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UNDERSTANDING THE "NEW TYPE" OF MAJOR POWER RELATIONS:

*The 'New Type of Major Power Relationship': an Analysis of the
American Response*

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Remarks Prepared for THE 28th ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE, 2-4 June 2014 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; PLENARY SESSION 2. UNDERSTANDING THE “NEW TYPE” OF MAJOR POWER RELATIONS: WHAT, HOW, WHY?

As an academic, I am not here to represent, much less to defend, the American government’s position on this or any other issue. But I will try to identify what the U.S. view is and analyze the reasons for it. This will lead me to suggest that the introduction of the “new type” formula into the China-U.S. dialogue is not going to alleviate the conflicts of interest and strategic mistrust between the two sides. Rather, the slogan has introduced yet another (albeit minor) arena for the expression of these conflicts and distrust. Each side uses the formula in its own way to advance its own interests.

Henry Kissinger’s observation on the differences between the Chinese and American styles of diplomacy helps explain why this is the case. He writes, “Chinese negotiators use diplomacy to weave together political, military, and psychological elements into an overall strategic design. Diplomacy to them is the elaboration of a strategic principle.... American diplomacy generally prefers the specific over the general, the practical over the abstract.”¹ Because the two sides approach diplomacy from different perspectives, they also approach the “new type” formula from different perspectives.

Let me say first how I understand the Chinese interpretation of this idea, and you can see whether I understand it correctly. As is known to all at this conference, the idea of a “new type of major power relationship” was introduced by then Vice President Xi Jinping during his visit to the U.S. in February 2012.² Since then Chinese officials have promoted the concept energetically, using it as a framework for explaining their position on many issues on which their goals and American goals are at odds. My understanding is that Chinese policy makers introduced the idea in the hope that it would help the two sides to avoid replicating the tragic historical pattern in which rising powers and established powers have often come into conflict as the former seeks to improve its security position and the latter seeks to defend its existing security position. To write a new page in history, China asks the U.S. to treat it fairly and equally; to recognize China’s legitimate security interests; to refrain from trying to block China’s rise by weakening China, encircling China, and manipulating regional frictions in ways that create difficulties for China. Both sides will benefit from the peaceful accommodation of China’s legitimate security interests. In short, China hopes American will not prevent it from rising in peace.

¹ *On China*, pp. 221-222.

² <http://ipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2012/02/20120214175031su0.376034.html?distid=ucs#axzz1mGinrgoJ>, accessed 2014.05.23; also David M. Lampton, “A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties,” <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=650>, accessed 2014.05.21..

On my understanding, American policy makers responded to this idea with suspicion. It sounded to them like a request for preemptive concessions to Chinese ambitions. China wanted the U.S. to recognize up front the legitimacy of its self-defined “core interests.” This might make sense if none of China’s ambitions clashed with significant security interests of the United States. But as a self-proclaimed “resident nation” (not just an outsider) in the Asia-Pacific, the U.S. has its own security interests, some of which apparently clash with those of China. The two sides’ sense of their own core interests were such that neither could accommodate all of the other side’s core interests without doing damage to some of its own.

This is why the U.S. has long preferred a different set of formulas for the relationship, which use the idea of “international law” and “international norms” to suggest that China should accommodate itself to the existing American presence in Asia. In the G.W. Bush administration the U.S. suggested that China should behave as a “responsible stakeholder.” The Obama administration suggested China act in such a way as provide “strategic reassurance.”³

Both sides’ formulas are appealing in the abstract. China’s formula implies that it has legitimate security interests that it cannot be expected to compromise, which portend no harm to anyone else, and other countries should yield to those interests, so China will not have to use force to protect itself. The U.S. position implies that life is full of clashing interests, and the higher good is to find practical procedures to settle these problems. Nobody wins or loses all the time, but we all have an interest in a system of international norms that enable us to resolve conflicts peacefully.

When we take these good sounding formulas and apply them to specific issues, we find that neither rhetorical position really settles any issue.

For example, on the question of the South China Sea, China’s position is that it has long-standing claims which are at least as legitimate as anyone else’s claims. The

³ For further discussion see Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), Ch. 4. Here are two recent examples of the way the U.S. likes to frame principles for the relationship.

President Obama in his interview with National Public Radio on May 28, 2014, after his speech at West Point: “[W]e welcome China’s peaceful rise.... We have a very specific concern when China is not following basic international norms, basic rules of the road, where it does not feel bound by the kind of international practices that have helped to underwrite China’s rise.... [W]e expect China to help uphold the very rules that have made them successful, not take advantage of them. And so there are basic principles that big countries don’t just push little countries around by virtue of size. There are mechanisms whereby, through international law, maritime disputes can be resolved.... [L]et’s find a systematic, legal way for us to resolve these disputes without resolving to conflict.... China now as a rising power needs to be part of that responsibility of maintaining rules that maintain peace and security for a lot of countries.”

Joint Statement from the Japan-U.S.-Australia Defense Ministers Meeting, May 30, 2014: “In discussing maritime security, the ministers underscored their shared interest in the maintenance of peace and stability; respect for international law and unimpeded lawful commerce; and upholding freedom of navigation and overflight in the East China and South China Seas. They also expressed their strong opposition to the use of coercion or force to unilaterally alter the status quo in the East China and South China Seas. They called on claimants to refrain from actions that could increase tensions to clarify and pursue claims in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); and they reaffirmed their support for the rights of claimants to seek peaceful resolution of disputes, including through legal mechanisms, such as arbitration, under the convention. They also called for ASEAN and China to reach early agreement on a meaningful Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.”

South China Sea is too valuable strategically and economically for China simply to abandon these valid claims. It would negotiate them in due course, in good faith, with other states that have presentable claims. But other claimants, to some extent encouraged by the U.S., have tried to move preemptively to weaken the Chinese position on the ground, and China has had to defend its interests. Only when China reacts to defend itself does the U.S. step in, in bad faith, to talk about international norms when it has not previously urged the other actors to obey those norms when they were violating them. The U.S. has treated China in this unfair way precisely because China is a rising power and the U.S. wants to constrain its rise. Also, relatedly, the U.S. maintains an unnecessarily robust naval and air presence in the South China Sea, too close to China's borders, for the purpose of surveilling China's military and making military preparations against China. No country can be expected to tolerate that kind of situation once its own navy and air force have grown strong enough to defend its maritime borders and territorial seas.

The U.S. position in response is that who has a better claim and who first disturbed the status quo are unanswerable questions. It intends no harm to China but has an interest in the underlying international norms of peaceful resolution of disputes and freedom of navigation (especially for itself). If one applies these norms, then they may turn out to limit China's strategic ambitions, but China should abide by them anyway because all countries have a higher interest in the norms.

Chinese would respond that the U.S. is interpreting the norms in a way that happens to serve its power interest, that of maintaining a U.S. strategic footprint around China's borders that is not compatible with China's newly achieved major power status. The U.S. answer in turn is that China can hardly expect the U.S. to vacate an important strategic position that it has occupied for a long time simply because China asks it to. In this way, the dialogue between principled, abstract positions reveals underlying power interests that are actually incompatible.

A similar result emerges if one looks at the dialogue over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands. China says that this was always Chinese territory, seized by Japan in a war of aggression and returned to Japanese administrative control by an unfriendly American administration. China was nonetheless willing to postpone resolving the issue, but Japan changed the status quo and China was forced to defend its interests; the U.S. is taking advantage of this situation to encourage Japanese militancy and damage China's core interests. The U.S. for its part says the rights and wrongs of the territorial claims and of who first disturbed the status quo are not the point. Issues like this naturally exist. The question is how to settle them. And the answer to that question is to use peaceful procedures laid out in international norms. China says that the way the U.S. interprets these norms consolidates American strategic interests and does not allow China to protect its legitimate interests against Japanese encroachment. Again, ultimately each side has a power interest – China to protect an important territorial claim and to push back against Japanese military assertiveness, and the U.S. to strengthen its alliance with Japan and push back against Chinese military assertiveness. Neither side's abstract formula resolves the underlying clash of hard interests.

We could apply the same kind of analysis to the differing ways the two sides see the issue of the East China Sea ADIZ, Taiwan, Tibet, dissidents, and so on. Each has a hard power interest that underlies its principled rhetorical position. In general, the U.S.

feels that changes in the status quo are coming from the Chinese side because China is building up. China feels it is simply repairing a security deficit forced on it by a century of poverty. Each side feels its strategies are legitimate and pose no threat to anyone else.

Edward Luttwak speaks of “great power autism” – the self-centered view that one’s own aspirations are legitimate and benevolent, there is no reason for others to be suspicious, and whoever puts obstacles in my way is doing it on purpose against me. The U.S. and China both seem to suffer from this condition.

Despite such profound differences, American officials did decide – I believe after a period of internal debate – to accept the Chinese formula. To refuse to do so might have sent an unnecessary signal of antagonism. But as far as I know U.S. officials seldom, if ever, repeat the formula in the precise form proposed by the Chinese. In keeping with Kissinger’s observation about the two countries’ different diplomatic styles, the U.S. side fiddles with the formula in order to signal that it has no binding or deductive power. In the American view, the idea of new style relations does not pre-ordain that the U.S. has to settle any particular issue in any particular way. The looser American versions of the formula are supposed to suggest that concrete problems should be solved in concrete, practical, legalistic ways.

American officials did not want to be trapped in the Chinese version of the formula because they saw it as a request for preemptive concessions. The Chinese, first of all, wanted to be treated as an equal power (in economic, military, diplomatic, and “values” terms) before their country had achieved equal quanta of actual power in fact. In effect, they wanted a balance of power by declaration rather than by praxis. Second, Chinese officials wanted the right to present their own list of “core interests” and have the U.S. automatically yield to those interests.

Third, in American eyes, China wants room to exert their country’s growing power for ends that are not clear. Americans believe that Chinese strategy is not transparent and thus we do not know where their aspirations end. Will China be satisfied with security conditions that we in the U.S. would consider sufficient for them? Or does their view of their own security require a condominium with the U.S. in Asia (as Hugh White proposes), which would be prejudicial to the interests of American allies and in that way damaging to the security interests of the U.S. itself? Or does China think its security interests require it ultimately to drive the U.S. out of Asia (as Aaron Friedberg fears)? Or, for that matter, to take over the world (as, for example, Martin Jacques predicts)? The famous Donald Rumsfeld remarks at the Shangri-La conference some years ago reflect this American view – “Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder, why this growing [military] investment?”⁴ For what purpose is China building a blue water navy? How big will it get and how far will it roam?

Human rights might seem irrelevant in such a discussion of hard strategy, but I think they come in at this point to help explain American suspicions of China. The authoritarian governing style and the arrests of people who try to make the system more transparent add a great deal to American mistrust. One may call this a question of “ideology” or “values,” but in American thinking it has a strategic meaning as well. Human rights are not a niche problem in the U.S.-China relationship, but part of the strategic problem. And I think this is true on the Chinese side as well. Since Beijing sees

⁴<http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2005-5c47/first-plenary-session-588b/donald-rumsfeld-b2b6>, accessed 2014.05.31.

human rights promotion as a cover for political subversion of the regime, the security threat presented by U.S. human rights diplomacy becomes one of the core interests that the U.S. should give up if it accepts the new style of major power relations.

Underlying these mutual doubts is a deep strategic mistrust. China has a longstanding experience of American containment and duplicity. The U.S. has an established strategic position that it does not want to change.⁵

The fact is that, unfortunately, some of the core security interests of the two countries do clash. To be sure, the two countries have many common interests. And neither aims at the conquest or extermination of the other. The possibility of living together peacefully does exist. Nonetheless there are important interests that are not compatible. The U.S. does surround China with direct deployments and alliances throughout East and Southeast Asia and beyond. The U.S. does control the first and second island chains. The Taiwan problem does tie down China's military. The U.S.-Japan alliance functions in a way that exacerbates China-Japan relations. The U.S. maintains an arms race with China and declares the intent to stay permanently ahead in each domain of possible conflict such as naval, air, space, and cyber. This is not a complete list. And China wants to change all these facts.

How are such problems to be solved? An interesting new book makes creative suggestions that, I think, show how hard it is to solve problems like these by formula. In *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century*,⁶ James Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon suggest that a "sustainable equilibrium" can be achieved if Washington and Beijing each demonstrate that it does not seek to threaten the other's core security interests. For example, the U.S. could refrain from creating long-range strike systems that are capable of attacking inland China, and could design missile defense systems in such a way that they do not undermine the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent. On China's side the authors recommend a ban on the use of antisatellite weapons, advance notice to the U.S. of deployments in the South and East China Seas, an informal agreement to cap defense spending in the neighborhood of half of American defense spending, and a commitment not to use force against Taiwan.

The trouble is that Beijing strategists are likely to read these and other proposals as asking China to accommodate an excessively intrusive American encirclement at just the moment when the shifting power balance should allow that intolerable situation to be corrected. The U.S. for its part would risk its credibility if it appeared to yield preemptively to Chinese ambitions by softening its military stance.

Still, the alternative of escalating conflict is not attractive to either side. It is possible that skillful management of the relationship on both sides may gradually alter today's atmosphere of mistrust. Probably, the way forward will be a long, messy, grind to test how much value each side places in various territories and principles, by seeing how much effort each side is willing and able to make to protect its perceived core interests against the other. Whatever equilibrium or compromise is to be reached between the two sets of interests will depend very much on the amount of power each side brings to bear. This is the stressful and risky way in which international politics is usually conducted, and it is bound to make all of us nervous and to feed the agendas of many future Asia-

⁵ For a thorough picture of this strategic mistrust, see Nina Hachigian, ed., *Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶ Princeton University Press, 2014.

Pacific Round Tables.

As this process unfolds, it is of course necessary to manage frictions so they do not get out of control. The magic word is “manage,” because the sad reality of international politics is that no grand strategic bargain between the U.S. and China is within our grasp. The fact that Chinese strategic ambitions do not threaten core American interests and vice versa can only be proven, if it is true, in the course of time and not by declaration.