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Forging a New Type of Great Power Relations in the Global Commons

Abraham M. Denmark

ABSTRACT The U.S.–China relationship will be of profound consequence to the geopolitics of the twenty-first century. Recognizing the propensity for rising powers to come into conflict with established great powers, China has proposed a “New Type of Great Power Relations” in hopes of avoiding conflict with the United States. While officials in Beijing and Washington appear to be comfortable with the label, the concept’s lack of substantive recommendations for engagement severely limits its strategic impact. Given that the potential for cooperation, competition, and conflict largely stems from U.S.–China interaction in the global commons, this article calls for both sides to jointly develop a common conceptual basis to improve cooperation and to manage areas of disagreement.

KEYWORDS China; commons; cyber; global; great; maritime; new; power; relations; space; type; United States

No international relationship will be of greater geopolitical consequence than that between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The complexity of U.S.–China relations—which include significant elements of cooperation and competition—will challenge the existing international liberal order and could threaten global peace and prosperity. Managing the rise of a new great power has historically been a fraught enterprise; whether Washington and Beijing are able to successfully integrate China into the international system will have profound implications for the twenty-first century.

Both Washington and Beijing have a profound interest in avoiding the kind of conflict that typically accompanies the rise of a new great power. Indeed, as noted by Stephen Walt, along with many other international political theorists, increased wealth and economic power often translate into greater military power, with the rising state intent on creating a “more favorable security environment in its neighborhood” to secure its new position and expanding interests.¹ However, this expansion may lead the rising state into competition and conflict with an established power as the often contradictory interests of the two powers increasingly serve as a source of competition, tension, and, possibly, conflict. Several existing areas of tension, including tension on the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan’s status, and China’s approach to disputed maritime claims, all have the potential to spark a crisis, and possible conflict, between the United States and China.

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To reduce the possibility of conflict, Washington and Beijing are currently struggling to establish a robust foundation on which to build their bilateral relationship. Former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's 2005 call for China to act as a "responsible stakeholder" was, in part, an invitation for Beijing to play a more significant role in the international system and cooperate with Washington on several areas of mutual interest. More recently, upon President Obama's inauguration in 2009, the United States reached out in an effort to cooperate with China on a range of global issues. For instance, over the past several years, China and the United States have expanded collaborative efforts to fight piracy off the Gulf of Aden, promote clean energy research and technology, and improve environmental protections.²

However, China's response to these entreaties has been mixed. On some issues, such as counterpiracy operations off the coast of Somalia and addressing Iran's possible pursuit of nuclear weapons, Beijing has been a helpful partner. Yet, on several other issues, including North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs as well as its conventional attacks against South Korea in 2010, concerns about provocative Chinese behavior in cyberspace, and multilateral efforts to resolve regional maritime disputes, China's cooperation has been sorely lacking. Many in China view American actions with great suspicion, sure that they are part of Washington's grand design to contain China and prevent its ascendance to great power status.³ Consequently, many Chinese scholars, officials, and citizens remain highly skeptical about Washington's entreaties aimed at improving collaborative engagement—convinced that they are part of a larger scheme intended to encumber and prevent China's rise.⁴

Yet, a window in Beijing may be opening. Conceptually, at least, China's leaders have begun to call for a "new type of great power relations" (新型大国关系) with the United States. The new general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, endorsed the concept in February 2012 during a visit to Washington, D.C. In remarks at the State Department, he called for a relationship characterized by "sincerity and candor," "enhanced dialogue and communication," "respect," strengthened strategic trust, expanded "practical cooperation," and an effort to "intensify coordination and work

together to meet challenges."⁵ Subsequently, at the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) in May 2012, former president Hu Jintao declared that the two nations should "strive to develop a new type of great power relations that is reassuring to the peoples of both nations and gives the peoples of other countries peace of mind."⁶ Hu further called for "trust" and "a spirit of equality and mutual understanding," and stated:

We should, through creative thinking and concrete steps, prove that the traditional belief that big powers are bound to enter into confrontation and conflicts is wrong, and seek new ways of developing relations between major countries in the era of economic globalization.⁷

The United States appears to be willing to discuss the possibility. One month after Hu's comments, President Barack Obama, on the sidelines of the G-20 meeting in Mexico, noted that the two countries have been able to "create a new model for practical and constructive and comprehensive relations between our two countries."⁸ Later, President Obama's national security advisor Tom Donilon made clear that the United States understands the premise of a new type of great power relations:

And I disagree with the premise put forward by some historians and theorists that a rising power and an established power are somehow destined for conflict. There is nothing preordained about such an outcome. It is not a law of physics, but a series of choices by leaders that lead to great power confrontation. Others have called for containment. We reject that, too. A better outcome is possible. But it falls to both sides—the United States and China—to build a new model of relations between an existing power and an emerging one. Xi Jinping and President Obama have both endorsed this goal.⁹

DEFINING A NEW TYPE OF GREAT POWER RELATIONS

While both Beijing and Washington seem to agree on the need to develop a new type of great power relations, the details of what that relationship will look like in reality remain unclear. Chinese leaders have, to date, only described the essential features of a new type of great power relations rather than the specific modes of engagement and interaction. Consequently, concrete steps have thus far proven elusive.

China's central leadership, including both Hu Jintao and his successor Xi Jinping, have been

consistent on the central features that China would like to see in the new U.S.–China relationship. In his meeting with President Obama on the sidelines of the seventh G-20 Summit, then-president Hu Jintao more clearly laid out what this “new type of great power relations” would look like in four key points:

1. The United States and China should continue to engage in dialogues and enhance mutual trust, and maintain high-level strategic communication.
2. The two countries should “deepen win-win cooperation both in such traditional fields as commerce, investment, law enforcement, education and technology and in such new sectors as energy, environment and infrastructure construction.” This will include increasing “subnational communication and cooperation and expand exchanges in politics, economy, security and culture among others.”
3. The United States and China “should properly manage their differences and ward off interferences” and the United States should “adopt a positive and pragmatic China policy” that does not allow domestic politics to “disturb China-U.S. ties” and that supports “the peaceful development of the relations across the Taiwan Strait with concrete action . . .”
4. “[T]he two nations should jointly undertake international responsibilities and meet global challenges” by engaging in “frank dialogues and pragmatic cooperation . . . so as to keep a healthy interaction in the Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁰

In his report to the 18th CPC National Congress on November 8, Hu stressed that China would continue to promote peaceful, win-win development while defending its core interests.¹¹ The *People’s Daily* (人民日报), the official newspaper of the Communist Party, summarized Hu’s remarks on China’s diplomatic strategy as:

Peaceful development is China’s basic state policy, and win-win cooperation is a banner for China’s friendly relations with other countries. At the same time, the country will resolutely safeguard its national sovereignty, security, and core interests. The two policies are two pillars of Chinese diplomacy and do not conflict with each other.¹²

In July of 2012, Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai and his co-author Pang Hanzhou released an essay that clarified China’s goal in seeking improved U.S.–China relations.¹³ They identify a number of areas in which

the United States needs to change its policy if it is to achieve closer U.S.–China relations. For example, while they view military-to-military relations as a key aspect of the U.S.–China relationship, they state that continued arms sales to Taiwan have disrupted dialogues and exchanges, concluding: “The U.S. side must bear full responsibility for all this.” Cui and Pang similarly raise U.S. intervention in China’s territorial disputes with its neighbors; public criticism on “issues related to Tibet, Xinjiang, democracy”; failure to view China as an equal; and trade disputes as areas in which the United States is not acting as a positive partner. Regarding recognition and respect of core interests, Cui and Pang conclude: “China has never done anything to undermine the U.S. core interests and major concerns, yet what the United States has done in matters concerning China’s core and important interests and major concerns is unsatisfactory.”¹⁴

It appears that, for Beijing, a new type of great power relations has largely been seen as an opportunity for the United States to make concessions without cost to China. Hu’s calls for cooperation and dialogue appear to be predicated on the United States adopting a “pragmatic and positive China policy,” which appears primarily aimed at achieving U.S. concessions on several unspecified points of contention between China and the United States. Similarly, Cui and Pang’s blaming of the United States for all problems in the relationship also signals an approach from Beijing that expects concessions from Washington alone in the pursuit of an undefined positive relationship with Beijing.

Clearly, such an approach will be unworkable for the United States. Just as China is unlikely to agree to negotiations on issues it defines as its core interests, so, too, is the United States unlikely to change its fundamental approach to these issues. Arms sales to Taiwan, a perennial issue of disagreement between Washington and Beijing, have been a consistent element of American policy for decades, enjoy broad bipartisan support among its national security elites, and are very unlikely to change for the foreseeable future. Similarly, Washington is unlikely to abandon other traditional elements of its foreign policy, such as the promotion of democracy and human rights.

Yet, both sides loudly proclaiming their principles at one another will do little to address challenges that affect their mutual interests and will do little to help the United States and China address sources of

tension and potential conflict. It is imperative that both sides develop an agenda for discussion on a wide variety of issues based on mutual interests that identifies opportunities for cooperation, develops mechanisms to manage disagreements, and does not directly affect the core interests of either side.

A WAY AHEAD

While Washington seems to be open to discussions about a new type of relationship, such an arrangement would need to be based on a jointly developed vision of the issues they face and a pragmatic approach to enhance cooperation on areas of mutual interest and manage disagreements where they occur.

Despite China and the United States often failing to see eye to eye on a number of issues, several opportunities for engagement are available that, over time, could help realize a new type of great power relations. Such engagement must be founded on a clear-headed understanding of mutual interests and a realistic understanding that some differences will be difficult to resolve. While engagement on issues such as social interaction, climate change, and global trade are certainly worthwhile, the broad outlines for cooperation in these areas are fairly well-understood by both sides. Moreover, while certainly of great political consequence, they are not issues in which disagreement could lead to crisis and conflict between the two sides.

While dialogue and engagement on other security issues will be vital to the stability of U.S.–China relations, the global commons represent an especially important area for interaction and engagement. As China continues to rise and the United States seeks to sustain and enhance its power in the Asia-Pacific, it is in the global commons—the ungoverned domains that serve as the interconnective tissue of the global economy¹⁵—where interaction could quickly lead to misunderstanding, crisis, and conflict.

Although having proven especially difficult thus far, U.S.–China engagement and cooperation within the global commons (maritime, space, and cyberspace) will be particularly essential to lessening the chances of future conflict between the two powers. The possible outcomes of conflict within any of these domains are such that both sides (not to mention the broader international community) share a strong interest in working together to develop a conceptual framework to address issues in such a way that

enhances cooperation while also effectively managing disagreements and disputes.

A solid conceptual foundation for great power relations in the global commons is the *sine qua non* if the two great powers are to avoid conflict, manage disagreements, and establish a basis for strategic cooperation. The United States and the Soviet Union were able to gradually develop a robust conceptual foundation for their engagement in these areas—a foundation that was codified as both sides embraced mutual assured destruction, arms control agreements, an incidents-at-sea agreement, and multiple international treaties on activities in space. Such agreements allowed both sides to understand and engage each other in a more productive and stabilizing manner and reduced the risk of a crisis escalating inexorably to war. While relations between China and the United States will be of a fundamentally different character than what existed between the United States and the U.S.S.R., Washington and Beijing must begin to establish a joint conceptual foundation for engagement in the global commons if they are to successfully build a new type of great power relations.

Maritime

On the face of the issue, both the United States and China have significant interests in ensuring that the high seas remain open to and reliable for global trade. They are the world's top maritime traders, accounting for 37 percent of global maritime exports and 25 percent of global maritime imports in 2010.¹⁶ Chinese imports of crude oil increased nearly five-fold between 2001 and 2011, with demand expected to surpass that of North America in 2014.¹⁷

In recent years, maritime issues have come to the fore as a leading source of tension and distrust between the United States and China. Decades of significant investment by China in its military are beginning to pay dividends, with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) beginning to emerge as a regional maritime force to be reckoned with. In the past year alone, as part of a long-standing effort to develop its naval power, China has inaugurated its first aircraft carrier¹⁸ and has used its growing maritime capabilities to enforce disputed maritime claims in the East and South China seas.¹⁹

As a result, these key waterways are rapidly becoming more congested and prone to incidents

that can quickly inflame regional tensions. American and Chinese maritime vessels have already had some unfortunate incidents at sea, most famously in 2009 when the USNS *Impeccable* was harassed in international waters by five Chinese vessels.²⁰ Vessels from other countries in East Asia, including Japan and Vietnam, have reported similar incidents.

More recently, tensions have escalated between China and Japan in the East China Sea over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands following the decision by the Government of Japan to buy the islands from their private owner. Since September, the waters surrounding the islands have seen numerous skirmishes between Chinese maritime surveillance ships and Japanese Coast Guard vessels. However, the inclusion of naval vessels in engagements around the islands has resulted in the dispute taking on a more dangerous tenor in recent weeks, with reports that on several occasions PLAN frigates have targeted Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) vessels and aircraft with fire-control radar.²¹ Additionally, with the introduction of Chinese and Japanese fighter aircraft into the equation, the potential for accidental or unintended escalation grows greater. Meanwhile, the United States, while reaffirming its security commitments to Japan and cautioning against “any unilateral actions that would undermine Japan’s administration in the islands,” has repeatedly called on both Tokyo and Beijing to reach a peaceful settlement and work to de-escalate the dispute.²²

The United States has repeatedly sought to engage China on issues of building maritime stability.²³ In 1998, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen and China’s Minister of Defense Chi Haotian signed the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, which was designed to serve as a forum for the two sides to discuss and avoid incidents at sea. However, this mechanism has not functioned as intended, leaving the United States and China without a basic means for consultations on issues of maritime security. Fundamentally, China seeks to restrict the ability of American forces to operate within China’s claimed Economic Exclusion Zones (EEZs) while the United States has not wavered from its policy to remain in these waters, a right protected by international law.

Despite the proliferation of areas of disagreement in the maritime domain, significant opportunities for cooperation and engagement are available. Both the United States and China share an interest in sustaining the openness and stability of vital sea lanes, and

neither side wants seaborne commerce to be interrupted. More important, neither Washington nor Beijing wants to see a maritime incident that could further inflame regional tensions and, worse yet, potentially spark a crisis or conflict. These interests can facilitate the development of a conceptual foundation for U.S.–China cooperation on areas of mutual interest, and the management of disputes in areas of disagreement, in the maritime domain.

Space

For decades, the number of actors in space was largely confined to two: the United States and the Soviet Union. The proliferation of advanced rocketry technology, however, has enabled more countries to join the community of space-faring nations. On the top of the list of these new entrants into space has been China, which recently became the third country to place astronauts into orbit. China today has 92 government and military satellites in orbit performing a wide range of tasks, from remote sensing and meteorology to communications and geo-positioning.²⁴ It has publicized a highly ambitious space program, which includes plans for the establishment of a space station in 2020 and crewed expeditions to the Moon and Mars. It has also become increasingly active in satellite launching, conducting 19 orbital launches between 2010 and 2012.²⁵

Less publicly, China has also pursued a robust military space program that expands its ability both to utilize space for military missions and to attack an adversary’s satellites.²⁶ Most troubling is the development of a Chinese antisatellite (ASAT) capability, which was tested to great public consternation in 2007. This launch alone created the largest amount of space debris in history, with an estimated 150,000 debris particles and at least 2,300 pieces larger than a golf ball.²⁷ Because of the speeds involved and the fragility of space vehicles, each piece of debris in orbit poses a threat. The debris created by the test of China’s ASAT capability has already forced manned spacecraft to adjust their orbits to avoid potentially devastating collisions.

However, concerns about China’s ASAT capability go far beyond considerations of debris. China has identified the U.S. military’s reliance on space-based command and control as a major vulnerability²⁸ and regularly writes about the need to attack these

capabilities in the course of a conflict with the United States.²⁹ Such a strike would be tremendously escalatory and has become an important factor in U.S. security planning.³⁰

As with the maritime domain, the United States and China also share significant interests in space. Both rely on access to space for commercial and economic activity, and both would be threatened by the use of kinetic ASAT weapons in a time of conflict. While both countries have proposed international agreements to rectify these concerns, neither has proven interested in considering the other's proposals. China has proposed an international treaty that bans "space weapons," which, if enacted, would seriously limit U.S. ballistic missile defense capabilities while leaving China's ASAT program unaffected. The United States, for its part, has sought to discuss with China the consequences of creating space debris and attacking space-based assets—dialogues that China has yet to take seriously.

Yet despite these problems, several opportunities for cooperation exist. Manned space poses an especially promising opportunity to cooperate in space for scientific advancement that will benefit both sides. Other opportunities to share space research data and cooperate on unmanned missions of exploration are promising.

The significant levels of disagreement between Washington and Beijing in space should not deter efforts to engage one another. Indeed, such levels of disagreement should prompt both sides to seek dialogue on these issues. To develop a conceptual foundation for U.S.–China relations in space, the two countries *must* explore potential areas of agreement and cooperation, as well as mechanisms and policies that can defuse or minimize tension over areas of disagreement.

Cyberspace

The United States has also sought to engage China on the dynamics of a new strategic domain—cyberspace—but has yet to have much success. Much like in the space domain, China is developing capabilities that make it more reliant on access to cyberspace while also challenging the ability of an adversary to use cyberspace during a time of crisis or conflict.³¹ Unlike space, cyberspace does not have decades of international agreements and strategic thinking

to fall back on; cyberspace is largely unregulated by international treaties, with strategic thinking about this domain in its infancy.³² For example, would cyberattacks that damage civilian infrastructure or financial networks be considered an act of war? This is unclear; also unclear is if they would provoke a response in the form of either a cyber counterattack or a kinetic strike. While the United States has begun to develop guidelines on such issues, they remain untested and completely unilateral.³³

Despite this uncertainty, clearly cyberpower will play an increasingly vital role in U.S.–China relations. As of December 2012, 42 percent of China's population used the Internet (more than 564 million users). Moreover, both the United States and China consider this domain to be a crucial battlefield in any future confrontation; in addition, significant concerns have been expressed about the escalatory potential of cyberattacks, which can damage vital domestic infrastructure such as transportation, power, and stock exchanges.³⁴

Furthermore, reports of Chinese cyberespionage and theft of intellectual property from the American economy are quickly becoming important bilateral political issues. While the complete value of the intellectual property that has been stolen is unknown, Gen. Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency and commander of U.S. Cyber Command, called cyber-based industrial espionage "the greatest transfer of wealth in history."³⁵ Despite Beijing's official denials and remonstrations, a recent report by a U.S. security firm tying Chinese cyberespionage activities to the People's Liberation Army merely focuses an additional spotlight on one of the worst-kept secrets in China and one of the more troubling aspects of U.S.–China relations.³⁶

These issues have been raised in bilateral discussions to little effect. Chinese officials repeatedly express the view that such intrusions are legitimate and that China is also the victim of such espionage. Of greater concern, though, is that Chinese officials and scholars refuse to acknowledge the destabilizing and escalatory potential of cyberattacks.

PROSPECTS FOR A NEW TYPE OF GREAT POWER RELATIONS

Despite some lofty rhetoric from both sides, any substantial shift in the fundamental elements of

U.S.–China relations are unlikely in the near future. For the foreseeable future, U.S.–China relations are likely to include substantial elements of both cooperation and competition.

A new type of great power relations may end up being the product of accrued successes on individual issues; so, in a way, perhaps it is worthwhile to announce the desired end-goal now. This will be a generational task.

Most important, both the United States and China must be cautious not to fall prey to self-fulfilling prophecies of great power conflict as a result of intransigent thinking or a failure to recognize opportunities to move from the current course. Ultimately, Washington and Beijing must take the lessons from history while not becoming its slave.

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