

(Re)Defining the “New Type of Major Country Relationship” between the United States and China by Ely Ratner

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The US response to China’s call for a “new type of major country relationship” remains one of the most controversial and misunderstood components of the Obama administration’s China policy. An immediate problem is the glaring disconnect between the ways in which policymakers in Washington and Beijing are interpreting the concept. What the United States sees as a way to manage competition and encourage China to cooperate on critical geopolitical issues, China’s leaders describe as a framework for acknowledging China’s newfound status and respecting its core interests.

Elsewhere in Asia, particularly among America’s allies and partners, there’s a palpable sense of confusion and dismay that Washington appears to be embracing the notion of accommodation to China with hints of a G-2 condominium that leaves the rest of the region on the sidelines. Beijing has amplified these concerns by telling diplomats throughout Asia that they should no longer count on a Washington that now privileges US-China relations ahead of all others.

Given these deep and enduring problems, there are good reasons to wish the concept would just go away. But that’s not going to happen anytime soon. President Xi Jinping has made it a centerpiece of his approach to the United States, beginning with his visit as vice president in February 2012. Since then, Chinese officials and academics have been falling over themselves to repeat the phrase and you’d be hard pressed to find an Asia-focused researcher in Washington who hasn’t been invited to Beijing to discuss the topic.

The cat is out of the bag in Washington as well. What started as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s call for the United States and China to “write a new answer to the old question of what happens when an established power and rising power meet,” has evolved into near-verbatim recitations of the concept by US officials. National Security Advisor Susan Rice told an audience at Georgetown University last November that it was time “to operationalize a new model of major power relations.”

However, although the slogan is here to stay (for now), still to be determined are the ways in which it will shape the behaviors of China, the United States, and the region. The consequences could be dire if China continues to misconstrue Washington’s vision for US-China relations. Misperception in Beijing that the United States is ready to accommodate China’s core interests could likely lead to Chinese

assertiveness and miscalculation. One could argue this is already occurring.

Similarly, if the region misreads US acceptance of the concept to mean that Washington will prioritize the US-China relationship above all others in Asia, allies and partners will be less likely to cooperate with the United States and will instead seek alternative means of ensuring their security, which would at once undermine US leadership and invite greater competition and conflict.

To avoid these pernicious consequences of misperception, the Obama administration should consider three lines of effort to revive the utility (if any remains) of the “new type” concept.

First, the administration should make a clear public statement about exactly how it is interpreting and using the concept. Susan Rice’s articulation at Georgetown was a good start, but more is needed. US officials should continue emphasizing, as Vice President Joe Biden did in Northeast Asia in December, the importance of enhancing risk reduction and confidence building measures. Also essential is a revival and updating of the “responsible stakeholder” concept introduced in 2007 by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick. US officials should reiterate Rice’s recognition of the need to “operationalize” the concept, which means working together to manage and resolve critical international issues.

Most significantly, in laying out Washington’s understanding of what it will take for a “new type” of relationship between China and the US, Obama administration officials should draw direct linkages to China’s behavior in the region. A principal cause of major power war throughout modern history, and certainly in the last century, has been revisionist behavior by rising powers. In no uncertain terms, the United States can make clear that China’s ongoing efforts to rewrite the territorial status quo in East Asia are incompatible with a “new type of major country relationship.” In other words, the concept will be a dead letter if Chinese revisionism persists.

Second, Washington should make clear that the notion of a “new type” of relationship in the 21st century is not a Chinese concept and does not apply only, or even primarily, to the US-China context. US officials can reiterate that this idea represents a recognition of the potential for deleterious security competition going back literally thousands of years. To reinforce this, Washington should consider calling upon Japan and China to seek a new type of major country relationship, which – again focused on the notion of precluding revisionism – would be consistent with recent statements by Vice President Biden, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, and Secretary of State John Kerry that all

countries should avoid unilateral acts to change the status quo in the South and East China Seas.

In addition to underscoring the central issue of avoiding the emergence of revisionist rising powers, raising the concept in the likes of the China-Japan, China-India, or Japan-Korea context would offer far more accurate historical analogs in which neighboring countries are tussling over history and territory. Besides, setting aside the overly abstract and deeply flawed political science on this issue, exactly which past case of a rising and an established power does Beijing believe is even remotely comparable to US-China relations in 2014? Good luck getting an answer to that question.

Finally, US officials should scrap altogether the verbiage of “new type of relationship” and find their own way to articulate their version of the concept. Repeating the Chinese phraseology but avowing a different interpretation will cause continued confusion. The talented speechwriters in the White House should be able to find alternative language that more precisely conveys the US position in ways that do not raise concerns about US accommodation to China at the expense of allies and partners.

However riddled with problems, there may still be time for the United States to make diplomatic lemonade out of this conceptual lemon.

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