



Can “stakeholder” hold U.S.-China relations?

by Jianwei Wang

Since Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick used the term of “stakeholder” in a speech on U.S.-China relations last September, it has triggered a lot of discussion in both countries. The Bush administration – from the White House to the Pentagon – has incorporated this concept into official documents such as the recent *Quadrennial Defense Review* and the *National Security Strategy*. At the recent summit in Washington, DC, top leaders in both countries also endorsed it. In his welcome remarks on the South Lawn of White House, President Bush used the term for the first time. President Hu Jintao’s remarks at the White House luncheon also mentioned “stakeholder,” although he quickly added that China and U.S. should also be “constructive partners.”

The Bush administration’s China policymakers have made laudable efforts to reconceptualize U.S.-China relations. Since taking office, the Bush administration has gone a long way in modifying its perception of China. Zoellick made it clear in his speech that China is not the Soviet Union of the late 1940s as it does not have a radical anti-U.S. and anti-Western ideology. This conclusion virtually put an end to the debate about whether China is the next Soviet Union in the post-Cold War era. Senior government officials now emphasize the common “strategic interest” between the two countries, which was seldom talked about during the first term of the Bush administration. But does the “stakeholder” idea provide a new conceptual framework that can lead to a more stable U.S.-China relationship?

The “stakeholder” concept presents a necessary cognitive foundation for a more stable U.S.-China relationship: it highlights common stakes in the existing international order. However, we still need to wait to see if it is enough to create a more robust relationship because each country could have a very different understanding and definition of the essence of this concept, as well as the means to realize a “stakeholder” relationship.

First, this concept was mainly put forward as a demand upon China by the United States. The implication is that China is not a “responsible stakeholder” yet. In the September speech, Zoellick listed a number of areas in which China’s behavior was perceived as problematic. And every time U.S. and Chinese leaders met, the Americans deliver a long list of complaints and demands while the Chinese often scrambled to address these concerns. If “stakeholder” is only used to facilitate the U.S. demands upon China, it will not serve as a solid basis for a stable relationship.

The U.S. should treat China in a more reciprocal fashion. Acting as “responsible stakeholders” should be the common objective; “stakeholder” should be a mechanism of mutual

supervision through consultation rather than unilateral accusations. Some U.S. policy makers have recognized this problem. In a recent interview, Zoellick pointed out that the U.S. and other countries “also need to be responsible stakeholders.” In his welcome speech to Hu, President Bush listed both the U.S. and China as “stakeholders” in the international system. In short, “stakeholder” needs to become a device for self-discipline and mutual examination, not a stick wielded by one side against the other.

The key question is who will define the “stake” and how it will be defined. If each side only uses its narrow national interests to judge the behavior of the other, the concept of “stakeholder” is meaningless: it is merely asking one side to subordinate its interests to the other.

We live in a U.S.-centered international system. It is only natural that the interests of the U.S. and the interests of the international system overlap to great extent. Therefore it is not surprising that the U.S. has more to say in defining the “stake” in the international system. Beijing has to accept this fact. That does not mean that the U.S. can automatically claim its interests are those of the international system. In fact, some U.S. foreign policies during the Bush administration have weakened the international system that the U.S. helped create.

And while China should resist the temptation to maximize its parochial interests at the expense of the global system and should better accommodate the stakes as defined by the U.S., Washington should not jeopardize China’s core national interests. For U.S.-China relations to have truly global significance, they must, in Zoellick’s words, go “beyond their pure national interest” and recognize “how one develops a national interest in the strength of the international system.”

Globalization has increased the common stakes for China and the U.S. The two countries have a common interest on almost all important international issues, such as fighting terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trade liberalization, environmental protection, energy, transnational crime, and pandemic diseases. Even the issue that historically divided the two countries most – Taiwan: the maintenance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait – has become a common stake for both sides. From this perspective, the concept of “stakeholder” reflects reality.

A common objective is not a guarantee of effective cooperation. As President Bush pointed out at the press conference with President Hu when asked about the Iran nuclear crisis, the U.S. and China have a common goal – preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons – but they may have different views about how to achieve it. The same situation could also be found in other issues of common concern such as the war on terror and the North Korean nuclear issue. The divergence in tactics is no small matter as it often leads to skepticism about the commitment of the other

side toward the common objective. The U.S.'s reaction to China's performance in the Six-Party Talks is typical in this regard. Without consensus on means and tactics, the common objective can't be achieved.

Finally, the concept of "stakeholder" has not significantly reduced suspicions about long-term strategic intentions. As Zoellick noted in his "stakeholder" speech, China is not another Soviet Union. It does not have a radical anti-American ideology, does not seek to overthrow the international system, and does not see itself in conflict with capitalism and democracy. If so, should China's domestic political system and its military modernization cause such alarm? Such suspicions seem to be deepening. As Zoellick put it, "many countries hope China will pursue a 'Peaceful Rise,' but none will bet their future on it." The *QDR* and the *NSS* highlight America's strategic anxiety about China. This wariness is used to justify an increasingly visible hedging strategy against China.

Chinese also have deep-rooted skepticism about whether the U.S. will genuinely accept a rising China as an equal partner. Beijing has tried hard to assure Washington that it has no intention of challenging U.S. leadership in world affairs. But China's rise must reduce U.S. global influence. The extent to which the U.S. can embrace this prospect is a big question for many Chinese.

In sum, the concept of "stakeholder" provides a positive first step for a new conceptual framework for U.S.-China relations. But this new framework is still just a skeleton. The two nations have a long way to go before they can declare that they have found a way to co-exist peacefully and cooperatively in the 21st century.

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