

US-China New Pattern of Great-Power Relations

by Richard Bush

Richard Bush (rbush@brookings.edu) is a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at The Brookings Institution. This essay is an adaptation of a blog-post that Dr. Bush wrote and Brookings disseminated before the meetings between Presidents Obama and Xi.

To no one's surprise, the topic of a "new pattern of great-power relations" came up during the meetings between President Obama and China's President Xi Jinping. We don't, of course, know what the two presidents said to each other about it, but PRC State Councilor Yang Jiechi did talk at length about the idea in his briefing after the meeting (mainly in terms of process). In his remarks for the media, US National Security Adviser Tom Donilon cited President Obama on the challenge of "building out the new model of relations between great powers."

"New pattern of great power relations" is the latest in formulations that Chinese leaders have deployed on a periodic basis, both as a tool to bring coherence to their increasingly unwieldy system and as a means to engage their foreign counterparts. To the average citizen, the concept may seem arcane, but it could have profound strategic significance – if it gains some content.

That China is focused on a "new pattern" reflects its concern about the old pattern. That pattern, in the Chinese understanding, is that when a previously weak country quickly accumulates power, it ends up challenging the existing international order and the principal countries that defend that order and then finds itself in perpetual conflict and major war.

China today does not wish to repeat the old pattern. It benefits a lot from the international system that the United States created after World War II, even if it dislikes some of the rules and the US forward deployment in East Asia, its home region. And Beijing understands that it is far from ready to fight a war with America. So it's a good thing that the Chinese are "using history as a mirror" and seek to understand how the dynamics of the past might hurt their national interests in the future. As long ago as 2006, official Chinese television did a documentary series "The Rise of Great Powers" on this phenomenon of power transitions. And the United States, the defender of the current international order, is right to welcome China's desire to avoid the tyranny of history.

The Obama Administration appears to be in the same place. As Donilon put it, Washington joins Beijing in rejecting the idea of an "inexorable dynamic" that a rising power and an existing power are in some manner "destined for conflict."

The problem is that the "new pattern" idea is so far just a slogan. It has no content. Among the many questions that would have to be addressed in order to "build out" the concept are the following:

- What in fact was the old pattern of great power relations? Was it simply a case of an irresistible force meeting an immovable obstacle over and over again? Or was something more complex going on to produce major conflict and war?
- In the current era, who are the great powers? China clearly has itself and the United States in mind. But what about Japan? What about Germany, Britain, and France, or the European Union as a whole? What about Russia, India, and Brazil? One can only figure out the pattern when one knows the players.
- What is the relationship between the great powers and Tier 2 powers? South Korea, South Africa, and Israel come to mind.
- How should great powers manage their relations in the complex situation where they all are present in the same region, where conflicts of interest are most likely? In East Asia, for example, China, Japan, and the United States are the key actors.
- What issues will be the substantive heart of the new pattern? Is it the relatively easy global issues which are ripe for multilateral cooperation? Or will it be the truly hard issues that threaten international peace and security?
- Should the new pattern be formed by identifying a set of overarching principles (probably the Chinese preference) or to build the pattern by learning lessons from interaction on specific issues (probably the American inclination)?

Presidents Xi and Obama will not answer these questions and define the "new pattern" at Sunnylands, and that was not the purpose of their meeting. But they clearly have agreed that this something worth pursuing. The question looking forward is what kind of process would best invest the concept with serious content.

'The times, they are a-changin.'

by Pier Luigi Zanatta

Pier Luigi Zanatta (pierluigi.zanatta@gmail.com) who is now based in Paris, was the Far Eastern Correspondent of the Italian News Agency ANSA.

From Yalta to Kennedy-Khrushchev, from Nixon-Mao to Carter-Brezhnev superpower summits used to keep Europe up with bated breath. Not so this time, even if the Californian meeting between Barack Obama and Xi Jinping was quite entitled to historical records, if only for the economic and strategic power involved.

The summit revamped the direct and freewheeling discussions that used to enthrall and reassure the whole of the planet, but this time there were no big headlines in the old Continent: barely a couple of words at the end of newsreels. Was the Sunnylands summit too far away or too embarrassing for European sensitivities?

Every day the economies of most European countries are agonizing under the brunt of Chinese exports and of the US industrial revival, with no real solution in the offing. Apart from agreements at emergency meetings on stopgap measures for financial rescues, most of the time internal EU policies are dominated by malaise and by unavowed rivalries, while individual states are frantically groping for a way out of their economic crisis, like ants who don't realize that the very survival of the anthill is at stake.

France did make an effort when former President Nicolas Sarkozy sought a closer and personal relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. But now Paris has curled up again in self-conceit, to the point of picking on imports of Chinese solar panels with an awkward crusade that annoyed Berlin and soon backfired. Similarly, during a recent visit to Tokyo, President François Hollande had to speak out four times on internal disputes back in France, which made him so upset that he badly blundered in congratulating his "Chinese" hosts.

Actually the prevailing attitude in many European countries is still to think of BRICS as a group of teenagers who will sober-up when dealing with an adult in the near future. A similar misjudgment has been extended to the whole of the Pacific. French media were recently boasting of the launch in Marseille of the largest container ship in the world: they omitted to point out that it had been entirely built in South Korea and will bring more merchandise from Asia to Europe than the other way round.

Whatever the uneasiness in Europe, the world dominance of the G2 is a fact and there will be an increasing need for reckoning with this reality, in Europe and elsewhere. From a strategic point of view, the G2 supremacy still leaves room for a larger group, which could include other 'traditional' powers like Russia, Britain and France (even if European defense budgets are more and more battered).

But in the long run the old Continent should start to face reality and be fully aware that squabbling and short sight are exposing it to the risk of fading into economic and political irrelevance.

Will Paris, Berlin and London be obliged to form a 'rescue directorate', much more efficient than EU institutions, to save in the end the historical cradle of Western 'grandeur'? For the time being, Europeans still seem to stumble around, waiting for an economic miracle in which overtaxed populations suddenly start to produce growth (with or without the financial magic of 'monetary easing' enacted by Washington, London, and Tokyo).

Maybe, more than economic miracles, Europe needs a sort 'cultural revolution' to realize that the world is quickly pivoting elsewhere and that:

is worth savin'

then you better start swimmin'

or you'll sink like a stone

for the times, they are a-changin'.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

if your time to you