Xi Jinping, the U.S., and New Model of Major Country Relations

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Abstract

Xi Jinping’s proposed new model of major country relations with the U.S. can be understood as a rational response to President Obama’s rebalancing to Asia strategy. In addition, Xi Jinping, the President of the PRC, has adopted a grand strategy of “March Westwards” for Chinese strategic planners to shrug off American influence in East Asia, to establish more balanced U.S.-China relations, and to strengthen U.S.-China strategic mutual trust. Through his “One Belt, One Road” proposal, Xi Jinping aims to coordinate policy communication, improve road connectivity from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea, promote trade facilitation, enhance monetary circulation, and strengthen people-to-people exchanges.

Tensions in the East and South China Seas have constrained the development of the new model of Sino-American relations. Beijing has repeatedly warned the U.S. not to side with Japan, Vietnam, or the Philippines in opposition to mainland China’s stand in these troubled waters. Even with continuous calls from Beijing to build the new model of major power relations, the Obama administration has not shied away from strengthening its security arrangements with its treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Energy cooperation and
cultural exchanges are only parts of a new model of major power relations. Even as trade between the two countries has reached unprecedented levels, strategic mistrust continues to grow as China continues its rise and the U.S. remains committed to being a resident power in the Asia-Pacific region. Another issue threatening to derail the Sino-American new model of major power relations is the disappearance of the current détente across the Taiwan Strait.

**Keywords:** Xi Jinping, Barack Obama, New Mode of Major Country Relations, March Westwards, East and South China Seas

### I. Introduction

Leaders and observers in Beijing see the United States (U.S.) as attempting to encircle mainland China, and President Barack Obama’s pivot to Asia-Pacific, or rebalancing Asia strategy, as aimed at countering China’s rise.1 Beijing criticizes the U.S. for not taking mainland China’s core interests into account, for example, by continuing to sell arms to Taiwan and tilting toward the positions of Japan and the Philippines in the East China and South China Seas. Although mainland China and the U.S. are cooperating on various projects under the Strategic & Economic Dialogue (S&ED) framework and have more than 90 channels for dialogue, they are potential adversaries and there remains a deficit of mutual trust on their respective core interests.

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Since Xi Jinping took office as President of the PRC, Beijing has emphasized the importance of building a “new model of major country relations” with the United States. To that end, Xi has tried to assuage U.S. concerns about the inevitability of confrontation between an already ascendant America and an emerging China, although leaders and experts in Beijing and Washington recognize the challenges posed by both sides’ lingering, deep-rooted strategic distrust. Xi has proposed to build a new model of major-country relations with the U.S. and has adopted a “March Westwards” strategy to shrug off American influence in Asia. Nevertheless, tensions in the East and South China Seas have erupted from time to time and have seriously hindered adoption of the new model of major power relations, which remains beyond their grasp. Beijing avoids the term “great power relations” and prefers to use the term “major country relations.”

Ironically, many observers in the U.S. foreign-policy circle perceive that Xi Jinping “who sees China as a great power peer of the United States” has presented a challenge for Washington.2

II. A New Model of Major Country Relations

Before serving as mainland China’s Ambassador to the U.S., Cui Tiankai candidly concluded that there are five thorny problems for mainland China and the U.S. to address if they are to successfully build a new type of relationship between major countries: first, there is a lack of strategic mutual trust; second, finding means to respectfully deal with each other’s core interests; third, the two countries need to be seen to be “truly implementing the principle of treating each

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other as equals”; fourth, the trade mix needs to be restructured and the U.S. should relax restrictions on high-tech exports to mainland China; and fifth, mainland China and the U.S. need to deal with each other in ways that ensure healthy interactions in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite the careful diplomatic phrasing, in 2012, Wang Jisi, a renowned professor at Peking University, observed that “in Beijing’s view, it is U.S. policies, attitude, and misperceptions that cause the lack of mutual trust between the two countries.” He Yafei, Deputy Director of the PRC State Council’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and former vice foreign minister, publicly admitted in 2003 that “U.S.-China trust is at its lowest since U.S. President Richard Nixon’s historic 1972 visit to China.”

It was against this backdrop that Vice President Xi Jinping visited the U.S. in February 2012 and proposed four ways for the U.S. and mainland China to build a “new type” of relationship: (1) “steadily increase mutual understanding and strategic trust,” (2) “respect each other’s core interests and major concerns,” (3) “work hard to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation,” and (4) “steadily enhance coordination and cooperation in international affairs and on global issues.” Of these four, economic and trade relations are the bedrock of Sino-

American relations.\footnote{6}{“Forging a New Relationship: China calls for an innovative thinking in its relations with the United States,” \textit{Beijing Review}, May 10, 2012, \url{http://www.bjreview.com.cn/world/txt/2012-05/07/content_450802_2.htm}.} In May 2012, then President Hu Jintao announced at the opening session of the fourth round of the mainland China-U.S. S&ED in Beijing that “Whatever changes may take place in the world and no matter how the domestic situations in our two countries may evolve, China and the United States should be firmly committed to advancing the cooperative partnership and build a new type of relationship between major countries that is reassuring to both peoples from China and the United States and people across the world.”\footnote{7}{“Forging a New Relationship: China calls for an innovative thinking in its relations with the United States.”} Nevertheless, it is Xi Jinping who has, at every opportunity, stressed to President Obama the imperativeness of building such a relationship.\footnote{8}{“Xi Jinping Holds Telephone Talk with U.S. President Barack Obama,” \textit{Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Gothenburg}, March 11, 2014, \url{http://za.china-embassy.org/eng/zgxw/t1136278.htm}.} In the opening address of the sixth round of S&ED in 2014, Xi Jinping used the term ten times, and warned “confrontation between China and the U.S. is bound to be disastrous to both countries and the world.”\footnote{9}{“The Sixth Round of China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue and the Fifth Round of China-US High-Level Consultation on People-to-People Exchange Open in Beijing Xi Jinping Attends and Addresses the Joint Opening Ceremony,” \textit{Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China}, July 9, 2014, \url{http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1173485.shtml}.}

In conversations with Secretary John Kerry in Beijing in April 2013, both Xi and Li Keqiang, the Premier of the PRC, said China is willing to work with the U.S. to find means of advancing the relationship based on mutual respect, increased mutual trust, expanded
cooperation, and appropriate handling of differences. In a joint press conference during his first summit with President Obama at Sunnylands Retreat in June 2013, at least four times, President Xi mentioned the necessity of building a new model of major country relationship, based on avoiding conflict and confrontation, increasing mutual respect, and mutually beneficial cooperation, with President Obama responding politely on one occasion. Xi has been eager to establish that Obama agreed to this new model of relations between the two countries. For example, Xi when met Obama in The Hague in March 2014, he mentioned that President Obama has “committed to building the new model of major country relations with China” in Obama’s letter to Xi. In the November 2014 Xi-Obama Beijing summit meeting, Xi Jinping once again stressed that he and Obama “reaffirmed the agreement that we reached at the Annenberg estate on developing the bilateral relations. We agreed to continue to advance the development of a new model of major-country relations between China and the United States. We had in-depth discussions on the priority areas for advancing such relationship,” and, interestingly, President Obama has intentionally avoided using the term that Xi has upheld


In September 2013, Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister of the PRC, spoke at the Brookings Institution, emphasizing that “the avoidance of conflict and confrontation is the prerequisite for the new model of relations, mutual respect is the basic principle and win-win cooperation is the only way to turn the vision into a reality.” What Wang did not mention in that speech is President Xi’s emphasis on the need to properly manage differences and disputes with the U.S., for which the two militaries must take greater responsibility. When Vice President Joseph Biden traveled to Beijing in December 2013 in the midst of tensions over the announcement of East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), he told Xi that “this new model of major country cooperation ultimately has to be based on trust and a positive notion about the motive of one another” and he believes that, if the two countries “get this relationship right, engender a new model, the possibilities are limitless.” According to Wang Yi, the Obama administration “subscribed to the idea fully,” and Obama and Xi have agreed to “advance the building of this new model of major-country relationship, starting first and foremost from the Asian region.”

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15. “Wang Yi: We Hope that China and the United States Will Develop Sound Interactions in the Asia-Pacific,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s*
Wang has also expressed his hope of seeing more commonalities and closer communication, coordination, and cooperation between mainland China and the U.S. in Asian affairs. Key areas for managing differences between the two countries include: “the Korean issue, maritime disputes in East Asia, military-to-military ties, economic relations, and cyber security.”\(^{16}\) Needless to say, the Taiwan issue, particularly U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, should also be placed on the list.

Given the mutual strategic mistrust, military cooperation remains a hurdle that needs to be overcome if a “new model of major country relations” is to be implemented. Xi has pledged that Sino-U.S. military relations will adhere to the “no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and cooperation” principles set forth in his new model of major country relations. The Obama administration is working to improve the quality of military relations, enhance dialogue on such issues as counter-piracy and maritime security, manage mistrust and competition, and bolster high-level communications. Therefore, the frequency of military exchanges involving top defense officials in 2013-2014 was higher than in 2009-2012 (see Table 1).

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Table 1: U.S.- Mainland China High-level Military Exchanges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Delegation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Vice Chairman of Chinese Central Military Commission Xu Cai-hou visited the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited mainland China</td>
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<td>May 2011</td>
<td>Chief of the PLA General Staff Chen Binde visited the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2011</td>
<td>Chairman of U.S. Joint Chief of Staff Mike Mullen visited mainland China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>PRC Minister of Defense Liang Guanglie visited the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2013</td>
<td>Chairman of U.S. Joint Chief of Staff Martin Dempsey visited mainland China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2013</td>
<td>PRC Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan visited the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel visited mainland China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Chief of the PLA General Staff Fang Fenghui visited the U.S.</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Compiled by the author from various news reports.

Cooperation proceeds apace on climate change, energy security, environmental protection and other functional matters. In addition, on Obama’s initiative, annual S&ED meetings were established with mainland China in 2009 (see Table 2). Under the annual S&ED framework meeting, strategic dialogue and economic dialogue are conducted by special representatives appointed by the presidents of the two countries. Two additional mechanisms were incorporated into the framework in 2010: the first is a strategic security dialogue (SSD) between the PRC Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State; the other is high-level consultation on people-to-people exchanges between the PRC Vice Premier and U.S. Secretary of State.
### Table 2: Outcomes of U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Chief negotiators:</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 2009-2012  | ‧ U.S.: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Treasury Timothy Geithner  
              ‧ Mainland China: State Councilor Dai Bingguo and Vice Premier Wang Qishan |
| 2013-2014  | ‧ U.S.: Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Treasury Jacob Lew  
              ‧ Mainland China: State Councilor Yang Jiechi and Vice Premier Wang Yang |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Round, July 2009</td>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>Signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Enhancing Cooperation on Climate Change, Energy and the Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2<sup>nd</sup> Round, May 2010, Beijing | | ・ Signed MOU on Implementation of the Framework for EcoPartnerships  
                                    ・ Signed MOU Concerning Cooperation on Supply Chain Security and Trade Facilitation  
                                    ・ Signed MOU Summarizing Trade Finance Activities  
                                    ・ Signed MOU for the Collaborative Program on Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Diseases  
                                    ・ Signed Memorandum of Further Cooperation on Nuclear Safety  
                                    ・ Signed Memorandum of Cooperation on Shale Gas Resources |
                                    ・ Signed MOU Regarding Cooperation in Law Enforcement Matters |
| 4<sup>th</sup> Round, May 2012, Beijing | | ・ Signed the Protocol for Cooperation on Agricultural Flagship Projects  
                                    ・ Signed MOU between National Science Foundation of the United States (NSF) and the Ministry of Science and Technology of People’s Republic of China (MOST) on the establishment of a partnership |
| 5<sup>th</sup> Round, July 2013, Washington, DC | | ・ Decided to establish U.S.-China Climate Change Working Group and the Cyber Working Group under the Strategic Security Dialogue  
                                    ・ Signed MOU Concerning Cooperation in Preventing Illicit Trafficking of Nuclear and Other Radioactive Materials  
                                    ・ MOU on Enhancing Energy Regulation Cooperation to expand cooperation on electricity, oil, and gas issues |
| 6<sup>th</sup> Round, July 2014, Beijing | | ・ Decided to establish a joint working group on the shared challenges posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and related technologies  
                                    ・ Signed MOU on Electric Vehicle and Industrial Energy Efficiency Cooperation |

Energy cooperation may be the most concrete and promising sector under the Sino-American Strategic and Economic Dialogue framework. Mainland China has tacitly supported the U.S.-led international campaign against Islamic State through bilateral vice minister-level dialogue on anti-terrorism cooperation and multilateral forums. Major breakthroughs in climate change, information technology products, and military confidence-building measures were achieved from Xi-Obama Beijing summit meeting in November 2014. Xi Jinping pledged that clean energy sources, such as solar power and windmills, would account for 20 percent of mainland China’s total energy production by 2030. Most importantly, mainland China and the U.S. reached and “voluntarily support” two military agreements, i.e., Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters and Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities, although the former memorandum was “made without prejudice to either Side’s policy perspective on military activities in the Exclusive Economic Zone.” Both countries also pledged to complete an annex on air-to-air encounters in 2015, which is the most complicated and dangerous military activity, particularly in the South China Sea.

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The positive side of S&ED or Xi-Obama meetings has not been reflected in popular trust in mainland China and the U.S. toward each other. Immediately after Chief of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff Fang Fenghui’s visit to the Pentagon, in May 2014, the U.S. Justice Department indicted five PLA officers for an aggressive operation using state intelligence resources to hack the networks of American corporations to “obtain trade secrets or sensitive business information for the benefit of its [mainland China’s] state-owned companies.”20 Beijing has done more than merely criticize the U.S. for hypocrisy in cyber security. Mainland China argues that it is a victim of cyber attacks, not a perpetrator; for example, its previous leader, Hu Jintao, and a networking company, Huawei, were targets of U.S. National Security Agency surveillance.21

III. Chinese March Westwards

Wang Dong, a professor at Peking University, undertook content analysis of the China Academia Journal Network Publishing Database and detected an increasing number of articles, peaking in 2011, debating the U.S. pivot/rebalancing to Asia and its implications for mainland China.22 The debate in America over what mainland

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China’s core interests consist of and whether the South China Sea has become a part of mainland China’s core interests, aroused a prudent response from Beijing in 2011. In the White Paper on China’s Peaceful Development, Beijing avoided incorporating geographic terms in enumerating its core interests; instead, they were included under the following headings: “state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China’s political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development.”

Xi Jinping’s proposed new model of major country relations with the U.S. can be understood as a rational response to Obama’s strategic pivot toward Asia and strengthening of the capabilities of U.S. allies to maintain the dominant role the U.S. has played in Asia since the end of World War II. In 2013, in its Defense White Paper, Beijing argued that “the U.S. is adjusting its Asia-Pacific security strategy, and the regional landscape is undergoing profound changes.” The tone is slightly different from that of the previous edition, which interpreted U.S. policy toward Asia neutrally, mentioning only that “The United States is reinforcing its regional military alliances, and increasing its involvement in regional security affairs.”

Dong.pdf>


Beijing’s reaction to America’s rebalancing strategy consists of a mixture of caution, pessimism, and criticism of the U.S.’s strategic configuration in the region. According to Yuan Peng, Vice President of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, Beijing sees itself “bearing the brunt of Washington’s recent increased military redeployments in Asia, intense diplomatic maneuvering, and the push to realize a Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP.”26 Wang Jisi, further argues that “the space for future strategic cooperation between the two countries will be squeezed, and big confrontation will be difficult to avoid.”27 Wang’s colleague, Zhu Feng, surveyed the Chinese media and PLA media outlets, and succinctly concluded that, while normally infested with anti-American comments, in addition to populist, nationalist and realist Chinese camp, there are internationalist and liberalist camps. Zhu Feng states:

China’s response, presently and in future, will much depend on the delicate balance between these five camps. The Nationalist and Realist Chinese account for the slight majority of the Chinese population and mass media, but the Internationalist camp anchors the mainstream of Chinese elites – the combination of the policy circle and the academic community. Interestingly the Chinese leadership is similarly split down the line, and current leaders can easily identify the camp which fits them individually.28

27. Wang Dong & Ying Chengzhi, “China’s Assessments of U.S. Rebalancing to Asia.”
In response to the U.S. pivot/rebalancing strategy, scholars in mainland China have proposed adopting a “March Westwards” strategy as this could provide a golden opportunity for Chinese strategic planners to shrug off American influence in Asia. For example, Wang Jisi believes this strategy “is beneficial to establishing more balanced U.S.-China relations, as well as strengthening U.S.-China strategic mutual trust.” In September 2013, President Xi Jinping spoke at Kazakhstan’s Nazarbayev University, proposing to build a “Silk Road Economic Belt” by strengthening policy communication, improving road connectivity from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea, promoting trade facilitation, enhancing monetary circulation, and strengthening people-to-people exchanges. A month later, in his address at Indonesian Parliament, Xi Jinping called for building a “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” to enhance nautical partnerships with ASEAN countries and others through the Strait of Malacca to India, the Middle East, and East Africa. Both a land and sea-based Silk Road, or “One Belt, One Road” for short, often dubbed China’s Marshall Plan, could help mainland China to bypass the U.S. economically, politically and geographically. In October 2014, Beijing, which has pledged to

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contribute an initial US$50 billion in capital, announced the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to offer financing for infrastructure projects in underdeveloped countries across Asia, which has given officials in the U.S. an enriched suspicion of Chinese attempts.\(^{33}\) Right before the APEC Beijing meeting, Xi Jinping declared that mainland China will create a US$ 40 billion Silk Road Fund to build infrastructure enhancing connectivity along the routes of “One Belt, One Road” and some in the U.S. perceive that “Mr. Xi’s charm offensive is an attempt to out-American the Americans” or “to take leadership away from the U.S.”\(^{34}\)

Beijing has paid special attention to cultivating its relationships with its southern neighbors, proposing to sign a treaty on good-neighborliness, friendship, and cooperation; to strengthen cooperation on non-traditional security fields; to build an “upgraded version” of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement; to establish an Asian infrastructure investment bank; to strengthen financial cooperation by increasing the scope of the bilateral currency exchange; to build a maritime cooperation partnership; and to boost cultural and educational exchanges between youth, think tanks and the media.\(^{35}\) In November 2014, Xi pushed forth the launch of a road map for Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) through Beijing’s preferred approach


of a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), instead of a comprehensive and high-standard FTA, such as the U.S.-led TPP. President Obama argued in his 2015 State of the Union speech that the U.S., not the PRC, “should write those rules” for the world’s fastest-growing region.36

To reduce mainland China’s vulnerability in the face of the U.S. rebalancing strategy, Xi Jinping has also tried to cultivate a closer relationship with Russia and with Vladimir Putin in particular. Unlike his predecessor, Hu Jintao, Xi’s initial trips abroad, in 2013 and 2014, were to Russia. As of April 2014, Xi has met Putin six times and Obama only twice in five overseas trips.37 Mainland China has been actively promoting Sino-Russian naval exercises in Sea of Japan, Yellow Sea, and East China Sea. In the Maritime Cooperation – 2012 drill, held in the Yellow Sea, mainland China and Russia conducted counter-terrorism exercises, including the rescue of a hijacked ship, the escort of a commercial vessel, and the defense of a convoy against air and sea attacks. In the Maritime Cooperation – 2013 drill in the Sea of Japan, the two countries demonstrated how well their efforts can be coordinated in fleet air defense, antisubmarine warfare, and surface warfare.38 In May 2014, mainland China and Russia conducted the Joint Sea – 2014 naval exercise in the East China Sea, including joint escort drills, joint aircraft identification

exercises, and air defense and maritime assault drills, targeting Japan over the territorial dispute over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands.

Coincidentally with the Joint Sea-2014, President Xi delivered a speech in Shanghai at the 4th Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) explaining that “Asian affairs ultimately rely on Asian people, which is essential for building region security and peace in Asia,” and that his Asian security concept is premised on promoting sustainable security and economic development with a combination of traditional and non-traditional security. Xi’s CICA speech may be interpreted as expressing his strategic intention of excluding the U.S. from involvement in the crises facing the Asia-Pacific region. Also in May 2014, Xi and Putin oversaw the signing of a 30-year, US$ 400 billion gas deal, even though “betting on help from the U.S. [on tapping mainland China’s shale gas resources] seems far wiser than rely on a Siberian pipeline.” Mainland China and Russia hold similar views of the U.S., which Strobe Talbott, president of the Brookings Institution, describes as “opposition to its [U.S.] unilateral military actions in Kosovo, Iraq and Libya, and [wanting to take] Uncle Sam down a peg or two.”

Vladimir Putin is not popular in the Western world, but is well received in mainland China, and, in May 2014, the Chinese version of Putin Anthology (2012-2014) was published, with Wang Yi, Foreign Minister of the PRC, writing in the foreword that “China and Russia

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have entered a new development stage in the comprehensive strategic partnership,” and stating his belief that the Chinese public will show greater interest in Russia.42

IV. Conflicts in the East and South China Seas

The Chinese renaissance may appear as a peace-loving dream of an awaking lion, as Xi Jinping told his French audience in March 2014.43 Nevertheless, it could also be interpreted as a nightmare by mainland China’s nervous neighbors in the East and South China Seas. The greatest threat to realizing the new model of major country relations comes from a potential confrontation between the militaries of the U.S. and the PRC in the seas of the Asia-Pacific region.

In the 18th Party Congress report, Chinese leaders stressed the need to enhance their “capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect the marine ecological environment, resolutely safeguard mainland China’s maritime rights and interests, and build mainland China into a maritime power.” The same report also highlights the context in which national defense policies are articulated, and stating that the Chinese “should attach great importance to maritime, space and cyberspace security.”44

Mainland China has adjusted its policy on the Diaoyudao (Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands) since the Japanese government announced its decision to “nationalize” the contested islands in September 2012. PLA’s maritime surveillance/coast guard patrols have been passing within 12 nautical miles (22 km) of the islands three to five times a month, and surveillance aircraft have flown over them. To demonstrate that it already exercises de facto jurisdiction over the area, mainland China has had to refit a variety of ocean-going vessels – ice-breakers, ocean tugs, survey vessels and electronic reconnaissance ships – as high-tonnage maritime surveillance/coast guard ships to patrol the waters around the Diaoyutai Islands.

At the same time, Beijing has called on the U.S. to remain neutral over the Diaoyutais issue. President Xi Jinping has told Obama, in March 2014, at The Hague that the U.S. “ought to adopt an objective and fair attitude, distinguish right from wrong, and take more actions that are conducive to push for an appropriate resolution and easing the situation.”

In a nutshell, Beijing urges the U.S. to exercise restraint and to not interfere in the controversy over sovereignty of the islands, nor to do anything that could incite conflict. Nevertheless, when President Obama visited Japan, in April 2014, he became the first U.S. president to clearly state that the Senkaku Islands have been administered by Japan, and so fall under the U.S. defensive net according to Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, even though the U.S. is not taking a position on the final determination of sovereignty.

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Xi might be the key decision-maker in the formulation of mainland China’s maritime policies, including the abrupt announcement of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013. The Chinese request that other countries’ aircraft “flying in the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone should report the flight plans to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China or the Civil Aviation Administration of China” and warn that “China’s armed forces will adopt defensive emergency measures to respond to aircraft that do not cooperate in the identification or refuse to follow the instructions.” These regulations also apply to aircraft having no intention of entering Chinese airspace. Beijing argues that mainland China is not exceptional in requiring aircraft flying over its ADIZ to report flight plans beforehand, but it also publicly admitted: “There is no unified international rule as to how to ask other countries to report flight plans to the ADIZ demarcators.” The U.S. responded promptly to mainland China’s unilateral decision by refusing to follow Chinese ADIZ regulations. Secretary John Kerry believes Chinese “unilateral action constitutes an attempt to change the status quo in the East China Sea,” while Assistant Secretary of East Asia and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel has said it “was a provocative act and a serious step in the wrong direction.”

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Long before the proposal of a new model of major country relations, mainland China has criticized the U.S. for internationalizing the South China Sea issue by siding with ASEAN claimants, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. Mainland China and the U.S. also have different interpretations on the rights of foreign militaries to act in Exclusive Economic Zones. The EP-3, signals reconnaissance version of the P-3 Orion, mid-air incidents near the Hainan Island in April 2001, the interdiction of the USS *Impeccable* in March 2009, and the close call of the USS *Cowpens* with a Chinese military vessel in December 2013 in the South China Sea all demonstrate the dangers associated with unfortunate incidents. In August 2014, the Obama administration criticized mainland China for a Chinese Air Force J-11 fighter-bomber taking aggressive and unprofessional intercepting actions against a U.S. Navy P-8 Poseidon patrol aircraft near Hainan Island over the South China Sea. These unsafe actions might explain the necessity of crafting a formal mechanism to prevent misjudgments by front lines officers. Therefore, mainland China and the U.S. signed agreements in November 2014, after years of negotiating under the S&ED framework, on a maritime and air confidence-building mechanism between the two countries. Both sides are committed to improved coordination and have included U.S. Coast Guard and PRC maritime law enforcement agency representatives in the air and maritime rules of the behavior working group.51

In addition to bilateral and direct conflict in maritime commons, mainland China has become assertive in its law enforcement activities
in the South China Sea since Xi Jinping took office. From Beijing’s perspective, while the U.S. is neutral on the competing sovereignty claims, the Obama administration has drifted to the opposite camp of the PRC in managing the South China Sea dispute. For example, the State Department blamed Beijing in August 2012 for upgrading the administrative level of Sansha [Nansha, Xisha, Zhongsha] City and establishment of a new military garrison. The Obama administration has argued that Chinese claim of “historic rights” to waters in the South China Sea that are exclusive to mainland China “are not within the narrow category of historic claims recognized in Articles 10 and 15 of the LOS [Law of Sea].” In February 2014, Assistant Secretary Daniel Russel stated clearly that “Any use of the ‘nine-dash line’ by mainland China to claim maritime rights not based on claimed land features would be inconsistent with international law.” Washington has supported the Philippines’ right to take its case to a United Nations tribunal for arbitration to find a peaceful solution, and the State Department called China’s establishing a large oil rig near the disputed Paracel Islands “provocative.”

Mainland China has criticized the Philippines for not negotiating through bilateral instruments and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea to settle relevant disputes facing the

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two countries. Beijing argued that the subject matter of the arbitration was concerned with the interpretation or application of the LOS, but, in essence, the territorial sovereignty over several maritime features is involved, so it “would constitute an integral part of maritime delimitation between the two countries, thus falling within the scope of the declaration filed by mainland China in 2006 in accordance with the Convention, which excludes, inter alia, disputes concerning maritime delimitation from compulsory arbitration and other compulsory dispute settlement procedures.” Therefore, Beijing rejects and will not participate in the arbitration conducted by the Arbitral Tribunal. In addition, mainland China stepped up land reclamation activities in 2014 on the disputed Fiery Cross Reef (Yong shu Reef), Johnson South Reef (Chigua Reef), Quarteron Reef (Huayang Reef), and Gaven Reef (Nanxun Reef), changing the topography of the Spratly Islands and leading to a military buildup in the South China Sea.

For Beijing, the U.S. is not a claimant to any of the Spratly Islands and Washington’s “irresponsible remarks” have instigated the tensions in the South China Sea, so mainland China has advocated a “dual track” approach “in addressing the South China Sea issue, namely, the relevant disputes should be resolved peacefully through friendly negotiations by the countries directly concerned while peace and stability in the South China Sea be jointly maintained by mainland China and the ASEAN countries.” Simply put, Beijing argues that

there is no place for the U.S. in the dispute settlement of the South China Sea.

V. Conclusion

Xi Jinping has reached out to other countries on a new Silk Road program to alleviate pressure from the U.S. and to raise mainland China’s profile in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. Sino-Russian ties have turned out to provide another model of great power relations, but Beijing deliberately highlights that it is most interested in its relationship with Washington. Xi will remain active on the world stage much longer than Obama, who is approaching the end of his final term, and it is believed that mainland China will soon become the world’s leading economic power, although the U.S. remains the world’s leading military power. Future U.S. presidents will find it ever more challenging to deal with a more confident mainland China possessing the substantive might necessary to counterbalance the American influence.

The spirit of the new model of major power relations, an absence of acute military confrontation, along with mutual respect, might set a new norm of Sino-American relations. Mainland China and the U.S. may be able to avoid a Spartan and Athenian confrontation, as in the Peloponnesian War that Thucydides described, but other states cannot stand aside as their national interests are also at stake. Beijing has adopted a “look west” strategy to fill the power vacuum in West and Central Asia through the “One Belt, One Road” strategy. Mainland China has also stepped up its involvement in Afghanistan’s peace

building process.

Tensions in the East and South China Seas have constrained the development of the new model of Sino-American relations. Beijing has repeatedly warned the U.S. not to side with Japan or the Philippines in opposition to mainland China’s stand in these troubled waters. Even with continuous calls from Beijing to build the new model of major power relations, the Obama administration has not shied from strengthening its security arrangements with its treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Beijing can claim that the annual Sino-American S&ED meetings have been bearing fruit, ranging from economic to cultural exchanges, but the economic dimension is only one facet of a new model of major power relations. Even as trade between the two countries has reached unprecedented levels, strategic mistrust continues to grow as China continues its rise and the U.S. remains committed to being a resident power in the Asia-Pacific region. Another issue threatening to derail the Sino-American new model of major power relations is the disappearance of the current détente across the Taiwan Strait.
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