

China's Great Power Mentality and Its Diplomatic Vision for the 21st Century by Chung Young-june

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As China embarks on a renewed path of “peaceful development” with its goal of creating a “harmonious world” under its fifth generation leaders, observers are keen to see how the most important bilateral relationship of our time – the United States and China – will evolve. China’s leaders view the first 20 years of this century as a “period of strategic opportunity” to create a “moderately well-off society,” acknowledged in the 18th National Congress of the CPC with slogans such as the “Great Revitalization of the Chinese Nation” and the “Chinese Dream.” Likewise, younger generations of Chinese people have been raised to believe forecasts from Goldman Sachs and the IMF that predict China will become the number one economic power in coming years.

The “new type of great power relationship” which China first proposed early in 2012 revolves around a bilateral relationship defined by “peaceful coexistence,” “mutual interests,” “win-win cooperation,” “strategic trust,” and “respect for each other’s core interests.” Because history indicates that a rising power is destined to confront, if not go to war with, established powers in the international system, the “new type of great power relationship” has been viewed as China’s strategy to avoid this outcome with the US. Since peaceful forms of transition have existed in history – the US and Great Britain in the early 20th century and that of the US and Japan’s economic rise in the late 20th – some question whether this is the model that China is pursuing.

Contrary to the claim in *PacNet* #52 (The Fragile and Vulnerable Foundation of the Sino-US Relationship) that China “offered to establish a new type of great power relationship with the US and not with any other powers,” as well as *PacNet* #40 (A ‘new type of great power relations’? Hardly.) and #40C (The Obama-Xi Summit: Whither ASEAN?) which only analyze the new Chinese slogan in terms of US-China bilateral relations, Yang Jiechi’s 18th Party Congress Report, “Unswervingly Walk Towards the Road of Peaceful Development,” identified four countries – the United States, Russia, European Union, and Japan – as “major great powers” that China should work with to develop a “new type of great power relationship.” That China’s newly designated president Xi Jinping’s first overseas state visit was to Russia rather than the US should be taken into account. Some Chinese policy analysts, including the vice president of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), claimed Xi’s trip to the 5th BRICS Summit earlier this year shows China’s intention to include “developing great powers” such as the other members of BRICS (Brazil, India, and South Africa) as targets of its “new type of great power relationship”

diplomatic framework. Simply put, the slogan illustrates a vision not only for bilateral relations with the United States but, as Ambassador Cui Tiankai puts it, is China’s “overall diplomatic vision for the 21st century.”

Of the existing great powers, only the US poses a grave threat to China’s security, whether militarily, strategically, and ideologically, since unlike Japan, the US maintains overwhelming superiority over China in virtually all aspects. China’s rise, however, does not necessarily mean that China will challenge US global preeminence as offensive realists or power transition theorists’ predict. It could reflect a rising China undertaking a peaceful and stable policy vis-à-vis a relatively declining US that prefers war to peace and is tempted to create conflict and confront the rising power in an effort to overcome the changing distribution of power. Simply put, American intellectuals need not emphasize only what kind of threat China will become. Reflecting on US decline and its intentions to remedy that situation, and whether that will be peaceful, is a more balanced approach to the study of US-China relations and international relations. In reality, the US actions form the basis of Chinese foreign policy. However, that does not mean that Beijing lacks plans for relations with countries other than the US when it comes to making a new type of great power relationship.

Chinese foreign policy is primarily geared and oriented toward great power diplomacy. The two Koreas, Vietnam and ASEAN, Central Asia, and countries on China’s periphery are of secondary importance behind traditional big powers such as the US, Russia, and Japan, as well as developing big powers such as India, Brazil, and South Africa which are important partners for China given their economic, political, and strategic capacities.

The slogan “new type of great power relationship” – as with “peaceful development” and “harmonious world” – suffers from structural influences stemming from political guidelines rooted in “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” These ideological constraints tend to focus attention inward rather than outward, meaning that Chinese foreign policy vision and blueprints are structurally orienting away from a global vision and remain mostly regional and local, inhibiting the commitment and will to take on greater responsibilities on the global stage commensurate to China’s size and the expectations of others. China’s principled pursuit of an “independent foreign policy,” preserving its “independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and a favorable environment for reform, opening up, and modernization construction” suggests that China is not ready to be a contributor to and provider of global public goods; rather it is more concerned with itself. That is why critics ask whether China’s new slogan is really just a demand for the US and other great powers to accept its national interests, sovereignty, and governance style rather than an attempt to achieve win-win cooperation and

respect each other's core interests. Middle and small powers need not be taken into consideration when it comes to issues of China's human rights or territorial disputes.

Such ideological constraints also force Chinese diplomacy to take more responsibility internally. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has limited influence and power compared with its counterparts elsewhere. The new Chinese passport incident, which created a fuss a few months ago, was created by the Ministry of Public Security even though its ramifications were suffered by the Foreign Ministry. In authoritarian governments like China, the army and law enforcement agencies have a larger voice in national security-related policy making. Also, China's de-facto highest ranking foreign policy officer, State Councilor Yang Jiechi, is not even included in the 25-member Politburo. Such examples highlight the fact that China, despite ambitions of creating a "new type of great power relationship" and desiring to be an active player in global politics, still lacks will and internal capacity as a result of ideological restraints.

Against this background, Director Hoang's analysis (*PacNet* #52) of the Snowden case is wrong: it isn't an indicator of the fragility in US-China relations, but illustrates how China is adjusting to the global international system led by the US founded on rule of law. Responding to US Deputy Secretary William Burns' accusations during the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) that the US is "very disappointed with how the authorities in Beijing and Hong Kong handled the Snowden case," Yang Jiechi replied by saying "The Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) government has handled the Snowden case in accordance with law, and its approach is beyond reproach. Others should respect this." Yang's words suggest China has grown confident enough to defend itself and accuse the United States by means that are often directed against it. Such political developments suggest that US-China relations will remain more strategic and cooperative and that we should be seeing a more responsible China in the future.

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