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**China Seeks a “New Type of Major-Country Relationship” with
the United States**

by

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China is seeking a “new type of major-country relationship”^{*} with the United States, according to official statements from Chinese leaders. Beijing has deliberated this concept since at least 2011, and it has been referenced frequently by high-level Chinese officials and widely discussed in Chinese media since February 2012, when then presumptive Chinese president Xi Jinping evoked it during a visit to the United States.^{1†} This approach likely is intended to create an environment more conducive to China’s rise by promoting more stable relations with the United States and avoid or, if necessary, manage tension that history suggests is inevitable between established and rising powers. Beijing sees the United States as an essential economic and strategic partner, but also as the power most able to hinder the achievement of its objectives.

High-level statements on the “new type of major-country relationship”

President Xi in February 2012 proposed four ways for the United States and China to build this “new type” of relationship: (1) “steadily increase mutual understanding and strategic trust,” (2) “respect each other’s core interests and major concerns,” (3) “work hard to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation,” and (4) “steadily enhance coordination and cooperation in international affairs and on global issues.”²

Other high-level statements on the “new type” concept suggest its basic tenets have achieved broad consensus among Beijing’s foreign policy actors:

- “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.”
- *then Chinese president Hu Jintao, May 3, 2012*³
- “Within the larger picture of the China-U.S. collaborative partnership, the two militaries need to actively forge [a new type] of military-to-military relationship and this is based on equality, mutual benefit, and cooperation. It is necessary for the two militaries to have more dialogues, communication, to promote understanding [sic] good trust and deepen exchanges and cooperation so as to constantly raise the level of development of this mil-to-mil relationship.”
– *then Chinese minister of national defense Liang Guanglie, September 18, 2012*⁴
- “In my view, this new model of relationship is based on mutual respect and aims to achieve win-win cooperation. Mutual respect means that both sides are willing to listen to each other's voice, understand each other, put us into each other's shoes and accommodate each other's comfort level. Win-win cooperation means that both sides should determine to abandon ‘zero-sum’ game, welcome each other's success and try to find opportunities from the other's success.”
– *Chinese ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai, June 14, 2013*⁵

* Some observers use the term “new type of great power relationship.” Both phrases refer to the same concept.

† U.S. and Chinese media outlets reported that the “new type of major-country relationship” concept was a central element of the June 2013 “shirtsleeves summit” between U.S. President Barack Obama and President Xi in Sunnylands, California. Xinhua, “China, U.S. agree to build new type of relations,” June 8, 2013. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-06/08/c_132442379.htm; Jeremy Page and ColleenMcCain Nelson, “U.S.-China Summit Reveals Beijing’s Drive,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2013. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324423904578521161140840702.html>; and Jamil Anderlini, “Global Insight: China’s ‘great power’ call to the US could stir friction,” *Financial Times*, June 4, 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/80f4168a-ccca-11e2-9cf7-00144feab7de.html#axzz2WfPEh45n>.

Motivations and potential manifestations of the “new type of major-country relationship”

Beijing’s attempt to develop a “new type” of relationship with Washington almost certainly reflects its desire to adjust the relationship to better accommodate China’s rise. Beijing likely judges the current level of distrust in the U.S.-China relationship could threaten its ability to defend and advance its expanding economic and strategic interests. Additionally, the “new type” concept, closely associated with President Xi, may represent his efforts to show a distinctive leadership style early in his administration and highlight improving U.S.-China relations as a key theme of his administration.⁶ Key factors shaping the policy probably are China’s growing confidence on the world stage – driven by decades of economic growth, relatively strong economic performance during the global financial crisis, and rapid military modernization – and increasing domestic expectations for China to assume greater global responsibility commensurate with its perceived status.⁷

The “new type” concept, like many Chinese policy slogans, is vaguely defined. This provides Chinese officials with the flexibility to frame it in different ways for different circumstances and audiences. Chinese officials could attempt to use the concept to serve a number of purposes, including the following:

- Develop deeper, more frequent, and more resilient channels of communication to improve the two countries’ abilities to manage crises if and when they arise.
- Pressure the United States to respect China’s “core interests,” defined by Beijing as upholding China’s political system and national security, Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, and economic and social development.⁸
- Promote an image of China as a constructive actor seeking common solutions to regional and global issues.
- Demonstrate that China is proactive in building a peaceful and cooperative relationship with the United States and does not have the intent or ability to challenge the U.S. militarily.
- Pressure the United States to cease military reconnaissance and survey operations in China’s claimed exclusive economic zone,^{*} reduce arms sales to Taiwan, and relax restrictions on bilateral military cooperation, particularly those imposed in the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act.^{9†}

“The ball is in the U.S. court”

China’s appears to recognize that achieving this “new type” relationship will depend on greater mutual accommodation of each country’s respective interests. However, official Chinese statements and

^{*} An exclusive economic zone is a 200 nautical mile zone extending from a state’s coastline within which that state can exercise jurisdiction to explore and exploit natural resources, but not full sovereignty. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, “Part 5: Exclusive Economic Zone.”
http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/closindx.htm.

[†] Section 1201 of the 2000 National Defense Authorization Act prohibits the U.S. Department of Defense from authorizing any military-to-military exchange or contact with representatives of the Chinese armed forces if that exchange or contact would create a national security risk for the United States. United States Congress, “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000,” Public Law 106-65, October 5, 1999.
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-106publ65/pdf/PLAW-106publ65.pdf>.

analyses tend to emphasize what Beijing sees as the U.S. responsibilities under this concept, and put the onus on the United States, rather than China, to realize the “new type” of relationship.

For example, then Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai (now Chinese Ambassador to the United States) in a 2012 essay on the “new type” concept asserted “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.”¹⁰ Wang Yusheng, former Chinese ambassador to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, echoed this assessment in an editorial for the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs. Ambassador Wang argues that while China has taken steps to improve bilateral relations, the United States has hurt the relationship by pursuing “hegemonic” objectives in the Asia Pacific region. He pronounces “the ball is in the U.S. court” to make the “new type of major-country relationship” work.¹¹

U.S. reception to the “new type of major-country relationship”

Notwithstanding Chinese assertions that achieving this “new type” of relationship requires a disproportionate amount of compromising by the United States, the Obama administration generally has been receptive to China’s approach. U.S. officials including President Obama and former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton responded favorably to the concept in public statements.¹² U.S. national security advisor Tom Donilon in March 2013 remarked President Xi and President Obama “have both endorsed [the] goal” of building a “new model for relations between an existing power and an emerging one.”¹³

Outlook

Beijing likely will focus, at least initially, on securing more frequent, higher-level U.S.-China dialogues and exchanges on bilateral, regional, and international issues. Chinese officials have emphasized the importance of this step in their discussions of the concept. For example, former Chinese president Hu Jintao advised the United States and China should “continue to engage in a broad range of dialogues ... and maintain high-level communication through senior-level visits, meetings, telephone conversations and letters.”¹⁴ There probably is common ground upon which Beijing and Washington can pursue such activities.¹⁵ However, each side’s reluctance to compromise on their respective key security interests may preclude an evolution in bilateral relations that significantly promotes trust and diminishes competition.

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- ¹ Michael S. Chase, "China's Search for a 'New Type of Great Power Relationship,'" *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 12:27 (September 7, 2012): 14. http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/cb_09_04.pdf.
- ² Xi Jinping, "Speech by Vice President Xi Jinping at Welcoming Luncheon Hosted by Friendly Organizations in the United States" (The National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and the U.S.-China Business Council, February 15, 2012). <http://www.chinausfocus.com/library/government-resources/chinese-resources/remarks/speech-by-vice-president-xi-jinping-at-welcoming-luncheon-hosted-by-friendly-organizations-in-the-united-states-february-15-2012/>.
- ³ Xinhua, "President Hu: China, U.S. should break traditional belief of big powers' conflicts," May 3, 2012. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-05/03/c_131565828.htm.
- ⁴ Liang Guanglie, "Secretary Panetta and Chinese Defense Minister General Liang Guanglie hold a Joint News Conference, China" (Beijing, China: U.S. Department of Defense, September 18, 2012). <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5116>.
- ⁵ Cui Tiankai, "Remarks by Ambassador Cui Tiankai at the 2013 China-US Policy Dialogue Luncheon," (Washington, DC: Embassy of the People's Republic of China, June 14, 2013). <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/dszl/dsjh/t1050515.htm>.
- ⁶ Jeremy Page and Colleen McCain Nelson, "U.S.-China Summit Reveals Beijing's Drive," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2013. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324423904578521161140840702.html>.
- ⁷ Jamil Anderlini, "Global Insight: China's 'great power' call to the US could stir friction," *Financial Times*, June 4, 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/80f4168a-ccca-11e2-9cf7-00144feab7de.html#axzz2WfPEh45n>.
- ⁸ Caitlin Campbell, Ethan Meick, Kimberly Hsu, and Craig Murray, "China's 'Core Interests' and the East China Sea," (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, May 10, 2013), p. 3. <http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Core%20Interests%20and%20the%20East%20China%20Sea.pdf>.
- ⁹ Zhao Xiaozhuo, "The Building of a New-Type Military Relationship Between China and the United States Is Facing a Historic Opportunity," OSC ID: CPP20130614787003. <http://www.opensource.gov>.
- ¹⁰ Michael S. Chase, "China's Search for a 'New Type of Great Power Relationship,'" *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 12:27 (September 7, 2012): 14. http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/cb_09_04.pdf.
- ¹¹ Wang Yusheng, "Is it possible for the U.S. and China to build a new-type major country relationship?" *Foreign Affairs Journal* 117 (Spring 2013). <http://cpifa.org/en/q/listQuarterlyArticle.do?articleId=254>.
- ¹² David M. Lampton, *A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties [Advance Release]* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2013), pp. 3-4. http://www.nbr.org/publications/asia_policy/free/ap16/AP16_NewRelationship_050813advance.pdf.
- ¹³ David M. Lampton, *A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties [Advance Release]* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2013), p.13. http://www.nbr.org/publications/asia_policy/free/ap16/AP16_NewRelationship_050813advance.pdf.
- ¹⁴ Michael S. Chase, "China's Search for a 'New Type of Great Power Relationship,'" *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 12:27 (September 7, 2012): 14. http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/cb_09_04.pdf; Ruan Zongze, "A Historic Opportunity to Establish a New Type of Great Power Relationship between China and the United States," (Beijing, China: China Institute of International Studies, December 31, 2012). http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2012-12/31/content_5638120.htm.
- ¹⁵ David M. Lampton, *A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties [Advance Release]* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2013), p.13. http://www.nbr.org/publications/asia_policy/free/ap16/AP16_NewRelationship_050813advance.pdf.