

STRATEGY IN CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

China's Major-Powers Discourse in
the Xi Jinping Era: Tragedy of
Great Power Politics Revisited?

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Xi Jinping took office in 2013 with a vision for a “new type of major-power relations” between China and the United States. What does this concept mean and why is it important now? An examination of the current Chinese discourse on major-power relations, as reflected in official and scholarly writings, reveals more continuity than change in China’s external orientation. China’s major-powers model reinforces (1) peaceful intentions rather than hegemonic aspirations, (2) the primacy of advancing China’s domestic development rather than its international position, and (3) tensions between China’s dual identities as a rising power and developing economy. The most distinct feature of this model is that it remains a Chinese proposition, posing a question as to the extent to which the United States and China are aligned in perceptions of their future relationship and the international order more broadly. KEYWORDS: major-power relations, US-China relations, China’s rise.

XI JINPING’S ADMINISTRATION BEGAN CHINA’S FIFTH-GENERATION LEADERSHIP transition in 2013 with a vision for a “new type of major-power relations” (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) between China and the United States.¹ While the United States has historically sought to shape China’s worldview, this vision is notable as a Chinese initiative to reconstruct understandings of great-power politics in the twenty-first century. What does this concept mean and why is it important now?

I trace the current Chinese discourse on US-China major-power relations. A preliminary assessment of this discourse reveals more continuity than change in the orientation of China’s international relations and relations with the United States. Specifically, China’s

major-powers model reinforces (1) “peaceful” intentions rather than hegemonic aspirations, (2) the primacy of promoting China’s domestic development rather than its international position, and (3) tensions between China’s dual identities as a rising major power and developing economy.

I begin by placing China’s concept of major-power relations in the context of domestic debates on China’s international power status since the 1990s. Next, I identify the spectrum of views characterizing the current Chinese discourse on major-power relations as they appear in official and scholarly accounts. I then assess the orientation of Chinese elite views based on interpretations of the proposed model. To conclude, I consider implications for US-China relations and the broader international order in the Xi Jinping era.

Emergence of the Discourse

Xi Jinping proposed China’s concept of major-power relations during his February 2012 visit to Washington as vice president and heir-apparent to Hu Jintao. Supporting the January 2011 Barack Obama–Hu Jintao joint agreement on building a “cooperative partnership,” Xi envisioned a new US-China relationship based on mutual understanding and strategic trust, respect for core interests, mutually beneficial cooperation, and cooperation on global issues (Office of the Press Secretary 2011; Xi 2012). State Councilor Dai Bingguo made a similar proposal in 2009 at the inaugural US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), where he pushed for “efforts to build a new model of relationship between two major countries, a relationship rooted in mutual respect, harmonious coexistence and win-win cooperation” (Zhang 2012, 1). Although Xi’s remarks in 2012 initially drew little US attention as a new framework for US-China relations, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton relayed a positive US response a month later (Clinton 2012).

China’s promotion of its new model of major-power relations subsequently emphasized the joint development of such relations, as raised by Hu Jintao and Dai Bingguo at the fourth S&ED in

Beijing and by Defense Minister Liang Guanglie in Washington in May 2012. The Chinese foreign ministry in July 2012 presented Beijing's first comprehensive outline of this model in an article by Cui Tiankai before his appointment as ambassador to the United States (Cui and Pang 2012). Cui framed the major-powers model not just as a US-Chinese joint effort but also as a response to what Hillary Clinton had raised as the need to find "a new answer to the ancient question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet" (Clinton 2012). At the May 2012 S&ED, Hu Jintao also stressed this need to "break the tradition of great-power conflict and confrontation" (Hu 2012).

China's current major-powers discourse is thus more specifically about the relationship between rising and established powers, and can be placed within the context of China's domestic debates since the early 1990s on its status as a rising power (Yan, Yu, and Tao 1993). These debates have evolved through three stages, marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and the 2008 global financial crisis. In 1998, during the Jiang Zemin administration, *China's Rise*, by Yan Xuetong at Qinghua University and researchers at the Ministry of State Security-affiliated China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), represented one of the earliest works on the international systemic conditions of China's rise (Yan et al. 1998). Studies from the 1990s began to assess China's "comprehensive national power" relative to other powers—including the United States, Japan, Russia, Britain, Germany, France, and India—but revealed inconsistent approaches among research bodies such as the CICIR, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s Academy of Military Sciences, and Qinghua University (CICIR 2000; Huang 1992, 1999; Wang 1996).

In the post-9/11 years, the focus of attention widened to both the nature and extent of China's rise as a global power. The central argument of the Hu Jintao administration's "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) or "peaceful development" (*heping fazhan*) concepts in 2003 and 2004 was that China's stable development and stable international relations are mutually reinforcing (Zheng 2004, 2005). This foreign policy doctrine aimed to mitigate external per-

ceptions, emerging in the 1990s, of an impending China threat or China collapse. The State Council's 2005 white paper, "China's Peaceful Development Road," laid out for the first time since 1978 the conceptual and practical underpinnings of China's national development strategy (State Council 2005). This official narrative extended to Chinese society through the China Central Television (CCTV)'s *Rising Powers* (*Daguo Jueqi*) series in 2006 on the historical experiences of the rise and fall of great powers. Chinese debates in the mid-2000s remained primarily self-assessments of the extent of China's superpower status given varying projections of China's rising power (Yan 2006; Yan and Zhou 2004). These assessments reinforced the consensus in the 1990s on the superiority of US power but, more importantly, questioned the limited consensus on China's current and future power status.

With the onset of the global financial crisis, studies from 2009 focused increasingly on the systemic consequences of China's rise and the strategies for addressing the central dilemma facing rising powers, namely, the potential for hegemonic conflict with the established power. The financial crisis formally ended post-Cold War US unipolarity according to Wu Xinbo, director of Fudan University's Center for American Studies (Wu 2010, 155). Reinforcing such views were international reports that China replaced Japan in 2010 as the world's second biggest economy after the United States (Dickie 2011; *Economist* 2010; Hosaka 2010; Monahan 2011). Against growing external perceptions of a rising, "assertive China" (Swaine 2010), Dai Bingguo, speaking at the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Fifth Plenary Session in December 2010, reaffirmed that "China's strategic intention can be defined in two words: peaceful development, i.e., harmony and development at home, and peace and cooperation abroad. . . . We do not seek hegemony" (Dai 2010).

Chinese views of relations with the United States have evolved within this debate on China's changing international power status, focusing increasingly on the relationship between US hegemony and China's rise in the post-9/11 era (Chen 2006; Men 2005; Shi 2002; Wang Fan 2008). *American Hegemony and China's Security* by Yan Xuetong, who is associated with China's realist school and hard-line policy, depicted the United States as a major threat to

China's security and domestic stability by the end of the 1990s (Yan 2000). On the other hand, US-China cooperation in the mid-2000s resonated with the views of China's US experts such as Wang Jisi at Beijing University, who argued that the dangers of confrontation make a stronger US-China strategic relationship both necessary and more likely (Wang Jisi 2005a, 2005b).

The period after the global financial crisis has seen a resurgence of Chinese realist voices, as reflected in Yan Xuetong's *New York Times* editorial in 2011, stating that "China's rise does indeed pose a challenge to America. . . . China's quest to enhance its world leadership status and America's effort to maintain its present position is a zero-sum game" (Yan 2011). Within China, Yan's 2010 study on China's relations with major powers from 1950, which points to a cycle of instability as a defining characteristic of the US-China relationship since the end of the Cold War (Yan 2010), prompted active theoretical and empirical reassessment of the relationship (Guo and Wang 2011; Zhou 2011).

Chinese Debates Under Xi Jinping's Leadership

China's discourse on major-power relations under Xi Jinping's leadership can be examined at two levels: government and government-affiliated research institutions, and Chinese academic institutions. This presentation of Chinese views can also be distinguished as *standard*, representing the generally consistent official line, and *divergent*, representing specific interpretations articulated in various official and scholarly publications (Wang Jisi 1997b). The focus is thus primarily on elite and subelite views, laying aside public opinion as expressed in the popular media. While subelite views rarely deviate significantly from the official line, debate on key foreign policy issues is active, illuminating Chinese lines of thought in response to national policy directives (Hao 2012).

Official Assessments

The Xi Jinping administration took office in March 2013 facing a marked deterioration in China's foreign relations since 2009, most

notably with neighboring states. In its April 2013 white paper, the People's Republic of China (PRC) defense ministry identified the expanding US military presence in the Asia Pacific under Obama's "rebalancing" strategy as a primary source of regional tension and first among the complex challenges in China's external security environment (State Council 2013). Ahead of China's March 2013 National People's Congress (NPC), US national security adviser Tom Donilon signaled the second Obama administration's favorable outlook for US-China relations, stating that "it falls to both sides—the United States and China—to build a new model of relations between an existing power and an emerging one. Xi Jinping and President Obama have both endorsed this goal" (Donilon 2013). China's official narrative on major-power relations has developed in response to this external strategic context and initial US reaction.

At the March 2013 NPC, Premier Li Keqiang reciprocated the US gestures of engagement by reaffirming China's willingness "to construct, together with the Obama administration, a new type of relationship between big powers" (Li Keqiang 2013). Within the first six months of the Xi administration, Foreign Minister Wang Yi presented this model to both domestic and US audiences, calling it "the most important outcome" of the first Obama-Xi summit in California in June 2013 (Wang Yi 2013a, 2013b).

Xi's proposed major-powers model has three core components: (1) a "prerequisite" of no conflict or confrontation, rejecting the assumption of predestined conflict between rising and established powers; (2) a "basic principle" of mutual respect for each other's "core interests" and "choice of social system and development path"; and (3) win-win cooperation as the "tool" for practically implementing the model in various functional areas of common interest (Wang Yi 2013a, 1–2; 2013b). Yang Jiechi (2013), state councilor and director of the CCP Central Committee's Foreign Affairs Leading Group, places this model within the broader framework of the Xi administration's diplomatic goals: (1) the "Chinese Dream," which envisions a coexistence of Chinese and Western value systems; (2) a new model of US-China major-power relations and advancing relations with other major powers; (3) expanding cooperation with neighboring and developing countries;

(4) strengthening high-level strategic planning; and (5) central coordination of foreign policy.

Relations with major powers—specifically the United States, Russia, and the EU—are the highest priority on Xi Jinping’s diplomatic agenda, complementing relations with neighbors, developing countries, and multilateral organizations.² At the 2013 China and World Forum in Beijing, An Huihou of the foreign ministry–affiliated China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), identified the United States and Russia as China’s two primary partners in building new major-power relations (*People’s Daily* 2013). But as Wang Yi indicated, “China’s diplomacy in the new era has taken on a more global perspective” (Wang Yi 2013b), as suggested by Xi’s first overseas summits as head of state with Russian, African, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), and EU counterparts in 2013. According to Ruan Zongze, CIIS vice president and former minister councilor for China’s Embassy in the United States, a defining characteristic of Xi’s external strategy is “multi-pivot diplomacy” (Ruan 2013).

China’s official discourse on major-power relations makes three main points. First, domestic development is China’s highest priority. At the June 2013 meeting of the CCP Central Committee Political Bureau, Xi emphasized stable major-power relations as key to creating a stable external environment for China’s domestic development (Xinhua 2013). As Li Keqiang reaffirmed at the March 2015 NPC, “development will remain the top priority for China and we need a peaceful international environment for us to focus on domestic development” (Li Keqiang 2015). Yang Jiechi further noted the coordinated readjustment of foreign and domestic policies of other major powers, such as the second Obama administration’s prioritization of domestic politics while stabilizing external relations, and the EU’s pursuit of economic recovery while furthering regional integration (Yang 2014).

Second, the Xi administration’s promotion of its major-powers model clearly signals benign intentions toward the United States. The model’s basic proposition of avoiding conflict in favor of cooperation on common interests embodies China’s nonconfrontational stance. Wang Yi identifies strategic trust as key to imple-

menting this model, affirming that “we have never had the strategic intention to challenge or even replace the United States for its position in the world” (Wang Yi 2013a). Since the concept was initially introduced in 2012, Beijing’s modified translation of “major country” rather than “major power” further suggested an effort to deny any assumption that China has reached major-power status.

Third, however, this emphasis on common interests is in tension with China’s recognition of differences with the United States over vital or core interests as well as political and economic systems. According to Fu Ying, director of the NPC Foreign Affairs Committee, the persistent lack of US-China mutual trust stems from misperceptions that are most clearly manifested in frictions over China’s political system (Fu 2015). Yang Jiechi (2013) draws the “bottom line” in China’s strategic orientation: “while firmly committed to peaceful development, we definitely must not forsake our legitimate interests or compromise our core national interests.” An Huihou further supports the threat of retaliatory action to the use of force: conflict is avoidable between rising and established powers, but “only when adversaries understand clearly that any benefit of trying to constrain China by military means will be outweighed by the cost” (*People’s Daily* 2013).

By favoring cooperation with major powers, however, Xi’s foreign policy concept reflects the continued pragmatic orientation of China’s high-level leadership. Yu Hongjun, vice minister of the CCP International Department and president of the China Center for Contemporary World Studies, describes the US-China relationship as one that is both “important and complex” and “strong and fragile” (Yu 2013b, 10). While the overall trend in bilateral relations remains favorable, cooperation in the economic arena is clouded by limited trust in the security and political fields based on Cold War thinking and great power politics (Yu 2013a). Yu Hongjun and Fu Ying both find that US and Chinese interests converge most closely in East Asia (Fu 2014). But as the defense ministry’s 2013 white paper indicates, the Asia-Pacific region is precisely where US-China competition over vital interests is also perceived as most likely. While the foreign ministry in its statement on the September 2015 Xi-Obama summit recognized

US “traditional influence and practical interests” in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015), Ambassador Cui Tiankai also warned that China will “welcome the United States strategic rebalancing to Asia-Pacific if it is constructive . . . but will oppose it if it is counterproductive” (Su 2015).

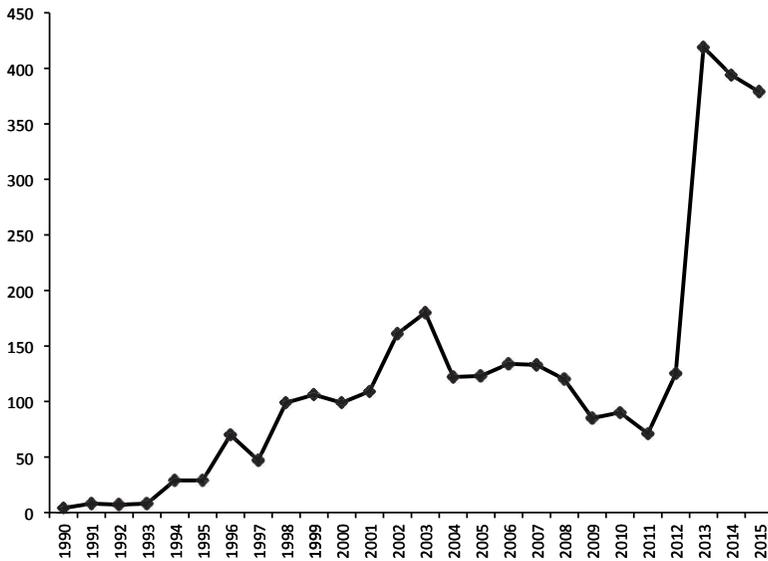
Scholarly Assessments

Chinese international relations scholarship remains primarily framed by realism. The relationship between major powers in particular is perceived as historically the most important in shaping and being shaped by the international system (Xu 2014). Recent studies assess US-China relations through the traditional lenses of power transition, Robert Gilpin’s cyclical theory of hegemonic war, and John Mearsheimer’s offensive realist account of great power competition over regional hegemony (Chen 2015; Li and Bi 2013; Shi 2013; Zhang 2012). A shared assumption underlying this research is that the international system has reached an initial stage of a power shift between the United States and China, raising a question about the extent to which the two powers can avoid the heightened risks of conflict (Chen 2015; Gao 2015; Wang Jisi 2015).

The likelihood of conflict between rising and established powers is a point of debate between realist pessimists and optimists. Within the major powers school, China’s US watchers have traditionally argued that stable US-China relations are central to China’s domestic and international interests, a view that was more prominent under Jiang Zemin’s “US first” policy than under Hu Jintao’s more “global” policy (Shambaugh 2011, 14–15). Despite Xi Jinping’s continuation of a more diversified foreign policy, Beijing’s current major-powers discourse has generated renewed debate on the prospect of pursuing stable relations with the United States.

While the number of Chinese journal articles with the keyword *daguo guanxi* (major-power relations) began to decline from 2003 during the Hu Jintao period, it jumped by 76 percent from 2011 to 2012 and more than tripled in 2013 (see Figure 1). Overwhelmingly, this literature has focused on US-China relations,

Figure 1: Number of Chinese Journal Articles on "Major-Power Relations," 1990–2015



Source: Zhongguo Zhiwang (China Network Knowledge), www.cnki.net.

followed by Russia-China relations. Scholarly assessments of Xi's "new type of major-power relations" emerged in 2012 in response to the official narrative and peaked in 2013.³

Xi Jinping's proposal in 2012 prompted a comprehensive reassessment of the forty-year US-China relationship based on the historical US relations with Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Japan (Yuan 2012). Chinese scholarly responses to the official discourse have four main elements. First, most interpretations of this model are generally positive, supporting the official line that it is both possible and necessary to avoid a major-power conflict with the United States. Second, more cautious views reinforce fundamentally realist concerns: uncertainty over US intentions and regional competition in the Asia Pacific. Third, while official presentations of this concept began primarily with the US-China relationship, scholarly assessments extend its application to the broader international order. Fourth, these assessments also affirm

the primary significance of the major-powers model for China's domestic development.

Optimists

Optimistic interpretations begin with the second Obama administration's positive reception of Xi's proposed model, the core premise of which is that structural conflict between the United States and a rising China is not inevitable. Yuan Peng, director of the CICIR Institute of American Studies, emphasizes this high-level consensus on avoiding conflict as a joint imperative of the United States and China (Yuan 2012). Zhang Tuosheng of the China Foundation for International Strategic Studies further suggests that since "the United States did not give a positive response" to Dai Bingguo's initial proposal in 2009, the current consensus demonstrates a substantial realignment of strategic thinking (Zhang 2012, 1). According to Tao Wenzhao of the CASS Institute of American Studies, the June 2013 Obama-Xi summit symbolized the beginning of new great-power relations and a smooth transition to the Obama and Xi leaderships after a period of tension since 2009 (Tao 2013, 2014). As Wang Jisi and Wu Shengqi indicate, the new model marks a shift in US-China relations from assumptions of "inevitable confrontation" to the promotion of "peaceful coexistence" (Wang and Wu 2013).

Optimists challenge the assumptions of inevitable conflict by pointing to external conditions that favor peaceful coexistence. Zhang Jiadong and Jin Xin of Fudan University's Center for American Studies identify the effects of nuclear deterrence, interdependence, and international institutions, arguing that not all power shifts from a historical and theoretical perspective involve conflict (Zhang and Jin 2013). Given such external qualitative differences in China's rise compared to other historical cases, major-power relations are no longer a zero-sum game of hegemonic competition (Xue and Feng 2013). The critical issue for Chen Yong of Beijing University is not just relative power but mutual trust over vital interests (Chen 2015). According to researchers at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS), the real task facing the United States and China is to seek mutual understanding

on joint interests rather than joint governance of the international system (SASS 2014).

Even those who recognize limited consensus on the future direction of bilateral ties view Xi's proposal as a pragmatic effort to manage differences and avoid misperception (Zhang and Jin 2013). Chen Xiangyang of CICIR and Pang Zhongying of Renmin University hold a middle-ground view, pointing to elements of both cooperation and competition in the US-China relationship that both sides must balance (Chen 2013; Pang 2013). As Ni Shixiong of Fudan University's Center for American Studies notes, the question is not whether the United States and China want to pursue this new vision of avoiding conflict but whether they need to (Ni 2013a). For China's optimists, Beijing's major-powers model predicts a favorable turn in the US-China relationship, an outcome that both sides believe is desirable, necessary, and possible at times of power transition.

Pessimists

But as realist theories claim, the likelihood of conflict depends not just on shifts in relative power but also on intentions. Chinese assessments of the relationship between emerging and established major powers thus distinguish between status quo and revisionist powers. Although US-China consensus on the general concept for developing bilateral relations clearly challenges the "tragedy of great power politics," uncertainty over strategic intentions remains the main impediment to cooperation (Li Yongcheng 2013). Xu Jian of CIIS concludes that despite satisfying the conditions for avoiding a major conflict in the security, political, and economic arenas, "US-China strategic mutual trust is currently inadequate" (Xu 2013, 18). Arguments for building strategic trust ultimately assume that the United States is constraining China's options, proposing that the United States must "give China more space" to develop its military power and defend its territorial interests (SASS 2014, 19). Jin Canrong and Dai Weilai of Renmin University thus emphasize that cooperation under this model depends most importantly on improving bilateral dialogue mechanisms such as the S&ED to prevent the potential escalation of existing frictions (Jin and Dai 2013).

As Niu Xinchun of CICIR indicates, the biggest factors conditioning US-China mutual strategic trust are Asia Pacific security issues and bilateral political differences (Niu 2013). For Gao Zugui and others at the Central Party School, what characterizes China's external environment in the postcrisis era is the emergence of major-power geopolitical competition in the Asia-Pacific (Gao 2015; Liu and Chou 2015). US strategy toward the Asia Pacific, according to Zhao Kejin and Yin Xiting of Qinghua University, is "contradictory," "hedging" between a "Cold War strategy" and active promotion of the bilateral partnership (Zhao and Yin 2012, 77–78, 82). Yuan Peng similarly notes that the United States and Japan have grown increasingly anxious over China's rapid development while continuing to engage China, warning that renewed US-Japan security cooperation since 2013 may undermine the future development of US-China relations (Yuan 2013b). New research from the Central Party School on the South China Sea issue, described as "a foreign invasion and occupation of sovereign [Chinese] interests," even reinforces the continued influence of Marxist analysis, interpreting US hegemonic behavior as a form of capitalist imperialism (Zeng 2013). According to Ruan Zongze of CIIS, the US "rebalancing to Asia" demonstrates deep strategic anxieties over its decline as "sole superpower" and has raised concern over US intentions since 2009 under the Obama administration (Ruan 2014a, 4–5). Most importantly, as Zhang Tuosheng emphasizes, China's relations with neighbors are a growing source of US-China strategic distrust: "competition in the Asia-Pacific region has increased significantly, resulting in the increased likelihood of a potential crisis. The two sides are more likely to be involved in a future crisis and conflict due to a third party" (Zhang 2012, 9).

Chinese scholars thus identify East Asia as the testing ground for implementing Xi's model of major-power relations (Li Kaisheng 2013; Wang Yi 2013a). Some scholars perceive Washington's rebalancing strategy in Asia as an "overreaction" to the dangers of power transition in the region, where the United States tends to "test China's resolve" by fueling hostility toward China among its Asian allies (Han and Wang 2012, 6–8). But as Ni Shixiong suggests, the major-powers model offers a way to dispel geopolitical tensions in

the region arising from China's rapid growth and the shifting US strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific (Ni 2012).

Implications of the Major-Powers Model

International Implications

Chinese interpretations of Xi's major-powers model extend its implications beyond the US-China bilateral relationship to the international and domestic levels. For Yuan Peng, this concept is the starting point for assessing US-China relations not just in the Xi Jinping era but also over the next ten years of international relations (Yuan 2013a). As Zhang Jian of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies indicates, the development of the US-China major-power relationship will determine the future of the broader international order (Zhang Jian 2013). According to Chen Zhimin (2013) at Fudan University, this relationship should evolve through three progressive stages, from "benign competition," to "bilateral partnership," and then to cooperation as international "community members," ultimately producing a "new type of international relations."

The extension of the major-powers model to the international level recognizes that global stability depends on the United States and China as "the world's most important and influential" major powers (Liu 2013, 30). Zhao Xiaochun of the University of International Relations indicates that China's envisioned partnership with the United States is the basis for building new relationships with other major powers (Zhao 2013). Specifically, the development of US-China strategic trust complements Chinese strategic interactions with Russia, the EU, and Japan (Ni 2013b). The major-powers model further extends to the strengthening of relations with China's BRICS partners and other emerging economies, whose rise since the 2008 global financial crisis has given them more equal status in the shaping of the international order (Qian 2013; Xia, Tang, and Liu 2012; Yang Jieman 2013).

But compared to past assessments, there is a growing focus on the global dimensions of US-China cooperation. As Wu Xinbo indicates, the envisioned new role of the United States and China

as “global partners” sets the core framework of the major-powers model (Wu 2014, 68). The contemporary global environment distinguishes the US-China relationship from its historical antecedents according to Wang Jisi, who argues that the model’s implementation requires the two powers to adjust not only to each other but also to their global strategies based on a deepened consensus on global responsibilities (Wang Jisi 2015).

While most Chinese scholars view the major-powers model as more broadly aimed at facilitating the peaceful transformation of the international system (Yang Jieman 2013), others such as Gao Cheng of the CASS Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies are deeply suspicious of US multilateral approaches to China (Gao 2012). From Gao’s perspective, the United States does not share the military concerns of a traditional hegemonic power, but is more worried about whether China’s rise will challenge US “institutional hegemony” that aims to create a “new imperial system” of global governance. The US long-term strategy toward China is “to use and shape international rules to suppress China’s expanding influence as an institutional competitor in critical strategic regions of the United States” (Gao 2012, 65). According to Zhang Tuosheng, rather than the Asia Pacific, the “global commons” is the decisive middle ground between traditional and nontraditional security where both conflict and cooperation are possible (Zhang 2012, 12). Zhang argues that US-China cooperation should expand from economic and nontraditional security fields to the global level, but remains cautious over issues of maritime, space, and cyber security. Wang Yiwei of Renmin University thus argues that China must approach the United States at the global level, where the United States continues to seek legitimacy and hegemony in global governance despite its relative decline (Wang Yiwei 2013c). For scholars such as Gao Zugui of the Central Party School, US-China geopolitical competition is really a crisis over international rules (Gao 2015).

Domestic Implications

As emphasized in the official discourse, Xi’s major-powers concept is linked most fundamentally to China’s domestic goals. Ling Shengli of China Foreign Affairs University claims that while the evolution of major-power relations has long been a central focus of

the CCP, the parallel emphasis on China's peaceful development is relatively new (Ling 2013). According to Li Jingzhi of Renmin University, Xi's proposed model is designed to mitigate the uncertainty surrounding US-China major-power relations, the biggest challenge to China's peaceful development (Li Jingzhi 2013).

But along with this common emphasis on the priority of domestic development, China's major-powers discourse is primarily about the external challenges to development. Although scholars such as Sun Zhe of Tsinghua University suggest that to avoid confrontation the United States and China must first address their own domestic pressures of economic transformation (Sun 2014), discussion of what China's internal development challenges are and how they exactly relate to its external environment is largely missing from the literature.

Instead, while the major-powers model focuses more on managing external security dilemmas arising from changes in the international power structure, it draws attention to differences in domestic political systems and worldviews by linking to normative debates surrounding Xi's Chinese Dream (Zhou 2014). In fact, Sun Zhe's analysis begins with the Chinese Dream concept to argue that the United States and China must engage through soft power approaches of cooperative diplomacy. Wang Yiwei further suggests that Xi's Chinese Dream is not only tied to the major-powers concept but also the American dream of inclusive development, which can evolve together to transform the traditional view of major-power relations (Wang Yiwei 2013a, 2013b). Others remain critical of the US-led Bretton Woods system and universal values narrowly defined by the West, demanding a greater voice for China and other emerging powers (Tao and Lin 2014). The focus of analysis ultimately remains on changes in the international structural context of US-China interactions, in terms of both material and normative power rather than domestic conditions.

What's New About China's Model of Major-Power Relations?

According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the joint vision of major-power relations raised under the Obama and Xi administrations

means that “China-US relations have today reached a new historical starting point” (Wang Yi 2014a). Chinese scholars similarly identify the Xi Jinping era as a distinct phase in China’s national strategy since Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening policy in 1979. Then what is so new about Xi’s proposed model of major-power relations?

First, China’s current foreign policy discourse suggests a shift from earlier assessments of China’s role as a rising major power, which focused primarily on China’s position in the international system. Debates from the 1990s centered on China’s international power status relative to other major powers at a time when many also questioned the sustainability of China’s rapid economic growth. The major-powers narrative under Xi Jinping, however, focuses more on the strategic interaction between rising and established powers. While earlier studies drew attention to changes in US and Chinese relative power, current assessments are more about US and Chinese strategic intentions in responding to each other. The central question now is not whether China is rising as a challenger to the United States but how to manage the impact of China’s rise together with the United States. While China is more confident about its status as a rising major power, there remains deep uncertainty over the US response. As China’s party paper indicates, “our initiative does not mean that the United States will necessarily change its policy toward China” (*People’s Daily* 2013).

Second, despite this uncertainty, Beijing’s initiative rejects the assumptions of inevitable conflict between rising and established powers. By emphasizing mutual strategic trust rather than shifts in power alone, the major-powers model argues that conflict is indeed avoidable. As Niu Xinchun of CICIR has indicated, the biggest misconception of US-China relations perpetuated by realist thinking is that “structural issues between the rising power and the current power make the fundamental nature of Sino-US relations one of competition, contradiction and conflict” (Niu 2011, 1–2). Such views contrast sharply with traditional claims a decade ago that “the zero-sum nature of power status helps us understand that there will be no win-win situation in conflicts among international political entities accompanying the rise of China” (Yan 2006, 13).

Then why is this initiative important now? Chinese elite debates suggest that Xi's proposition responded specifically to the heightened risks of US-China competition that surfaced beginning in 2009, when a perceived decline in US relative power coincided with Obama's rebalancing of US air and naval forces to Asia and disputes with China over vital interests in the region. Despite Obama and Hu's November 2009 agreement to build a "positive, cooperative, and comprehensive China-U.S. relationship for the 21st century" (Clinton and Geithner 2009; Office of the Press Secretary 2009), the bilateral relationship instead reverted to a Cold War rivalry, most evidently in the Asia Pacific. By the mid-2000s China's US experts recognized that China's rise could challenge US regional hegemony in the Asia Pacific (Wang Jisi 1997a, 2005a).

The current discourse on major-power relations more importantly reveals three patterns of continuity in Chinese thinking. First, China's reassurance of nonconfrontational intentions underlies its assertions of peaceful development a decade ago. The desire to avoid hegemonic conflict was in fact a driving premise of US-China normalization, as embodied in the Joint Communiqué of 1972, which states that neither country "should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region" (Joint Communiqué 1972). Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, and Pang Hanzhao date the joint effort to build new major-power relations to Nixon's opening, an effort that continued with Deng's conclusion in 1989 that "Sino-U.S. relations must be improved," Jiang Zemin's propositions to Clinton in 1993, and Hu Jintao's proposals to Obama in 2011 (Cui and Pang 2012).

Second, this denial of hegemonic aspirations remains primarily aimed at promoting China's domestic development rather than its international position. As Wang Jisi has argued since the 1990s, "Chinese perceptions of the international structure and order are largely extensions of domestic concerns," which implies that Beijing's policies reflect "defensive rather than expansionist aims (Wang 1997b, 18), and a desire for stable relations with the United States (Wang 2005b). In terms of China's quest for a secure external environment for its domestic development, Xi's Chinese Dream is also consistent with Hu's vision of peaceful

development as well as Deng's strategy from the late 1980s, which emphasized an international role commensurate with China's national conditions of development (Xiong 2010).

Third, Xi's promotion of new major-power relations in tandem with the Chinese Dream reflects persistent tensions between China's identities as a rising major power and a developing economy. Reflecting the deep historical legacy of China's "century of humiliation" from the 1840 Opium War to the PRC's founding in 1949, the Chinese Dream sees China's rise (*jueqi*) as China's national rejuvenation (*fixing*) (Wang Yi 2014b). At the same time, Chinese rejections of "G2" (China-US) leadership since 2009 emphasize that China's global cooperation with the United States remains constrained by its capacities as a developing economy rather than by revisionist intentions (*China Daily* 2009). China's leadership thus identifies China and the United States as not just permanent members of the United Nations Security Council but most importantly as the world's biggest developing country and biggest developed country (Li Keqiang 2015; Yang 2015).

Conclusion

There is nothing really new about China's proposed "new type of major-power relations" between the United States and China. China's elite discourse under Xi Jinping only underscores the continued centrality of China's relations with major powers to its domestic and international objectives. As Zhang Yebai of the CASS Institute of American Studies argued in 1990, China's foreign policy adjustments since the founding of the PRC primarily reflect changes in China's relations with superpowers (Zhang 1990).

However, while the high-level promotion of the US-China major-powers model has been accompanied by an active Chinese domestic debate, the reaction from the US community of international relations specialists has been relatively limited. As Yuan Peng of CICIR notes, this trend raises concern over the extent to which the United States and China are really aligned in their visions of the future relationship (Yuan 2013a). While the Chinese foreign ministry's statement on the September 2015 Xi-Obama summit began

with continued “consensus” on the major-powers model, the term disappeared from US official language (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015; Office of the Press Secretary 2015). China’s foreign policy discourse has in turn developed an increasingly global orientation, reinforced by joint statements on climate change as major products of the Xi and Obama administrations in 2014 and 2015 and Beijing’s hosting of the G20 group of major economies in 2016.

The most distinct feature of China’s major-powers model is that it remains a Chinese proposition, for the future of not just US-China relations but also the broader international order. Ruan Zongze of CIIS refers to the concept as a Chinese solution to managing major-power relations in line with the principles of peaceful coexistence proposed in 1953 (Ruan 2014b). According to Wang Yiwei of Renmin University, China’s model of major-power relations can develop into “China’s theory of international relations” linked with that of the United States (Wang Yiwei 2013b, 62). Foreign Minister Wang Yi introduced China’s “major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” at the 2013 World Peace Forum as a “Chinese solution to improve global governance,” in response to “a deep crisis of thinking and culture in modern civilization” (Wang Yi 2013b).

One indicator of change in China’s external orientation under the Xi leadership is what Chinese scholars describe as a current state of confusion in China’s own academic and policy community over Beijing’s grand strategy as a rising major power.⁴ While this uncertainty may partly stem from the lack of transparency within China’s top decisionmaking apparatus, it is reflected in an active domestic debate on the relevance of *taoguang yanghui* (bide time and keep a low profile) as China’s core foreign policy doctrine since 1979 (Chen and Wang 2011; Xiong 2010). It is no coincidence that Xi’s major-powers rhetoric emerged alongside not only his peripheral diplomacy (*zhoubian waijiao*) of regional engagement after tensions from 2009 but also fundamental reassessments of the global institutional and normative order as embodied in the Chinese Dream, which calls for the democratization of international relations (He 2015; Zhou 2014).

According to He Yafei, former PRC ambassador to the United Nations, the post-2008 era marks China’s historical choice of

reconstructing the postwar order in line with changes in the international power balance (He 2015). Beijing's pursuit of this choice is evident not only in its new multilateral economic initiatives but also in cyberspace, where Xi Jinping in December 2015 called for a "multilateral, democratic, and transparent governance system" (Xi 2015). While Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea and US arms sales to Taiwan remain traditional points of US-China mutual suspicion, misperception also extends to preferences over the global rules of governance. Although Xi's major-powers model is an effort to reassure the United States that China's rise will remain peaceful, its global message uncovers the very lack of trust that the model seeks to address in the first place.

Finally, Chinese scholarly views of major-power competition neither significantly diverge from nor largely draw on the views of their US counterparts. Mearsheimer (2001) has long predicted a US-China rivalry that begins over regional hegemony, while Aaron Friedberg (2011) has further pointed to the domestic drivers of China's hegemony with Chinese characteristics. Beijing's current major-powers narrative, and Washington's waning response, suggest that a tragedy of great power competition is likely to be as much over ideas as over material power.

Notes

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1. The standard translation of *major power* later changed to *major country*. I will use the former term, since it appears most frequently in the international relations literature.

2. There is disagreement among Chinese scholars on which countries China identifies as major powers.

3. For a comprehensive collection of papers, see Jia and Yan (2015); Liang, Chen, and Li (2014); and Zhang Jianxin (2013).

4. As displayed at an academic workshop in Shanghai, November 2015.

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