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**Not-So-Empty Talk**

**The Danger of China's “New Type of Great-Power Relations” Slogan**

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Ever since his February 2012 visit to Washington, Chinese President Xi Jinping has championed his vision for a “new type of great-power relations” between China and the United States. The Obama administration, in an apparent desire to avoid conflict with a rising China, seems to have embraced Xi’s formulation. In a major speech last November, U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice called on both sides to “operationalize” the concept. And during a March 2014 summit with Xi, U.S. President Barack Obama declared his commitment to “continuing to strengthen and build a new model of relations.”

In uncritically signing on to the “new type of great-power relations” slogan at the Obama-Xi Sunnylands summit in June 2013, the Obama administration fell into a trap. It has what is most likely its last major chance to dig itself out when Obama visits Beijing next month for a follow-up summit. And he should make use of the opportunity. Although some U.S. officials dismiss rhetoric as insignificant and see this particular formulation as innocuous, Beijing understands things very differently. At best, U.S. acceptance of the “new type of great-power relations” concept offers ammunition for those in Beijing and beyond who promote a false narrative of the United States’ weakness and China’s inevitable rise. After all, the phrasing grants China great-power status without placing any conditions on its behavior -- behavior that has unnerved U.S. security allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific. At worst, the formulation risks setting U.S.-Chinese relations on a dangerous course: implicitly committing Washington to unilateral concessions that are anathema to vital and bipartisan U.S. foreign policy values, principles, and interests.

Already troubling, each additional invocation of a “new type of great-power relations” grows more costly. Instead of reactively parroting this Chinese formulation, Washington must proactively shape the narrative. It should explicitly articulate and champion its own positive vision for U.S.-Chinese relations, which should accord China international status conditionally -- in return for Beijing abiding by twenty-first-century international norms, behaving responsibly toward its neighbors, and contributing positively to the very international order that has enabled China’s meteoric rise.

THUCYDIDES TRAP

The “new type of great-power relations” concept is appealing to so many policymakers and scholars in both countries because of a misplaced belief in the Thucydides Trap. This is a dangerous misconception that the rise of a new power inescapably leads to conflict with the established one.

The Chinese side has exploited this oversimplified narrative to great effect: Xi himself has warned of such confrontation as “inevitable,” and leading Chinese international relations scholars claim that it is an “iron law of power transition.” Hillary Clinton, the former U.S. secretary of state, echoed the sentiment at the 2012 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue when she said that the United States and China’s efforts to avoid a catastrophic war are “historically unprecedented” and that both sides need to “write a new answer to the age-old question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet.” A year later, at the Sunnylands summit, Tom Donilon, then the U.S. national security adviser, explained that efforts to reformulate the U.S.-Chinese relationship are “rooted in the observation … that a rising power and an existing power are in some manner destined for conflict.”

Such sentiments are puzzling, especially coming from Americans. They deny human agency (and responsibility) for past -- and possibly future -- disasters. And they reject progress. Further, they are based on a selective reading of modern history, one that overlooks the powerful ways in which the norms that great powers have promoted through their own rhetoric and example have shaped the choices of contemporaneous rising powers, for better or for worse. Most problematic, the narrative of needing a “new model” to avoid otherwise inevitable conflict is a negative foundation, a dangerous platform on which to build the future of U.S.-Chinese relations.

To be sure, Clinton, Donilon, and their successors might understand all this but are prepared to dismiss rhetoric and focus instead on action. This is surely what U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry had in mind at the 2014 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue when he noted that “a new model is not defined in words. It is defined in actions.”

Even so, flirting with the Chinese-proposed slogan for bilateral relations, as the administration has done, while dismissing it in private is dangerous. Chinese leaders take such formulations extremely seriously: the phrase “new type of great-power relations” appears repeatedly in their speeches, and permeates Chinese media and public discourse on U.S.-Chinese relations. Uncritical embrace creates an unsustainable situation wherein each side mistakenly expects unrealistic things of the other, worsening the consequences when those expectations are ultimately dashed.

Even worse: There doesn’t even seem to be a clear consensus within Washington about what exactly “new type of great-power relations” actually means. Interviews suggest that the administration’s definition hinges on two prongs: cooperation in areas where U.S. and Chinese interests overlap and constructive management of differences where they don’t.

But Beijing could intend any number of things. A theoretically benign interpretation is reflected in former State Councilor Dai Bingguo’s remarks at the fourth U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue: “respect each other and treat each other as equals politically; carry out comprehensive, mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation economically; build up mutual trust and tolerance and share responsibilities in security matters; learn from and promote each other culturally; and seek common ground while reserving differences and live side by side in peace with each other ideologically.”

For others, the dirty secret is that “new type of great-power relations” isn’t that new. It is disturbingly redolent of a very old type of values and order, in which spheres of interest, zero-sum gains, and great-power exceptionalism ruled the day. Indeed, Shi Yinhong, a leading Chinese IR scholar and counselor to China’s State Council, has characterized it as a call for America and China to “respect each other’s interests and dignity” as both a “nation-state in the traditional sense” and a “rare and special” great power.

An even more cynical interpretation -- and one supported by interviews with current and former U.S. officials -- is that, under the new formulation, Xi expects the United States to make certain accommodations concerning China’s “core interests.” Indeed, in the February, 2012, speech in which Xi first introduced the concept, he explicitly identified “respect for each other’s core interests” as one of four areas constituting a “new type of great-power relations.” But no U.S. administration is likely interested in making such accommodations. And there is no evidence that Beijing would be willing to make meaningful concessions of its own; in a July 2012 paper, Cui Tiankai, China’s ambassador to the United States, claimed that “China has never done anything to undermine the US core interests” and that, even in its own neighborhood, China is merely a “victim on which harm has been imposed.”

Whatever Chinese leaders’ intentions in promoting the concept actually are, in other words, they don’t look good.

TROUBLING TERMINOLOGY

The Obama administration’s continued flirtation with the “new type of great-power relations” concept appears to have been misunderstood in Beijing and beyond, and risks being misperceived as a precipitous change in U.S. power and policy.

First, the terminology paints an absurd picture of a United States too feeble to articulate, much less defend, its own vision for promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia -- only furthering perceptions of U.S. decline in China and its neighbors. The Obama administration’s rhetoric, however well intentioned, sometimes exacerbates this misperception. A case in point: Kerry’s statement to his Chinese counterparts at the 2014 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue that “there is no U.S. strategy to try to push back against or be in conflict with China.” The Obama administration is certainly right to try to allay concerns -- unfounded but extremely prevalent in China -- that the United States is attempting to “contain” China. But it is ill advised to do so in a manner so easily heard as an apology.

Second, Beijing’s interpretation of “new type of great-power relations” appears to be linked to an assumption that China’s growing material power has made a power transition inevitable, compelling Washington to accommodate Beijing’s claims in the South and East China Seas now. Such arguments reveal ignorance, first, of fundamental changes to the international order since the days of might makes right and, second, of the manifold sources of U.S. power and preeminence. By allowing the terms “great-power relations” and “equality” to permeate official discourse on bilateral relations, Washington risks tacitly condoning such anachronistic views of international politics.

Third, China’s economic growth is slowing, and the country’s future is ever more uncertain as various societal and other domestic headwinds strengthen. Decades of extraordinary economic and military growth make many Chinese assume that the rapid increases in material power will continue indefinitely. That is unlikely, but the consequences of such bullishness are real and unsettling: growing expectations within China for U.S. concessions and anachronistic calls for “equal” treatment and “space.”

If that weren’t enough, the “new type of great-power relations” concept is also unnerving to U.S. allies and partners in the region. If fears of abandonment grow, some may seek other -- potentially more destabilizing -- options for deterring China.

Such concerns are particularly intense in Japan -- arguably Washington’s closest ally and the best situated to stand up to China independently, if necessary. Xi has already attempted to exploit the Obama administration’s embrace of the “new type of great-power relations” concept to score a victory in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands dispute. During a September 2012 meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, Xi invoked the “important consensus” he claimed that the two had reached in defining their relationship and then pivoted immediately to the most critical flashpoint in Chinese-Japanese relations: “We hope that the U.S., from the point of view of regional peace and stability, will be cautious, will not get involved in the Diaoyu Islands sovereignty dispute, and will not do anything that might intensify contradictions and make the situation more complicated.” The record of China’s Japan policy during the past two years suggests the Xi administration is intent on isolating Japan -- bypassing Tokyo while engaging Washington -- and keeping the country relegated to a status inferior to China and the United States. Indeed, as Australian scholar Amy King argues, China’s conception of a “new type of great-power relations” leaves little room for Japan.

A POSITIVE ASIA-PACIFIC VISION

The U.S.-Chinese relationship is too important to leave up to a vague slogan rooted in a cynical nineteenth-century premise: that the two countries must do something historically unprecedented to avoid war. In the twenty-first century, an effective international order hinges on powerful states supporting an inclusive, equitable, win-win system that has the same rules for the strong and the weak. Might can no longer make right.

That is why the Obama administration should immediately replace the “new type of great-power relations” formulation with a specific, reciprocal, results-oriented, and positive vision -- one that accords China international status in proportion to its active support for the international order that has greatly benefited China over the past four decades. There is precedent for such a framework, most notably the Bush administration’s 2005 call for China to be a “responsible stakeholder.” Such an approach not only welcomes China’s peaceful rise but also explicitly charts a pathway to its coveted status as a great power.

Starting now, U.S. policy and rhetoric should build on China’s desire for membership in the great-power club by setting goals for increased contributions to the international system and greater provision of public goods. Washington must also disabuse Beijing of the notion that it can negotiate with the United States over the heads of China’s less “great” neighbors and emphasize that, to be a true twenty-first-century great power, Beijing must follow its own Golden Rule and treat other countries as it wants to be treated. Disputes with smaller neighbors are an excellent opportunity for Chinese leaders to show the world what their self-professed vision of “democracy in international relations” actually means in practice.

Above all, the United States must not give tacit approval to a Chinese shortcut to great-power status out of exaggerated fear of inevitable conflict. It must approach Beijing from a position of strength. Like Washington, Beijing has powerful incentives to avoid a military clash. It enjoys tremendous benefits from trading partners across the Asia-Pacific -- in particular, the United States and Japan -- and relies on exports to sustain its national development and domestic stability. Washington need not accept disproportionate responsibility for avoiding conflict.

To be sure, explicit rejection of a major foreign policy formulation crafted by China’s preeminent ruler may have costs. But the costs of continued acceptance will only be higher. At a minimum, to avoid validating “new type of great-power relations” Washington should immediately cease using the phrase. If the U.S. government does use the term, it must always follow with a forceful, explicit definition of what “new type of great-power relations” is and what it is not. Washington should also call out aspects of China’s current behavior -- namely its coercion of its neighbors and apparent efforts to undermine U.S. alliances and key international norms -- as antithetical to both U.S. interests and Beijing’s coveted recognition as a great power. That should convince Beijing that even considering division of the Asia-Pacific into spheres of interests is a nonstarter.

Given its political system, history, and deep realpolitik traditions, Beijing’s resistance to Washington’s socialization efforts is hardly surprising. China will not do everything the United States wants, and some Chinese observers will cynically interpret U.S. attempts to reformulate the relationship as a ploy to burden China and contain its rise. And that is why Washington must be patient as it provides a consistent focal point for Chinese leaders’ pursuit of great-power status, strengthening the hand of moderates and internationalists in domestic policy debates. China’s growing (and U.S.-encouraged) contributions to peacekeeping and antipiracy have been rightly lauded. Greater contributions in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and sea-lane security should be as well.

LAST CHANCE

To its credit, in recent months, the Obama administration has gotten tougher with Beijing. Finally realizing that China was controlling the narrative, the administration has publicly opposed Beijing’s destabilizing policies, restated unambiguously Washington’s support for Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, criticized the mishandled November 2013 rollout of China’s East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone, and publicly questioned the basis for China’s overexpansive, vague South China Sea claims.

This increasingly firm rhetoric is laudable but insufficient. Without more attention and support from key administration principals, the rebalance risks being seen in the region as more words than action -- ironic, given the similar criticism that U.S. officials have leveled at the “new type of great-power relations” formulation. Since the Asia-Pacific Rebalance is a major component of Obama’s foreign policy legacy, it is especially puzzling that the administration has not articulated a formal strategy for the region. As a first step, the administration should promptly communicate a positive, concrete vision for the Asia-Pacific’s future and China’s role in it. To guide further U.S. action and signal resolve, this should then be codified in a formal policy document, released in conjunction with a major speech by Kerry or by Obama himself.

None of this is to deny the role of material power in shaping China’s trajectory. As China expert Thomas Christensen has argued, the United States’ military presence in the Asia-Pacific and its focus on solidifying ties with regional allies and partners are not only hedges against possible Chinese provocations but also important means for influencing Beijing’s foreign policy decision-making. Indeed, the story of China’s rise remains incomplete. No doubt, we’re in a rough patch today. But despite widespread claims to the contrary, nothing about China’s future course -- and certainly not military conflict -- is predetermined. How things play out will depend on the choices made by leaders in many countries, but especially in Beijing and Washington.

The so-called Thucydides Trap to the contrary, history tells us that the trajectories of rising powers can be shaped in powerful ways by the leading power’s behavior and rhetoric. And on those terms, “new type of great-power relations” is a deeply flawed concept. The United States must jettison it and replace it with one that charts a clear pathway for the type of twenty-first-century great power that the United States wants China to become. A more effective vision for U.S.-Chinese relations should be positive and aspirational, designed to shape Beijing’s decision-making by tying China’s eventual attainment of great-power status to behaving like a twenty-first-century great power, including by making positive contributions to international peace, stability, prosperity, and especially by behaving responsibly toward its neighbors. That would in effect be a truly new type of great-power relations -- and Washington must consistently lead by example. For many, U.S. Asia policy is directly linked to Obama’s legacy. Yet his administration is increasingly focused elsewhere, with real-world consequences. For the Obama administration’s China policy, it’s time for proactive leadership.