

## **Strategic Cooperation without Mutual Trust: A Path Forward for China and the United States**

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Both Chinese and American strategists have observed that the rebalancing strategy adopted by the Obama administration in 2010 has not only failed to improve mutual trust between China and the United States but also undermined their strategic confidence in each other. Many policy analysts have further argued that this lack of mutual trust is a crucial obstacle to the development of strategic cooperation, particularly at a time when both countries are undergoing leadership transitions. This belief is so popular that it overshadows all the examples of strategic cooperation between major powers without mutual trust. The United Kingdom, for example, established strategic cooperation with the Soviet Union based on the common interest of defeating Nazi Germany in World War II. China and the United States likewise developed strategic cooperation in the 1970s even though Mao Zedong did not trust Richard Nixon. With the possible exception of the U.S.-Britain partnership, hardly any strategic cooperation between the United States and a major power has been based more on mutual trust than on shared interests. Thus, even though the U.S. rebalancing strategy has eroded mutual trust between China and the United States, it is still possible for these two giants to develop strategic cooperation in the coming years.

Chinese realists argue that the U.S. rebalancing strategy is driven by two factors. The first factor is China's rise. The United States wants to maintain its status as the only superpower, and China's rise challenges the unipolar configuration of the post-Cold War world. The second factor is the possible shift of the world center from Europe to East Asia, which is directly related to the first factor. Although Japan boasted the second-largest economy in the world for more than two decades, the global balance of power remained centered on the West. In contrast with Japan's modernization during the Cold War, China's rise as a comprehensive national power since 2002 has increased the possibility that East Asia will replace Europe as the economic and political center of the world. Faced with this trend, the United States seeks to strengthen its position in East Asia rather than see its global leadership role weakened. [End Page 4]

Beijing thus believes that the U.S. rebalancing strategy aims at constraining China from becoming the dominant power in East Asia, in spite of assurances from Washington that the strategy does not target China. Yet faced with this policy, mainstream Chinese strategists continue to regard mutual trust as a precondition for strategic cooperation between Beijing and Washington and worry that the lack of mutual trust will undermine bilateral relations and increase the risk of war. This view is actually shared by Washington. Communication is seen as an effective approach for improving mutual trust. For instance, with the exception of Vice President Xi Jinping, who had injured his back, all of China's national leaders met with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her visit to China in September 2012, even though they knew these meetings could not result in any common understanding. The Chinese government similarly values the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) because it believes that this mechanism can help improve mutual

trust with the United States. In fact, the S&ED is less useful for improving mutual trust than it is for finding common or complementary interests between the two countries.

Chinese realists agree with the mainstream strategists that growing competition between China and the United States is inevitable as the gap in comprehensive national power narrows between the two countries. With China poised to become a superpower second only to the United States by 2022, the strategic competition between them will likely only intensify and proliferate into more sectors. Yet Chinese realists have confidence that selfish interests, such as the desire to avoid military clashes between two nuclear powers, will encourage U.S.-China cooperation, especially preventive cooperation. As long as both sides are vigilant, they can keep their competition peaceful. Consider, for example, that the disputes between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands have had almost no impact on China-U.S. relations. This phenomenon illustrates that both Beijing and Washington are wary of conflicts that could escalate to military clashes.

In comparison with U.S. policy toward China during the first term of the Clinton administration, the current U.S. rebalancing strategy is much softer and clearly illustrates the superficial friendship between China and the United States. This state of superficial friendship drives rivalry between the two countries, but the strategy of superficial friendship facilitates cooperation between them.<sup>1</sup> China and the United States have been able to [End Page 5] maintain this superficial friendship since the late 1990s, even in the absence of mutual trust, mainly because they share objective strategic interests, such as nuclear nonproliferation, peace in the Asia-Pacific, counterterrorism in Central Asia, and trade and investment. In the late 1990s, for example, China and the United States agreed to no longer target nuclear weapons at each other, which helped stabilize bilateral relations.

In order to manage unavoidable competition, the principle of "peaceful competition" may be more useful than the principle of "peaceful coexistence." During his visit to China in October 2011, Vice President Joe Biden was warmly received by his counterpart Xi Jinping. Xi suggested to Biden that China and the United States should develop a new type of major-power relations characterized by "healthy competition." Following the meeting, no voice from the U.S. side opposed this suggestion. It may be possible for China and the United States to agree on the principle of peaceful competition through preventive cooperation, even if they cannot agree on healthy competition, because the former principle can provide a red line for both sides.

China and the United States should thus expend more effort on developing preventive cooperation than on trying to improve mutual trust. Cooperation can be based on conflicting as well as shared interests. Although in the coming years China and the United States should be psychologically prepared to witness conflicting interests increase faster than common interests, Beijing and Washington can skillfully manage competition by focusing on developing preventive cooperation based on these conflicting interests. China and the United States can develop such cooperation not only in the military sphere but also in addressing nontraditional security threats, such as those posed by energy, finance, and climate change.<sup>2</sup>

To call for China and the United States to prioritize preventive cooperation does not mean that they should give up on building mutual trust or developing shared interests. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that preventive cooperation offers a path for the two sides to stabilize their strategic relations in the absence of trust. The worst-case scenario is not that China and the United States will be faced with more competition in the coming years, but that such competition will escalate into military conflict because they never learn how to develop cooperation in the absence of mutual trust or shared interests. [End Page 6]

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#### Footnotes

1. Yan Xuetong and Qi Haixia, "Football Game Rather Than Boxing Match: China-U.S. Intensifying Rivalry Does Not Amount to Cold War," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5, no.2 (2012): 110-13.
2. Scott Victor Valentine, "Towards the Sino-American Trade Organization for the Prevention of Climate Change (STOP-CC)," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no.4. (2011): 465-70.