalculation, or accident. Progress is being made on this front, but more needs to be done. And such cooperation needs to be insulated from the ups and downs of the political relationship between the two countries. Too often, when tensions arise in the political relationship, either the United States or China will respond by suspending military to military dialogue and cooperation. This is the completely wrong response. In periods of political tension, contacts between the militaries of the two countries should if anything be increased, not suspended.

Avoiding military confrontation or conflict will also require the two countries to accept some basic realities.

The United States will have to accept that as China's economy grows, its military will also expand and that its naval forces will increasingly take on a global presence and a global role. This could actually be an opportunity for the United States, however, because this more capable Chinese navy -- working with U.S. naval forces -- could assume some of the burden of policing and protecting the global sea lanes.

For its part, China will have to accept a continuing U.S. military and naval presence in the Asia Pacific in support of our existing alliance relationships. I would argue that this is actually a good thing for China, however. It will reassure China's neighbors, who are increasingly nervous about the growth of China's military power, and make them more accepting of China's "peaceful rise".

IV. What additional steps could be taken to increase the likelihood of achieving this "new model" of great power relations?

First, the two countries need to place cooperation in meeting global challenges at the center of their relationship. This is critical if the two countries are to meet their respective national objectives for a peaceful, prosperous, and stable future.

Second, the two countries need to improve their crisis management and dispute resolution mechanisms particularly on bilateral issues in order to head off confrontation, avoid disrupting cooperation on global issues, and protect the overall relationship.

Third, the two countries need to broaden and deepen trade and investment between them and place it on a truly reciprocal and equal basis – with China free to trade with and invest in the United States, and the United States equally free to trade with and invest in China.

Fourth, the two countries need to develop additional mechanisms to manage the competition for national resources (especially food, energy, and water) and, where possible, substitute cooperative or parallel development for competitive exploitation.

Fifth, the two countries should try to identify three or four high profile cooperative projects that benefit both nations and that will be noticed by the publics in both countries. This will show the value of U.S./China cooperation to both our peoples. My candidates:

- Something in the environmental area – like a joint project to improve air quality in a U.S. city (like Los Angeles) and a Chinese city (like Beijing).
- Something in the public health/medical area – like a joint initiative to eradicate a major childhood disease.
- Something in energy – like a joint project to develop advance technology for exploiting shale oil/shale gas resources in both China and the United States.
- Something in space – like a joint project to lead an international effort at space exploration.

Finally, both countries will have to accept that even under this “new model” of relations, each will continue to do things the other will not like and will view as contrary to its interest. For example, the United States will continue to champion human rights, freedom, and democracy around the world because we believe that nations based on these principles not only provide a better life for their people but are also more stable in the long run.

V. Conclusion

If the two nations can work together to manage the potential threats to the relationship, and take steps to strengthen their relationship, there is a reasonable chance that a “new model” of great power relations based on cooperation rather than confrontation can actually be achieved between China and the United States. If so, it will be a good thing for both countries, their peoples, and the world.