Recently, I attended think tank events here in Washington, D.C. discussing United States policy toward the Asia Pacific region and U.S.-China relations. These seminars were always crowded with people. It became apparent that the phrase “new model” is now a buzzword. It is encouraging to find that the new framework, first proposed by China, was well received. As Secretary of State John Kerry commented, after meeting with his Chinese counterpart Minister Wang Yi in September 2013, “the U.S. was committed to working with China for this new model of relations.”

In early 2011, then Vice President Xi Jinping paid an official visit to the United States. It was during that visit that Xi presented an idea of building a “new model of major power relations” with the United States. It took some time for the United States to consider and accommodate to this new definition. Then in June 2013 in an informal summit with U.S. President Barack Obama in Sunnyland, California, Xi Jinping went further to explain what the new model of major power relations means. “No conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect, mutual benefit and win-win” should be guidelines for the new model. Since then, some high-ranking officials in the Obama administration and many in U.S. think tanks began to quote it or elaborate on it at different occasions. It seems that the new framework, “new model,” has been agreed upon. Or has it?

**WHY A NEW MODEL?**

At first glance, the phrase new model does not seem special. But a second glance might lead to a conclusion that it is of great significance in the history of bilateral relations between these two countries.

To understand what the new formulation really means, it is important to look at the overall context of relations between China and the United States. China-U.S. relations have so far experienced three stages:

In the first stage, when the two countries broke the ice to establish official ties in late 1970s and 1980s, China was weak economically but important politically and strategically to the United States. Early relations were pretty good, on a solid footing, with a common purpose of dealing with the perceived threat from the Soviet Union.

Since the end of Soviet Union China-U.S. relations have evolved into another stage in which China’s economic integration into the global community has been a dominant
feature. China’s trade to the United States has been growing, and on a faster track in wake of China’s accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. By 2008, China-U.S. two-way trade volume reached more than $400 billion, starting from $2 billion in 1979.

The 2008 financial crisis marks another important turning point for China-U.S. relations. As both countries struggled to recover from economic stagnation, China and other BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India and China] took the lead in dragging the world out of recession and contributing more to global growth compared with the United States. When China overtook Japan in 2010 in terms of nominal gross domestic product (GDP), news items and commentaries were making headlines predicting China would surpass the United States as early as 2018. Many analysts have even predicted that China, a rising power, will clash with the United States, an established power, as manifested in historical textbooks of the last century, given that the two countries differ in so many ways.

It was under these circumstances that China, under the new leadership of President Xi Jinping in particular, attached great importance to its relations with the United States. For two reasons, it became imperative for them to frame it in a positive way.

First, world peace and a friendly peripheral environment are essential for China to pursue its domestic reform. China adopted reform and a policy of opening-up in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. In November 2013, the Third Plenum of China’s Communist Party decided to launch an all-out effort for another round of sweeping and all-embracing reform. China currently is facing dual challenges. One is that China is still on its way to realize modernization, which is a long and painstaking process for an old civilization like China. The other is China’s integration with the international community propelled by globalization. The only way for China to have sustainable growth and development is to actively evaluate reform. China has a daunting task to push ahead with the domestic reform agenda, therefore, any external disruptions and disturbance are not welcome.

Second, the United States is the only superpower in the world. A stable and friendly relationship with the United States is certainly pivotal to China’s overall foreign policy goals. As many U.S. observers note, China-U.S. relations have become important like never before.

If we look at China-U.S. relations from an international and regional angle, a new model of relations between two countries seems more urgently needed.

**DOES THE NEW MODEL CONTRADICT THE “PIVOT TO ASIA”?**

For the last decade, the Asia-Pacific region has been enjoying dynamic economic growth and development driven by countries like China, India and many others. This megatrend has brought the region center stage in the world. Against this backdrop in 2009 Obama declared a U.S. “strategic pivot to Asia.” “The strategic pivot or rebalancing, launched four years ago, is premised on the recognition that the lion’s share of the political and economic history of the twenty-first century will be written in the Asia-Pacific region. To benefit from this shift in global
geopolitical dynamism and sustainably grow its economy, the United States is building extensive diplomatic, economic, development, people-to-people and security ties with the region.\(^1\)

The United States’s goals and interests do not collide with that of China. As two representatives of developing and developed countries, China and the United States not only need to complete reforms at home, but also need to work together on many international issues like climate change, security, energy, and trade among others.

Also important is that two countries should not repeat some of the misfortune and bitter episodes of the last century. Thus forging a new kind of power relationship between them is desirable. For Chinese, they prefer to define it first and identify a few guiding principles. If any problem or crisis occurs, those principles are to be applied to deal with it. By doing so, both sides can reduce some unnecessary suspicion and trouble. For Americans, they prefer to view it as what it is and believe any definition of a relationship ultimately depends on outcome. It is not easy for Chinese to bring American counterparts to their views.

The moment Obama moved into White House, the United States was not in good shape. A messy house left over by two Bush administrations was not easy to put in order again. The ongoing financial crisis, slow economic growth, and rocketing unemployment constrained Obama’s options. The economy would dominate much of Obama’s decisions, continuing into his second term of office. The U.S. public, tiring of the “War on Terror,” were calling for an end to the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama administration had their hands tied and faced a weak economic recovery.

It must be stressed here that as the world enters the twenty-first century, information-led globalization affects every nation. As the Internet, smart phones, and new media are widely used and applied, almost every nation, including large countries like China and the United States, have to confront challenges like governance efficiency, social equality, and the environment. While China needs to reform, so does the United States. Many experts here make comments that the United States needs to reform immigration, health care, gun control, education, and many others new trends driven by globalization. In fact, some of Obama’s reforms have been fruitful in terms of the development of new energy resources, restructuring financial laws, and instituting health care. Now the U.S. economy is improving but not across all sectors.

The United States is also adjusting to a new world in which the U.S. is relatively declining while the rest is rising. Obama’s commitment to withdraw troops from abroad and focus on domestic fronts shows that the U.S. political system has a great resilience. This explains why the Obama administration is more inclined to apply diplomatic means instead of military to address pressing issues like Syria’s use of chemical weapons and Iran’s nuclear program. As many pundits say it is important to “put the house in order” so that at the end of day the U.S. is stronger. Understandably, reform at home, similar to what China does, is the biggest task for the Obama administration.

As Richard Haass put it, “Foreign policy begins at home.”\(^2\) With the Obama administration

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2. Richard N. Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America’s House in Or-

focused on domestic issues, “rebalancing” with Asia, though important, is taking secondary consideration to those urgent reforms at home.

DOES ONE MODEL NEGATE THE OTHER?

The administration understands that China, also busy with its own reform, needs a peaceful climate. Furthermore, China does not constitute a threat to the United States, according to a survey jointly conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the China Strategic Culture Promotion Association. A very low percentage of respondents in both China and the United States see the other country as an enemy, though a majority of U.S. and the Chinese elites and the American public as well as a plurality of the Chinese public view the other country as a competitor, rather than a partner. The findings of this survey and many other similar polls could serve as a good foundation for a new model of relations between China and the United States to consider.

Due to the political system of separation of powers, U.S. foreign policymaking power is shared by the executive and legislative branches and under the influence of think tanks, the media, and interest groups as well. So U.S. policy toward China always fluctuates in a dynamic motion. In other words, China should be neither annoyed by China-bashing rhetoric in a U.S. election year, nor carried away by these comments. This is made evident as the interests of two countries increasingly converge, with containment elements being surpassed by those promoting engagement on the America side. The management of relations between China and the United States is becoming more opportunity-driven rather than crisis-driven.

When China came up with an idea of creating a new model of major power relations, the Obama administration did not reject it. Why? The definition, a neutral expression, also met with little sharp criticism from so-called “hawks.” A few experts questioned the choice of words, saying that the phrase new “major power” relations implies a G-2, a world jointly governed by the Big Two. This may be related to an inaccurate translation of the original Chinese text (新型大国关系). When China says new model, we emphasize and highlight a new model of relations, not big powers; but the English translation “New Model of Major Power Relations” leads people to put emphasis on the latter part. The United States is a global power and China is a regional power. Major Power Relations implies that China and the United States are powers at the same level. For these reason, I think that “major power” should be changed to “major country” in order to avoid an unnecessary interpretation.

Some people here in the United States argue that a new model of major country relations is simply another expression of Sino-U.S. relations, it is not big deal, and the nature of their bilateral ties remains intact. So far, opposition to this definition is not strong or substantial, nor does it prevent both hawks and doves in their attempts to influence U.S. China policy.

From an international perspective, the new relations between China and the United States


4. Word for word translation is “new model major country relations.”
does raise the interest of many countries, especially Japan, Korea, Viet Nam, the Philippines, and other Asian countries surrounding China. These countries are eager to know what new model really means and how their relations with the United States and China are going to be affected.

In December 2013 at a seminar at the Carnegie Endowment, some experts from Japan said that a new model of relations between the United States and China is contradictory to U.S. rebalancing to Asia.5 In their views, rebalancing to Asia is meant to contain China. They seem puzzled why the United States would accept a new model of relations with China. Apparently these Japanese saw it from either a cold war mindset or wishful thinking. Some Korean scholars are not as skeptical as the Japanese. Koreans view it positively and do not believe that a more stable and closer Sino-U.S. relations would endanger the interests of Korea.

Some suspicion from countries is understandable, but unnecessary. When China and the United States try to establish a new mode of relations, world peace and stability are the prime focus. It is not going to be a new alliance against any third party, or at the cost of others’ national interests. The Forum on Diplomacy with Peripheral Countries convened in Beijing November 2013 made it very clear that China would further strengthen its ties with peripheral countries so as to ensure a favorable surrounding environment and ensure those neighbors would benefit from China’s development. China’s efforts to forge a new model of relations with the United States could contribute to a more stable and secure region in which everyone can have its share of growth and prosperity.

In September 2005, Robert Zoellick, then U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, said in New York that China should be a “responsible stakeholder” in the international community.6 Pushed by his harsh criticism combined with a way forward, China decided to accept this role following a careful study. Fast forward to 2011, China announced an initiative proposing a new model of relations with the United States to strategize and structure future China-US relations.

As presented below, some officials in the decision-making circle in the Obama administration began to define China-U.S. relations with alternative viewpoints—viewpoints that basically are not contradictory to China’s ideas on this new model.

Let me list a few comments on the U.S. side:

The two countries should “forge a new model of cooperation,” President Obama, Sunnyland Summit, June 2013.

The United States “welcomes the rise of China,” Secretary Hillary Clinton, January 2013 before leaving the State Department.

The “US is not out to contain China,” John Kerry in his most recent visit to Beijing, February, 2014.

“When it comes to China, we seek to operationalize a new model of major power relations,” Susan Rice, National Security Advisor, in her first major speech in November 2013 at Georgetown University.


“We’re aware of the historical predictions that a rising power and an established power are destined for rivalry and confrontation. We simply reject that premise.” Evan Medeiros, a senior director for Asian affairs, National Security Council, at the Center for American Progress, February 11, 2014.

CONCLUSION

While the future of the new model of relationship is bright, a journey of a thousand miles starts with a simple step. Much more has to be done to consolidate it. Given so many differences and competing views between the two countries, the road ahead is by no means a smooth one, requiring both sides to make sincere and concrete efforts. While China is ready and committed, the United States is less so. Recent disputes on territorial and historical issues in the East China Sea and South China Sea are considered by many as tests as to whether China and the United States could manage this new model of relations.

China’s rise is inevitable and contributes greatly to the peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. But some countries are still unable to adjust themselves to this new situation. While their economic integration with China becomes indispensable, they are strengthening military and security alliances with the United States in order to hedge against China. The Cold War was over two decades ago, yet the Cold-war mindset is still lingering on in this region. One of the important tasks of building up a new model of relations between China and the United States is to relinquish cold war ideology and adopt a forward-looking approach.

In the past two years the new model of major power relations between China and the United States is taking shape. Kerry’s recent visit to Beijing is a manifest example to this end. Through joint efforts, some positive progress has been made on three crucial areas. First, on regional security we engage in no conflict and confrontation; second, on global issues we have good cooperation; and third, on a strategic partnership we do respect each other and strive for a win-win goal.

Whether most people on earth can have a better life and more countries enjoy growth and prosperity, depends upon cooperation and collaboration among nations free from wars and conflicts. The revolutionary development of technology and a rapid-changing pace of life present countries like the United States and China with unprecedented challenges and opportunities. While focusing on reforms at home, both should also pay attention to global issues. Much effort is needed to overcome resistance from domestic politics and group interests. More coordination and dialogue are needed to make innovations on international cooperation between countries for the common good. A new China-U.S. relationship should not only benefit the two peoples, but also rest of world as well.
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