



Article

# China Debates the ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’

Qi Hao<sup>†,\*</sup>

<sup>†</sup>Qi Hao is Assistant Professor at Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

\*Corresponding author. Email: kev15030@126.com.

## Abstract

The proposal to forge a ‘new type of great power relations’ is one of the most important diplomatic innovations this Chinese administration has made. Although popular in official discourse, Chinese scholars diverge greatly on how to define the new concept. Debates focus on who the great powers are and what the new relations feature. All are rooted in the vagueness of this concept in official discourse. As the official interpretation of the concept is changing, the debate is also narrowing to that of the goals of the new relations. However, the revision of this concept makes it less practical due to its disconnectedness with the reality of China–US relations. The revised expression also diminishes the uniqueness of the new relations proposal, which implies that it may no longer be a feasible guide to China–US relations or an effective framework for academic studies on the power transition between existing and established powers.

Having surpassed Germany and Japan in succession to become the world’s second biggest economy, China imposes greater influence than ever on regional and global affairs, not just in economy, but also in politics and security. There has consequently been more discussion on China’s rise both in Western and Chinese studies. Debates on China’s rise have extended from relatively simple narratives on the ‘China threat’ in the 1990s to more neutral and specific ones, such as whether there could be a peaceful rise of China, whether China could adapt to the existing international regimes and norms, and, most specifically, how China as a rising power would manage disputes and conflicts with other major powers.<sup>1</sup> The answers

1 Regarding discussions on the influence of China’s rise, see Barry Buzan, ‘China in International Society: Is ‘Peaceful Rise’ Possible?’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2010), pp. 5–36; Feng Huiyun, ‘Is China a Revisionist Power?’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2009), pp. 313–34; Charles Glaser, ‘Will China’s Rise Lead to War’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67479/>

to these questions differ greatly when viewed through the different lenses of IR theories and schools. Unsurprisingly, most of these discussions unfold around or involve China-US relations, for China is considered the destined competitor for US hegemony, and this bilateral tie would to a great extent determine the development of the international order.

In light of potential competition with the United States, China's top leaders have put forward a new concept that they call the 'new type of great power relations' (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) which they have tried to endow with concrete meaning. In the middle of the second China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue in May 2010, then State Councillor Dai Bingguo made the proposal that China and the United States initiate an era of globalization with the new type of great power relations of mutual respect, harmonious existence, and win-win by states of different social systems, cultural traditions, and levels of development.<sup>2</sup> On his visit to the United States in February 2012, then vice president Xi Jinping said that the United States and China should expand their common interests and mutual beneficial cooperation and strive to shape a new type of great power relations in the 21st century.<sup>3</sup> In May 2012, at the beginning of the fourth China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue, President Hu Jintao put forward five recommendations for building the new type of major powers.<sup>4</sup> In June 2013, when he met with Obama at Sunnylands in California, President Xi Jinping summed up the new relations in the three points: 'no conflicts or confrontations, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation',<sup>5</sup> which later became the official definition of the new type of great power relations.

When reviewing the initiation and evolution of this new concept since 2010, it has on most occasions applied to China-US relations. Although at first the United States seemed to echo the Chinese leader's proposal to build new relations, the United States and China still disagree over the idea in some respects, such as the necessity of creating such a new concept, what it means, and how it can be achieved.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that these disagreements stem

charles-glaser/will-chinas-rise-lead-to-war; John J. Mearsheimer, 'Can China Rise Peacefully', *The National Interest*, 25 October, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>.

- 2 'State Councillor Dai Bingguo's Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Second China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue', 25 May, 2010, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2010/05-25/2302977.shtml>.
- 3 Xi Jinping, 'Yaoba ZhongMei guanxi suzao cheng 21 shiji xinxing daguo guanxi' ('We Should Shape US-China Relations into a New Type of Great Power Relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'), 16 February, 2012, <http://gb.cri.cn/27824/2012/02/16/2225s3559315.htm>.
- 4 Hu Jintao, 'ZhongMei ying dapo daguo duikang luoji' ('China and US Should Break the Logic of Great Power Confrontation'), 4 May, 2012, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2012-05-04/033424365185.shtml>.
- 5 'Xi Jinping gaikuo ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi, bu chongtu, bu duikang, xianghu zunzhong, hezuo gongying' ('Xi Jinping Sums up China-US New Type of Great Power Relations as No Conflicts and Confrontation, Mutual Respect, Cooperation with Win-Win Benefits'), 10 June, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-06/10/c\\_116107914.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-06/10/c_116107914.htm).
- 6 Wang Jisi and Wu Shengqi, 'ZhongMei dui xinxing daguo guanxi de renzhi chayi ji Zhongguo duiMei zhengce' ('Different Understandings of the New Type of Great Power Relations by US and China and China's Policy toward U.S.'), *Dangdai shijie (Contemporary World)*, No. 10 (2014), pp. 2-7; Wang Yiwei, 'Xinxing daguo guanxi, ZhongMei renzhi you chayi' ('China and US have Different Understandings of the New Type of Great Power Relations'), 16 November,

largely from suspicions on the part of the United States side about China's intentions in proposing the concept. It is quite natural that China and the United States should have certain disputes over the new concept, in view of the lack of mutual trust that is generally used to justify the failure of the two countries to cooperate.<sup>7</sup> What is most odd is the divergence over the concept within the Chinese academic community, which goes beyond the disagreements between the United States and China.

Chinese academics and policy makers have at best reached consensus in a negative way which distinguishes the new type of great power relations from other types of relations in history, but which gives no clear definition of the key parts of the concept. To gain an understanding of this concept, it must be clear who the great powers are and what kind of relationship can be called 'new type'. On these two questions, we find serious disagreements within the Chinese academic community that may send contradictory messages to those whose focus is on China's rise and its incentives. This article aims to address the debates on several key points of the new concept, including the definition of 'great powers' and the nature of 'new type', and why and how this relationship should be constructed. On these questions, Chinese scholars have diverged to varying degrees.

### Who Are the Great Powers?

Most Chinese scholars of international studies consider the new type of great power relations as Chinese leaders' reflection on China's growing strength and the future scenarios for its relationship with other countries. However, as a diplomatic proposal for implementation, the first thing to make clear is with whom China would construct the new relationship. As to academic meaning, we have to know who qualify as great powers, and how to understand great powers from the perspective of theory building. Unfortunately, there exists no uniform understanding of the new relations. Do they refer to a certain relationship or to general ones that China wishes to develop? Reflecting the vagueness of this concept in their application of it, Chinese scholars diverge greatly on what a great power means. I give in this article a detailed description of the different ideas within the debate, and go on to assess them from the perspective of logic and real policy.

The first point of view takes this new concept as a diplomatic tool to deal with China's foreign relations generally. Upholding this idea, Pang Zhongying in the first explains the risk of not generalizing the concept, and elaborates on China's main purpose in proposing it. As regards US-China relations, he asserts that China would be involuntarily pitted against the United States if the 'new type' were to be restricted to relations with the United States, so providing endorsement for those who play up China's threat to US dominance; as regards China's relations with other countries, it is not wise to make them perceive China as placing the US-China relations above all others, as this would damage China's foreign relations as a whole. Besides pointing out the potential risk of limiting the 'new type' to

2014, [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2014-11/5192710.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2014-11/5192710.html); Diao Daming, 'Meiguo xuejie dui ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi de taolun' ('The Discussion of the New Type of Great Power Relations in American Academic Circle'), *Quarterly Journal of International Politics*, No. 1 (2015), pp. 78–99.

7 Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust*, March 2012, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/3/30-us-china-lieberthal/0330\\_china\\_lieberthal.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/3/30-us-china-lieberthal/0330_china_lieberthal.pdf).

US–China relations, Pang also notes that, as elaborated in the report of the 18th People’s Congress, China could improve and develop relations with developed countries, expand the space for cooperation, and manage disputes properly, so promoting a long and healthy new type of great power relations. Based on the official standpoint, he holds that the ‘new type’ is designed not only for the United States and China, but could also apply to China’s relations with Russia, the EU, India, Brazil—even all G20 countries. As to the shape of the new relations, to Pang’s thinking, either bilateral or multilateral ties would work.<sup>8</sup>

Chen Zhimin admits that the concept was originally created and applied in the context of US–China relations, a bilateral tie entailing many conflicts of interest and difficulties. But, similar to Pang, Chen recognizes that proposing a unique new type of great power relations between China and the United States would seem to the rest of world to be reminiscent of a G2, although that might not necessarily be the case.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the new type of great power relations should be applied to China’s relations with all major countries, including developed and developing countries and various international organizations. Chen has even suggested that the concept be rephrased ‘new model of relations between major powers’.<sup>10</sup>

Besides the above arguments based on logic and real policy, certain other studies go further, to the extent of neglecting the debate on whether ‘new type’ should be used generally or with a designated target, instead elaborating on how China should construct the new relationship with different countries. Wu Xinbo takes the Chinese official position on the new type of great power relations of ‘no conflicts and confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation’ between great powers as a starting point. In his view, relations with different countries must be tackled in various ways to fulfil China’s purpose in constructing the new relations by underlining different emphases in specific bilateral ties.<sup>11</sup> Certain other scholars raise China’s relations with specific countries as examples of the new type of great power relations, the best case scenario that of China–Russia relations, which from their point of view set a good example of what building the new type of a great power relations can achieve.<sup>12</sup> To justify their judgment, they cite how the mutual trust between China and

- 8 Pang Zhongying, ‘Xinxing daguo guanxi bu zhuanzhi ZhongMei’ (‘The New Type of Great Power Relations Does Not Solely Refer to China-US Relations’), 9 September, 2013, [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2013-09/4335238.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2013-09/4335238.html).
- 9 G2 was firmly denied by Chinese leaders and academics for its discordance with China’s advocacy of multi-polarization. Wei Ling, ‘Guanyu ZhongMei G2 de jidian sikao’ (‘Some Thoughts on China-US G2’), *Zhongguo gaigebao (China Reform Newspaper)*, 15 March, 2010, [http://www.crd.net.cn/2010-03/15/content\\_5144653.htm](http://www.crd.net.cn/2010-03/15/content_5144653.htm).
- 10 Chen Zhimin, ‘Xinxing daguo guanxi de xingtai fenxi’ (‘Shape Analysis of the New Type of Great Power Relations’), *Guoji guancha (International Review)*, No. 5 (2013), pp. 14–20.
- 11 Wu Xinbo, ‘Xinxing daguo guanxi shi pan daqi’ (‘The New Type of Great Power Relations is a Grand Chess Game’), 11 January, 2013, [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2013-01/3472577.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2013-01/3472577.html).
- 12 Ji Zhiye, ‘ZhongE guanxi shi goujian xinxing daguo guanxi yangban’ (‘China-Russia Relation is a Model of the New Type of Great Power Relations’), 22 March, 2013, [http://news.xinhua.net.com/2013-03/22/c\\_124489905.htm](http://news.xinhua.net.com/2013-03/22/c_124489905.htm).

Russia, in terms of politics, security, and economic cooperation, is escalating to a level to which China as long aspired in its relations with other great countries.<sup>13</sup>

Through a generally positive outlook on the China–Russia relationship, other scholars have even made a concrete analysis of the impediments and incentives confronting China and Russia on their way to the new relations, including various negative factors such as imbalances of power and trade relations. In their view, based on the universal rule of international relations, the checks and balances conducted in China–Russia relations would also appear as a main challenge to accomplishing the new type of relations.<sup>14</sup> Extending the application scope of the new concept, the China–India relationship is also incorporated into this case study by certain scholars, so denoting the significance of the country’s relations with developing countries in the process of China’s rise. The favourable conditions for China and India to develop the new relations, as illustrated in the study, are rooted in both countries’ common appeal for a new international order and their ever deepening economic relationship.<sup>15</sup>

Similar to the first view on the new relations, the second view or study approach also discusses the new concept as a general diplomatic term, but goes beyond the range of China’s foreign relations and extends to the relationships between rising non-Western countries and established Western powers, aiming to shed some light on how well these countries would live. In this way, the big countries are categorized according to the traditional standard of political economy. In Zhang Xiaoming’s view, China’s proposal to build the new relations can be regarded as a collective strategic appeal by non-Western rising powers to maintain an international order in tandem with Western powers, mainly based on international institutions. From this perspective, all the relationships between non-Western and Western powers can be studied within the framework of the new type of great powers relations.<sup>16</sup>

The third view, based on its understanding of the new relations, strongly opposes applying the concept widely among major countries of the world. Yan Xuetong insists that the new type of great power relations refers only to new relations between an emerging and established power. Thus the concept cannot be applied to any other bilateral ties but China–US relations,<sup>17</sup> which implies the uniqueness of the United States and China as established and emerging powers. Zhao Suisheng draws the same conclusion as Yan, but through a

- 13 Gao Zugui, ‘ZhongE guanxi shi xinxing daguo guanxi de dianfan’ (‘China–Russia Relation is an Example of the New Type of Great Power Relations’), 4 July, 2013, <http://v.ifeng.com/mil/annals/201307/c25e27bb-1188-4f6e-b1d0-1457d122a230.shtml>.
- 14 Wang Sheng and Luo Xiao, ‘Goujian ZhongE xinxing daguo guanxi de jichu he lujing’ (‘The Basis and Approaches for Building China–Russia New Type of Great Power Relations’), *Xiandai guoji guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)*, No.7 (2013), pp. 41–49.
- 15 Hu Erjie, ‘Guanyu goujian ZhongYin xinxing daguo guanxi de ruogan sikao’ (‘Some Reflections on Building the China–India New Type of Great Power Relations’), *Heping yu fazhan (Peace and Development)*, No. 3 (2014), pp. 52–63.
- 16 Zhang Xiaoming, ‘Dui xinxing daguo guanxi de yizhong jiedu’ (‘An Interpretation of the New Type of Great Power Relations’), *Guoji zhengzhi yanjiu (International Politics Quarterly)*, No. 1 (2014), pp. 49–58.
- 17 Yan Xuetong, ‘MeiE guanxi yu ZhongRi guanxi dou bushi xinxing daguo guanxi’ (‘Neither the US–Russia nor China–Japan Relations is the New Type of Great Power Relations’), 26 June, 2014, [http://www.guancha.cn/YanXueTong/2014\\_06\\_26\\_241158.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/YanXueTong/2014_06_26_241158.shtml).

comparison of the China–US relationship with other China-foreign relations. He notes that although China has showed the will to build the new relations with various emerging powers, including Russia, India, and South Africa, when it comes to practical policy, none of these relations parallels with US–China relations because, economically, only US–China relations can be called ‘great power’, and it is therefore of vital importance that the two countries overcome the tragedy of great power politics.<sup>18</sup>

It is noteworthy that most scholars who oppose a general use of the new concept have used the exclusive method when presenting their arguments. But the different understandings of power contrasts among great powers engender slightly different thoughts on what relations should be excluded. Qu Xing’s opinion represents a somewhat mixed perception of the new type of great power relations within the Chinese community. He regards China’s proposal of the new relationship as a reflection of the country’s good wish to evade the predestined tragedy of emerging and established great powers, which is a mainstream point among Chinese scholars. From the perspective of China’s foreign relations, he considers US–China relation as the core of the new concept, thus excluding the possibility of or necessity for China to build the new relations with other powers. Although Qu holds a universally accepted view on China’s key purpose in constructing the new relations, he nevertheless differs greatly from the views of Yan and Zhao on what qualifies countries to build the ‘new relations’. In terms of capabilities, he also ranks the EU and Russia as great powers, but does not treat the EU as a potential target for China’s building of the new relations. The reason he gives for excluding China–EU relations as a candidate for the ‘new type’ is that the EU does not consider China a potential strategic threat. Based on the same logic, he believes the ‘new type’ can be applied to US–Russia relations, as Russia is still a giant power militarily and perceived by the United States as a great threat.<sup>19</sup>

It seems reasonable for Russia and Europe to be regarded as major powers due to their status in international society. But Qu Xing’s logic as to why the EU does not see China as a potential threat while the United States does needs to be clarified. If we follow this logic, Russia and Europe are also in the need of some sort of new relations, as the security dilemma between the two countries has worsened since NATO’s eastward expansion. Another question related to Qu Xing’s idea is that of whether a nation’s capability correlates with the threat it poses to other countries—an old question in international relations, and a key factor in understanding that the new type of great power relations in the 21st century is not neatly black and white.

Bridging the gap among various ideas about who are the players in the new type of great power relations, Yang Jiemian attempts to make a comprehensive and objective summing up of the concept by sifting out dual implications from the academic discussions and diplomatic practice of this new concept which advocate international norms of morality and aim to get real problems settled. According to his understanding, although the new type was initiated for US–China relations, all the traditional Western powers and emerging powers as represented by BRICS can be included in the category of great powers when constructing

18 Zhao Suisheng, ‘ZhongMei ying gongtong mouqiu shijie quanli tianping xinde pingheng’ (‘China and US Should Seek a New Balance of World Power’), *Renmin luntan (People’s Forum)*, No.18 (2013), pp. 6–25.

19 Qu Xing, ‘Zhongguo xuyao zenyang de xinxing daguo guanxi’ (‘What Kind of New Type of Great Power Relations Does China Need’), 15 June, 2013, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/opinion/2013/06/15/268374.html>.

the new type of relations. Through proposing this new concept, China hopes to promote the fairness, justice, and rationality of international relations, so implying a general applicability of this new concept. In support of his argument, he notes that China's relations with other great powers have been classified under different categories based on their achievements and potential to form a new type of relations, and that it is necessary for China to underline a different focus and make different efforts in its relations with these great powers.<sup>20</sup>

Reviewing all these debates on the application of the new concept, it can be concluded that the lack of consensus on the purpose of building the new relations mainly accounts for the disputes among Chinese scholars. If China's purpose in proposing this concept lies in the wish to get away from the so-called Thucydides Trap, characterized by the strategic confrontation between established and emerging powers, the leading target could be no other country than the United States. However, according to the same logic, Qu Xing and Zhang Xiaoming have different ideas on who qualify as great powers eligible for the 'new type'. Qu adds the factor of threat to decide which countries need the 'new type', and Zhang attempts to view the definition of great powers within a long time span, from a perspective of international order.

Different from the approaches above, other scholars use the principle of 'equality, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation' as standards through which to distinguish the 'new type' from other great power relations, which implies theoretically that the 'new type' can be formed between any two big countries, though with different levels of difficulty and pre-conditions. However, the imprecise use of this term in the study of China's foreign relations makes the new concept a vague one characterized by two drawbacks.

First, although some scholars regard the new relations as a generalized term in China's foreign policy, they make no clear division among different 'new type' of great power relations. It is natural that different major countries may respond differently to the rise of China, which is indeed the background for proposing the concept. If the concept were applied when referring to the relations between China and all major countries without division, it would offer no effective framework through which to provide insights or theoretical guidance for China's diplomacy in the era of China's rise. Secondly, there is no authoritative illustration of the goal in achieving the new type of great power relations, or as debated by some Chinese scholars, the new concept is created with multi-goals, then some questions would arise, including what is the main goal with the new relations, what is the relationship between different goals, and how to realize different goals. The drawbacks specified above may bring troubles for both academic study and diplomatic practice. Obviously, to achieve different goals with different target, China has to take different paths and create different conditions.

## How can the New Relations be Characterized?

Another argument about the new concept is that of what the new type of great power relations would look like, or how the content of the new relations should be defined. The debate on this question relates closely to who the main players in the new relations would be.

20 Yang Jiemian, 'Xinxing daguo guanxi lilun zhanlue he zhengce jiangou' ('New Type of Great Power Relations—Theory, Strategy and Policy Formulation'), *Guoji wenti yanjiu* (*International Studies*), No. 3 (2013), pp. 9–19.



If the 'new type' is regarded as a general shape of the relations between great powers, it is to be expected that the new relations between different countries may take on different features that would undoubtedly reflect the diversified nature of this new type of relations.

As to the nature of the new type of great power relations, four points of view are apparent within Chinese academic circles. The first partly equates the new type of relations with the partner relationship that China has been promoting with other big countries. Therefore, the new type of great power relations is not taken as a brand-new concept in the history of China's foreign relations. Pang Zhongying puts all China's various partnerships with other big powers into the basket of new type of great power relations, including the strategic cooperative partnership (*zhanlue xiezuo huoban*), strategic partnership (*zhanlue hezuo huoban*), and comprehensive and cooperative partnership (*quanmian hezuo huoban*).<sup>21</sup> Chen Zhimin holds a similar idea, based on his prescribed view of the nature of the new type of relations. He categorizes the relations between big powers into seven shapes: those that are enemies in hot war, rivals in cold war, cut-throat competitors, traditional allies, benign competitors, partners, and community members. Out of all of these, he selects the last three as the potential shapes for the new relations. As the Chinese government has made great efforts in the last decade to develop various partnerships with other countries, the new relations proposal cannot be regarded as a new diplomatic discourse or practice.<sup>22</sup>

The second view underscores strategic competitiveness in the relations between great powers as a prerequisite for building the new relations. Most scholars holding the second opinion prefer to describe the 'new type' as a stable relationship of peaceful competition. Zhou Fangyin insists that the new type must be built upon strategic competition between great powers, but with stable development of their relations. In his view, there is no need for new type relations where there is no strategic competition, and the purpose of building the new type is to prevent malignant competition from eroding a bilateral tie. As to the new type relations between the United States and China, he pictures this as a long-term stable relationship endowed with strategic significance, but not for expediency. To achieve this goal, the two sides must specify their bottom line with respect to certain key national interests, and no one attempts to challenge or test the other's resolve to defend these key interests.<sup>23</sup>

Yan Xuetong gives a more straightforward two-fold definition of the new type, one that aims to sheer away from any military confrontation similar to that between United States and former Soviet Union during the Cold War, but which in the meantime is not directed towards strategic cooperation like that of the United States and UK. In short, a new type should feature peaceful strategic competition, neither getting too close nor too far to fall apart.<sup>24</sup> Addressing the concern that the new type proposal might be equated with the G2, so causing unwanted trouble for China's foreign relations, Yan thinks this is a result of misunderstanding of the new type. He considers the competitive part of the new relations as its

21 Pang, 'The New Type of Great Power Relations Does Not Solely Refer to China-US Relations'.

22 Chen, 'Shape Analysis of the New Type of Great Power Relations'.

23 Zhou Fangyin, 'ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi de dongli lujing yu qianjing' ('The Motivation, Approach and Prospect of China-U.S. New Type of Great Power Relations'), *Dangdai yatai (Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies)*, No. 2 (2013), pp. 4–21.

24 Yan, 'Neither the US-Russia Nor China-Japan Relations is the New Type of Great Power Relations'.



core nature, largely different from the G2, which is based on positive cooperation between great powers.<sup>25</sup>

Shi Yinhong's idea is something of a combination of Zhou and Yan's opinions, though he understands the new type from a slightly different perspective. He imbues the two key phrases, 'new type' and 'great powers' with strategic meaning wherein the two sides in the new relations have to respect each other not as ordinary sovereign powers, but in terms of certain key interests and the dignity that unique big powers possess in the international community. Shi does not explicate the interests and dignity of the unique big powers that command such respect, but it is certain that the list of such interests would go beyond those that traditional powers cherish. Meanwhile, to protect and convince each other of these key interests, the two sides must negotiate their way around the so-called 'Peloponnesian Trap' characterized by face-to-face confrontation.<sup>26</sup>

The third view or study approach attempts to define the new type according to the attitude of big powers and the kind of cooperation between them, namely the new type passive safeguarding and positive management. Big powers under the former category have no choice but to strive to maintain a peaceful status-quo devoid of large-scale conflicts or war, while the focus of those with a positive management attitude is on the cooperative aspect to achieve a win-win result.<sup>27</sup> This division seems also to imply two levels of new type through which big powers may escalate their relationship. As a matter of fact, these two new types can be regarded as two forms coexisting in the relations between big powers. Yan Xuetong makes a persuasive argument for such coexistence, using the example of the US-China relationship. He observes the diversified interests between the United States and China, including common interests, complementary interests, and conflicting interests, in light of which the two countries cooperate in different ways to achieve their common goals. With respect to common and complementary interests, the United States and China can develop positive cooperation, while preventive diplomacy is indispensable to avoid conflicting interests that could ruin the relationship.<sup>28</sup> This simple dichotomy, however, depends on a clear definition of what constitutes complementary and common interests between great powers. Although all relationships among different countries of the world feature coexistence of various forms of interests and cooperation, the precondition for such coexistence is they are not of strategic significance, as otherwise neither passive safeguarding nor positive management can be integrated into the foreign policy of any great powers.

The last view is a somewhat philosophical perspective that idealistically regards the new type relations as a state of harmony between great powers in which there are no conflicts or cooperation. Studies holding this view usually reflect on the new type of relations through the lens of constructivism, wherein the new type of relations is a 'harmonious symbiosis', possibly rooted in the change of common perception among great powers of the

25 Yan Xuetong, 'Xinxing daguo guanxi yu G2 butong' ('The New Type of Great Power Relations is Different From G2'), 18 April, 2014, <http://cn.nikkei.com/columnviewpoint/41-viewpoint/8917-20140418.html>.

26 Shi Yinhong, 'Goujian xinxing daguo guanxi de hongguan sikao' ('Macro Thinking on Building the New Type of Great Power Relations'), *Qianxian (Frontier)*, No. 7 (2014), pp. 47-49.

27 Yang, 'New Type of Great Power Relations—Theory, Strategy and Policy Formulation'.

28 John Mearsheimer, *Daguo zhengzhi de beiju (The Tragedy of Great Power Politics)*, trans. Wang Yiwei and Tang Xiaosong (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2014), p. 441.

inevitability of the emerging and established powers' descent into vicious competition for dominance. Wang Yiwei conceives of 'three transcendences' to be achieved to build new relations with regard to cultural conflict, zero-sum game, and ideological confrontation. As to the theoretical meaning of the new relations, he construes it as a substitute for traditional Western IR theories through the ontology of the 'harmonious world' idea, the methodology of coevolution, and the epistemology of 'human concern and great power responsibility'.<sup>29</sup> Su Changhe holds a similar view to Wang, asserting that the development of a symbiotic relationship reduces the possibility of great power confrontation. According to his observations, a new international system featuring a paralleling of various partnerships and traditional military alliances is looming. He asserts that the prospect of new relations would be closely bound to the development of partnerships, rather than the more traditional alignments, the cohesiveness of which would be a decisive factor in whether partnership or alignment prevails. Citing the competition between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific, he proposes that the partnership diplomacy that China initiated has subtly reshaped the US alliance system.<sup>30</sup>

The debates above involve the key elements on how to define the new relations. To understand the debates against the background of China's diplomacy, all the discussions above actually relate closely to the ongoing debate about whether China should give up its long-held principle of 'keeping a low profile' and carry out great power diplomacy, or strive for achievement, as advocated by a few scholars.<sup>31</sup> The disagreements on the subject and nature of the new type of great power relations reveal that some Chinese scholars are still in support of the 'keeping a low profile' principle as advocated by Deng Xiaoping, and believe that the reasons for doing so remain prevalent. Therefore, the new type proposal should be embedded in China's overall foreign relations with all the major powers in the world, and characterized by win-win cooperation.

### The Significance and Conditions of and Obstacles to Building the New Relations

As China's new foreign policy initiative, the new type of great power relationship needs to display its uniqueness in the process of being constructed if it is to exert long-term influence on China's diplomacy. In other words, the real significance of this new concept lies in its goal, which would go beyond the reach of other Chinese diplomatic appeals. Also, through their different understandings of it, Chinese scholars provide three perspectives for understanding the significance of this proposed concept.

- 29 Wang Yiwei, 'Yi hehe gongsheng shixian sanchong chaoyue, Zhongguo de xinxing daguo guanxi lilun jishi' ('Achieving Triple Transcendence Through Peaceful and Harmonious Coexistence, the Cornerstone for the Chinese Theory of New Type of Great Power Relations'), *Renmin luntan (People's Forum)*, September 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0916/c40531-22938665.html>.
- 30 Su Changhe, 'Gongsheng xing guoji tixi de keneng zai yige duoji shijie zhong ruhe goujian xinxing daguo guanxi' ('The Possibility for a Symbiotic International System - How to Construct New Type of Great Power Relations in a Multi-polar World'), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 9 (2013), pp. 4–22.
- 31 Yan Xuetong, 'From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), pp. 153–84.

The first one elaborates on the meaning of building the new relationship from the perspective of a rising power. Zhang Xiaoming holds that the new type with regard to China's foreign relations is in reality a preventive diplomacy whose aim is to avoid direct confrontation with the United States.<sup>32</sup> In a similar way, Zhao Suisheng regards the new relationship as the Chinese government's rephrasing of the principle of 'peaceful coexistence'. He believes that the Chinese leadership is totally aware of the gap between China and the United States in terms of overall capabilities, and hence of the irrationality of an all-round confrontation with the United States while China is pursuing its dream of building 'an overall well-off society' and 'the great rejuvenation of the nation' in the first two decades of the 21st century, for which a prolonged span of 'strategic opportunity' is necessary.<sup>33</sup> As a common ground for the ideas above through which China seeks to make its way with a new type of US–China relations, the potential danger of conflicts due to China's growth is perceived more than ever in contemporary international politics. Slightly different from the ideas above, certain other scholars underline China's rise mainly in terms of its economic prosperity. Zhong Feiteng prefers to view China as a great economic power that differs greatly from great powers in Western history. According to his idea, China's giant economic achievement cannot be sustained without a desirable external environment, which building the new type of great power relations would ensure.<sup>34</sup>

Besides the strategic meaning of building the new relations, certain scholars add more details to make the new concept operational, such as referring to concrete mechanics for communication and cooperation. Zhang Yun sees the practical part of the new concept as making US–China relations more institutionalized and predictable. Nevertheless, according to his idea, it would be unrealistic to demand that the two powers follow one another's logic in their relations, for the conduct of both sides can be strongly justified in terms of their respective logic and rationality. Taking this into account, a feasible expectation of the new type counts on mutual respect or acknowledgement of the other's logic, mainly through the institutionalization of regular communication at different levels, which can help reduce risk and prevent crises from escalating.<sup>35</sup>

The second approach views the new type from a much broader perspective that lifts the new concept beyond the bilateral relationship between the United States and China and connotes promotion of China's diplomatic thinking, its undertaking of great power responsibilities, and maintaining the regional order. Ruan Zongze conceives of three connotations of establishing the new type that can be seen at different levels. The first lies in manifestation of the idea of a harmonious world, which is a necessary component of achieving the 'Chinese Dream'. The second is justified by the need for a new mentality through which to develop the relations between great powers in a highly interdependent world. According to Ruan's idea, taking the lead in promoting a win–win new type of great power relations shows the sense of duty inherent in Chinese leadership. The last but not the least

32 Zhang, 'An Interpretation of the New Type of Great Power Relations'.

33 Zhao, 'China and US Should Seek a New Balance of World Power'.

34 Zhong Feiteng, 'Xinxing daguo guanxi gongtong fazhan yu Zhongguo waijiao xin linian' ('The New Type of Great Power Relations, Joint Development and China's New Diplomatic Ideas'), *Guoji luntan (International Forum)*, No. 1 (2014), pp. 34–39.

35 Zhang Yun, 'ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi de mubiao' ('The Goal of China-US New Type of Great Power Relations'), 22 June, 2013, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/65037.html>.

connotation regards the new relations, or the way in which China and the United States get along, as a decisive factor in the future of the Asia-Pacific.<sup>36</sup>

The latter is reflected in a Chinese foreign policy outlook that considers the new type of great power relations as the debut of new international relations. As pictured by Chen Zhimin, the new type of great power relations is only part of China's diplomacy, the core spirit of which should be taken as a base for seeking entirely new international relations. As an emerging power, China's new international relations diplomacy should consist in a new type of relations with great powers, small powers, and non-state actors.<sup>37</sup>

Just as argued at the beginning of this part, the meaning of the new relations proposal as a diplomatic innovation lies in its indispensability to realize a unique goal. The first argument above underscores the meaning of the new relations as United States and China achieving peaceful power redistribution, which is obviously beyond the appeal of other initiatives. The second one endows the new relations with more meanings with regard to China's international responsibility as illustrated by Ruan Zongze and to the spirit of China's overall diplomacy advocated by Chen Zhimin. The question with the second arguments is that if imbuing the new relations with meanings of which they conceive, the new relations proposal would make no difference with some other diplomatic appeal like the idea of 'harmonious world', which aims to promote good relations among all the countries. Another question pertained to Chen's argument lies in whether China could use the spirit of new type of great power relations to tackle its relationship with other type of entities.

Assuming the significance of building new type relations, the next question is how to realize this concept, or how likely that is. Although the question of whether or not the new type concept refers specifically to US-China relations is intensely debated in China's academic circles, most studies on the possibility, conditions, or impediments involved in building the new type concept are conducted around US-China relations, so tacitly equating it with US-China relations.<sup>38</sup>

In probing the possibility of building new type relations, most Chinese studies base their analyses or predictions on the conditions and impediments of US-China relations. With respect to favourable conditions for building new type relations, much of the consensus that exists among Chinese scholars is characterized by the following points. The first focuses on the change of time and nature of state. Zhou Fangyin holds that the new type proposal is not just wishful thinking on the part of the Chinese government, but one well justified by norm changes in the new era and concern about real interests. In his view, a state of no war among great powers has appeared in international politics due to the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, the burgeoning of nationalism, deepening recognition of sovereign rights, and high economic interdependence. In this era, the competition for power in a peaceful way characterizes the relations between great powers.<sup>39</sup> Jin Canrong draws a similar

36 Ruan Zongze, 'ZhongMei neng jianli xinxing daguo guanxi me' ('Will China and US Manage to Build the New Type of Great Power Relations?'), 30 December, 2013, [http://www.dangjian.cn/gjgc/201312/t20131230\\_1667401.shtml](http://www.dangjian.cn/gjgc/201312/t20131230_1667401.shtml).

37 Chen, 'Shape Analysis of the New Type of Great Power Relations'.

38 When searching for 'new type of great power relations' in the CNKI Index, 178 articles from 2012 to 2014 are listed, among which 148 focus on the possibilities, conditions, and impediments for China-US new type great power relations.

39 Zhou, 'The Motivation, Approach and Prospect of China-US New Type of Great Power Relations'.

conclusion through his interpretation of the uniqueness of state nature. In his view, the United States and China are not traditional nation states but a new type of civilized state actors, who differ greatly from emerging and existing powers in history, so constituting a natural precondition for the United States and China to build the new type of relations.<sup>40</sup>

The second point lies in the necessity of US–China cooperation in the field of global governance, an integral part of the ‘pluses’ in US–China relations, according to certain Chinese scholars. Tao Wenzhao is optimistic in his figuring out of the great space for close cooperation between the United States and China in tackling such global threats as climate change, infectious disease, and terrorism. He sees US–China cooperation on these issues as a good way of averting zero-sum competition.<sup>41</sup>

The third condition depends upon the communication mechanisms at various levels between the two countries. Jin Canrong gives much weight to the role of communication in stabilizing US–China relations. He is aware that the most useful part of various dialogues lies in their ability to exert control over conflicts or crises, but that this cannot be expected to achieve their resolution. In achieving their basic goal, communication mechanisms are designed to create a good atmosphere and strengthen mutual strategic trust, based on which appropriate solutions catering to the interests of both parties can be found.<sup>42</sup>

As to the impediments in building the new type of relations, there are three kinds of issues whose resolution presents different difficulties. The first relates to the inevitability of US–China competition for power. Zhou Fangyin believes it natural that the United States should exert intense resistance to a potential power transition and take preventive measures to lower any loss of interests that the process of power transition might entail. As for the scramble between the United States and China, Zhou believes that, apart from security and economic interests, the two countries also compete for international standing, which is of a zero-sum nature.<sup>43</sup>

The second kind consists in specifically creating or increasing tensions in US–China relations, the list of which changes and expands as the United States and China make more connections in both traditional and new fields. The traditional flashpoints usually refer to the Three Ts (Taiwan, Tibet, and Trade), which are to some extent being replaced by new conflicts in maritime and cyberspace. The rebalanced strategy initiated by the United States to tackle these new disputes and the involvement of its allies in the Asia-Pacific region, however, increases tensions between the two countries. The accumulation of these traditional and newly emerged conflicts engenders an irresolvable lack of trust which may in turn block the efforts of both countries to ease their tensions.

With regard to the influence of these issues on building the new type of relations, there is great disparity among the studies of Chinese scholars. Some attribute the erosion of

40 Jin Canrong and Zhao Yuanliang, ‘Goujian ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi de tiaojian tansuo’ (‘Exploration of the Conditions for Building a China-US New Type of Great Power Relations’), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economics and Politics*), No. 3 (2014), pp. 50–68.

41 Tao Wenzhao, ‘ZhongMei yuanhe keyi goujian xinxing daguo guanxi’ (‘Why China and the US could Build the New Type of Great Power Relations’), *Zhongguo guoqing guoli* (*Chinese National Conditions and Strengths*), No. 1 (2014), pp. 64–65.

42 Jin and Zhao, ‘Exploration of the Conditions for Building a China-US New Type of Great Power Relations’.

43 Zhou, ‘The Motivation, Approach and Prospect of China-US New Type of Great Power Relations’.

US–China relations to the US’s misconduct.<sup>44</sup> Pang Zhongying illustrates his idea by citing the Snowden incident. He holds that the United States will not give up its cyberspace monitoring program because the United States would not trade its dominance in this field for cooperation on the cyber issue with other countries. It is consequently almost impossible for the United States and China to form a new type of relations in the sphere of cyber security.<sup>45</sup> Han Zhaoying regards the rebalancing strategy as an overreaction by the United States to China’s rise, and an exaggeration of the potential risk in the process of power redistribution that could bring the United States and China into an adversarial relationship.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to the above ideas, certain other scholars disagree with the totally negative view on all of these seemingly negative issues. In Yan Xuetong’s view, the lack of mutual trust is no excuse for the failure of US–China cooperation. Even without mutual trust the United States and China could still develop positive cooperation on common interests, and preventive cooperation to avoid conflicts might indeed engender more trust between the two countries.

The third impediment, as argued by some scholars from the perspective of the United States, lies in the ambiguity of the new concept, which makes it less attractive than it appears. According to Xue Litai and Zhu Huizhong’s idea, it is possible for the United States and China to break the Thucydides Trap in the nuclear era, which may be characterized by the new type of great power relations. But before that China must elaborate on the details of the concept, which is at present just a bundle of principles with no clear content or guidelines for implementation. The vagueness of the concept may mislead the United States into taking it as an expedient without serious consideration.<sup>47</sup>

### Approaches to Realizing the New Relations

No matter how the new type of great power relations is defined, it makes no sense if it cannot be implemented. Based on the discussions above, it can be said that the new type of great power relations is a strategic concept that must be addressed in tactical detail, which means the new relations should be linked with specific aims. Studies by Chinese scholars on how to realize the new relations hence attempt to figure out the right approach to achieving different aims.

Shi Yinong holds that a clear visualization of ‘strategic destination’ is necessary when selecting an approach to the new type, and that it should figure out how the United States

44 Wang Yusheng, ‘ZhongMei jianli xinxing daguo guanxi keneng ma?’ (‘Is it Possible for China and the US to Have a New Type of Great Power Relations?’), 29 December, 2012, [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2012-12/3431583.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2012-12/3431583.html).

45 Pang Zhongying, ‘Zhongmei xinxing daguo guanxi shuoyi xingxan’ (‘The China-US New Type of Great Power Relations Is Easier Said Than Done’), 3 July, 2013, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/65332.html>.

46 Han Zhaoying and Wang Shishan, ‘Meiguo de yatai zai pingheng zhanlue ji qi fumian yingxiang’ (‘U.S.Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy and its Negative Effects’), *Renmin luntan* (People’s Forum), No. 17 (2012), pp. 6–13.

47 Xue Litai and Zhu Hui Zhong, ‘Lun xinxing daguo guanxi de xianshixing ji tiaozhan’ (‘Comments on the Feasibility and the Challenges of New Type of Great Power Relations’), *Lingdao* (The Leader), June 2013, [http://www.21ccom.net/articles/qqsw/zwj/article\\_2013090491299.html](http://www.21ccom.net/articles/qqsw/zwj/article_2013090491299.html).

and China can make a change in their power distribution. According to his idea, the United States should have a more balanced or rational understanding of the change in its power and influence in different functional and geographical areas, thus aspiring to 'selective preponderance' but not 'overall dominance'. For instance, he suggests that the United States acknowledge China's advantage with regard to trade and economy, especially in Asia, and that China should be clearly aware of American military superiority to it and the US's diplomatic advantages compared to China. In short, within the framework of various financial and security institutions, the contrasting shares of power and influence between the United States and China should be commensurate with their capabilities and respective contributions.

On how redistribution of power and responsibilities can be realized, Shi holds that both the United States and China should change their diplomatic behaviour to strike a balance between give and take. The United States should make every effort to eradicate various disturbances at home and abroad, take on more responsibilities, and acquire corresponding payback in terms of power and influence. As far as China is concerned, Shi believes it necessary for the country to exert a 'strategic push' that gradually forces compromises from the United States and so eventually, over time, arrive at a 'final settlement'.<sup>48</sup>

Similar to Shi's idea, Zhou Fangyin also pictures an 'ultimate shape' of the new type of great power relations. He believes there is no easy-access for the new type, given the sophisticated relations between the United States and China concerning various conflicts of interests. Adopting a realistic view, he visualizes the new type of great power relations as a strategic stalemate featuring high stability that is immune to wishful thinking on the part of either country to change the status quo.<sup>49</sup>

Based on his vision of the prospect, Zhou puts forward specific policy recommendations. On the one hand, as US-China relations move nearer to the critical point of power transition, he believes there is more pressure on both countries to take practical measures that place the bilateral tie under control. China should take a good grasp on its policy changes to make the process of power transition stable and predictable. In the process, both the United States and China can resort to innovations of certain measures, such as intent interpretation, cognition adjustment, change of behaviour, and institutional arrangements, for purposes of reducing possible damage to their relations. On the other hand, to forge a new type of great power relations of greater stability, China needs to take a moderate but tough position that shows firmness in protecting its vital interests, especially when confronted with unreasonable conduct by the United States. This would be helpful in making the United States adopt a more practical attitude and adjust its expectations of the new type of great power relations.<sup>50</sup>

Taking a different path, Da Wei attempts to match different measures and the new type goals at different levels. He views President Xi Jinping's 'three points' summing up<sup>51</sup> as the three levels of developing the new type of great power relations. On the first level, which he

48 Shi, 'Macro Thinking on Building the New Type of Great Power Relations'.

49 Zhou, 'The Motivation, Approach and Prospect of China-US New Type of Great Power Relations'.

50 Ibid.

51 Da Wei, 'Goujian ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi de lujing xuanze' ('The Approach Selection for Building the China-US New Type of Great Power Relations'), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economics and Politics*), No. 7 (2013), pp. 59-73.



regards as the lowest, the strategic interdependence of the United States and China is a staple that consists in the four integral pillars of nuclear equilibrium, economic interdependence, common confrontation of global threats, and social and cultural connections. As to the goals, he believes that the United States and China are already on the threshold of the new type of great power relations. On the second level—mutual respect—Da Wei believes it would be extremely difficult for the United States and China to muster sufficient strategic trust to address their respective core concerns. Therefore, in promoting the new relations at the middle level, China should lower its expectations and seek to move forward gradually while striking a consensus with the United States. At the third level, in Da Wei's view this would require that the United States and China go beyond their parochial definition of national interests, and lift the aims of their cooperation to that of constructing and maintaining international institutions.

Chen Zhimin also categorizes the new type of great power relations under different levels, but more academically. He depicts three potential shapes for the new type, including the relations of benign competition, partnership, and community membership, which would coexist and evolve in sequence, according to his idea. Firstly, to achieve the initial shape of benign cooperation, he recommends that China accept four points. The first is to expand common interests while reducing the space for vicious competition. The second requires China to cooperate with the United States to produce a set of rules for benign competition. The third is to face international competition or soft balancing by other countries with a light heart. The last level requires China to clarify its strategic bottom line and so deter vicious competition. Secondly, in terms of developing partnership, he acknowledges the effectiveness of China's policy over the last two decades of constructing partnerships at different levels with great powers. Lastly, he considers the goal of sharing membership of a community as an ideal, which may not be realized in view of the reality of international politics.<sup>52</sup>

All of the above scholars focus their studies on how the United States and China should interact to realize the new type of great power relations, which depends upon whether the United States and China could achieve a peaceful power transition that keeps conflicts and crisis under control, and takes further steps towards win-win cooperation. Wang Jisi has a totally different understanding of how to achieve the new relations. In his view, the state of mutual distrust may last for quite some time. Worse still, the United States and China may not live up to sharing mutual trust in its true sense. Based on this daunting prospect, he claims that the key to building the new relations has little to do with the way in which the diplomats of both countries handle their relations.<sup>53</sup>

He notes that the United States constantly diverts its attention from certain specific concerns to others. For instance, when thorny issues such as Iraq, Libya, Al Qaeda, or the RMB exchange rate are either resolved or relieved, the United States then focuses on other issues like Iran and the DPRK's nuclear programme, cyber espionage, and maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. It is natural for a great power to have to address endless concerns as new problems appear, but Wang fears that the United States and China will lose track if they relate the new type of great power relations to various specific issues

52 Chen Zhimin, 'Shape Analysis of the New Type of Great Power Relations'.

53 Wang Jisi, 'ZhongMei huo yongyuan da budao zhenzheng de huxin' ('China and US May Never Have Real Mutual Trust'), 18 November, 2013, <http://news.takungpao.com/world/exclusive/2013-11/2046992.html>.

that are constantly changing. He asserts, therefore, that the United States and China should follow and pay more attention to their respective path towards building a prosperous, democratic, civilized, and harmonious country, and not be too distracted by external troubles. He cites Henry Kissinger's opinion that the United States and China should be engaged in a non-zero-sum relationship of co-evolution.<sup>54</sup>

### Concept Development in Chinese Official Discourse and Its Policy Implications

From the debates within Chinese academic discourse, it can be concluded that there is low consensus on the meaning of new type of great power relations, especially as regards what we can expect from them. Therefore, it is necessary to explore why Chinese scholars have diverged so greatly on how to define the concept. Although some scholars recognize the academic significance of studying the concept, and hope to make it a framework for creating Chinese IR theory, the concept is in the first place a diplomatic term, and debates on it within academic circles are largely attributable to the continual change of expression or interpretation of this term in official discourse.

Looking through the history of China's diplomacy, it is noteworthy that the new type of great power relations is not a brand new concept. In an inner speech in 2000, Jiang Zemin put forward a similar concept characterized by non-alignment, non-confrontation, and not directed against any third country.<sup>55</sup> But compared with the new type of great power relations proposed by Xi Jinping, it is clear that the new concept today imbues a different meaning of 'great power' as regards capability, for China's growth has effected a change in international power contrast which is the premise for proposing the new type of relations.

When the new type of great power relations was first proposed, it was widely acknowledged that the concept was designed specifically for the US–China relationship, but was later indeed applied on different occasions by Chinese high leaders in reference to the relations between China and other major countries, such as Russia and India. The wide use of this concept made it the most popular term in China's diplomatic discourse throughout the years 2012 and 2013. In spite of its prevalence, the new term has little practicability in directing China's foreign relations due to its absence of clear targets and goals. In this respect, the new concept is something of a setback from the partnership diplomacy, which could at least make a difference in China's foreign relations. The diplomatic practice of this concept somewhat misled Chinese academic studies as to why the concept was created and what its practice might achieve. Thus there appeared lots of discussions on building new relations with other big powers, not only with Russia and India as mentioned by high leaders, but also with other big powers like Germany and France.

However, other than Xi Jinping's clear description of the new relations, the interpretation of the concept was subjected to continuous changes in official discourse. In an article

- 54 Wang Jisi, 'ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi fendao yangbiao haishi shu tu tonggui' ('The China-U.S. New Type of Great Power Relations - Going Separate Ways or Achieving the Same Ultimate Goal by Different Routes'), *Guoji zhanlue yanjiu jianbao (International Strategic Studies Briefing)*, 16 March, 2014, <http://www.ciss.pku.edu.cn/ueditor/net/upload/file/20140813/6354349448281485577423276.pdf>.
- 55 Zhong, 'The New Type of Great Power Relations, Joint Development and China's New Diplomatic Ideas'.

in August 2013, State Councillor Yang Jiechi, in charge of China's diplomacy wrote, 'Pushing for constructing a new type of great power relationship between China and US and achieving healthy interactions and win-win cooperation with other big powers are important ideas of the Party's Central Committee led by Party Secretary Xi Jinping in operating major power relations.'<sup>56</sup> This statement makes clear that the new type of great power relations would refer solely to China-US relations. Later, in November 2013, the concept was for the first time mentioned by Susan Rice, National Security advisor, in a public speech at Georgetown University.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the use of the term seemed to diminish after receiving cold feedback from the United States.<sup>58</sup> It was suspected that China's declaration of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in November, and an ensuing risky confrontation between US and China vessels in the South China Sea in December 2013 had negative effects on the US attitude towards the new relations proposal. Certain changes then appeared on China's side concerning the new relations. At China's Central Meeting on Foreign Affairs Work at the end of 2014, a new concept entitled the 'new type of international relations' was created.<sup>59</sup> It was also noted at that meeting that in his speech Xi Jinping placed neighbouring diplomacy before great power diplomacy, saying little about the new type of great power relations and nothing about China-US relations, which was taken as a sign that China was focusing more on its neighbouring countries and reducing the weight of US-China relations in its diplomacy.<sup>60</sup>

On a visit to Russia in April 2015, foreign minister Wang Yi claimed that China and Russia had succeeded in building the new type of international relations,<sup>61</sup> implying that the new type of international relations would be used in terming China's relations with other major countries. But it was not clear then whether China would continue to stress the new type of great power relations between the United States and China when US high officials had rejected the concept.

- 56 Yang Jiechi, 'Xin Xingshi xia Zhongguo waijiao lilun he shijian chuaxin' ('The Innovation of Diplomatic Theories and Practice under New Situation'), *Qiushi zazhi* (*Seeking Truth*), No. 16 (2013), p. 9.
- 57 Susan Rice, 'American Future in Asia', 21 November, 2013, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article181088.html>.
- 58 'Briefing on Obama Trip to East Asia and Pacific Region', 7 November, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/11/20141108310720.html?CP.rss=true#axzz3K1P8jbnN>.
- 59 'Xi Jinping Chuxi zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua' ('Xi Jinping Attends the Central Meeting on Foreign Affairs Working and Delivers Important Speech'), 29 November, 2014, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_chn/zyxw\\_602251/t1215440.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1215440.shtml).
- 60 'Waimei ping Xi Jinping waishi jianghua waijiao zitai fangdi haishi fangqi taoguang yanghui' ('Comments by Medias abroad on Xi Jinping's Speech on Foreign Affairs, Lower the Diplomatic Profile or Give up the Principle of Keeping the Low Profile'), 2 December, 2014, [http://news.ifeng.com/a/20141202/42616007\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/a/20141202/42616007_0.shtml).
- 61 Wang Yi, 'ZhongE wei jianli xinxing guoji guanxi jinxing chengong shijian' ('China and Russia Succeeded in Building New Type of International Relations'), 7 April, 2015, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/04-07/7189804.shtml>.

The new type of great power relations seemed to be activated again in China's discourse before Xi Jinping's state visit to the United States, when Chinese leaders and high officials met with US officials on various occasions.<sup>62</sup> After Xi's visit to the United States, the list of results of Xi Jinping's state visit reveal that the two leaders arrived at a consensus on the new type of great power relations,<sup>63</sup> although the US side made no mention of the term in their fact sheet on Xi's visit.<sup>64</sup> Also noteworthy is that China revised the previous expression of the new type of great power relations by deleting 'no conflicts and no confrontation'.<sup>65</sup> According to the interpretation of certain Chinese scholars, the deletion of the first principle signifies that both leaders achieved a new strategic consensus whereby China and the United States would not fall into a 'Thucydides Trap'. Therefore China-US relations should be elevated to the new level of 'mutual respect and win-win cooperation'.<sup>66</sup>

The new type of great power relations has thus recently been changed in official discourse in two respects. Firstly, it has been made clear that the concept refers only to China-US relations, after being used generally in China's diplomacy for a while. Secondly, Xi Jinping's original expression of the new relations has been revised to read 'mutual respect and win-win cooperation'. Although whether it will be changed again is not certain, the academic debate about the concept has been effectively reduced as to who the main players in the new relations are. But as the expression of the new relations is revised, certain new problems may arise regarding the concept itself and China-US relations.

As to the outlook of the concept, the rephrasing of the new relations concept may reduce its feasibility, taking into account the US's scepticism in this regard. Of the three principles in the new relations that Xi Jinping advocated, only 'no conflicts and no confrontation' received straightforward US endorsement, and is regarded by certain scholars as the core of the new relations.<sup>67</sup> The deletion of this principle implies a change of emphasis. The outlook of the new relations proposal may thus depend upon the achievements with regard to the latter two principles. Unfortunately, in exploring the reasons for US reluctance to accept

- 62 'Xi Jinping huijian Meiguo zongtong guojia anquan shiwu zhuli laisi' ('Xi Jinping meets with US National Security Advisor Susan Rice'), 28 August, 2015, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1292052.shtml>; 'Wang Yi huijian Meiguo guowuqing Keli' ('Wang Yi meets with US Secretary of State Kerry'), 5 August, 2015, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1286523.shtml>.
- 63 'Xi Jinping Zhuxi dui Meiguo jinxing guoshi fangwen zhongfang chengguo qingdan' ('China's List of Results for President Xi Jinping's State Visit to US'), 26 September, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_chn/zyxw\\_602251/t1300767.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1300767.shtml).
- 64 'Fact Sheet: President Xi Jinping's State Visit to the United States,' 25 September, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/fact-sheet-president-xi-jinpings-state-visit-united-states>.
- 65 'China's List of Results for President Xi Jinping's State Visit to US'.
- 66 'Zhuanjia chanshu ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi biao shu wei he shaole liugezi' ('Expert Explains Why Six Words Are Deleted from the Expression of the New Type of Great Power Relations'), 28 September, 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/0928/c1002-27643499.html?t=1443497327912>.
- 67 Yan Xuetong, 'ZhongMei xinxing daguo guanxi de hexin shi bu duikang bu chongtu' ('The Core of the China-US New Type of Great Power Relations is "No Conflicts and No Confrontation"'), 2 September, 2015, <http://news.163.com/15/0922/07/B43NJAS200014SEH.html>.

the new relations proposal, some studies conclude that 'the key barrier for the White House is its suspicions towards Chinese intentions. Washington is not fond of Chinese designs to obtain foreign recognition of its "core interests", which the administration sees as a murky jumble of territorial demands'.<sup>68</sup> Concerned that China intends to gain US recognition of its interests through mutual respect, there would be fewer chances of the United States accepting the revised expression of the concept.

Regarding real policy, the revised concept may become disconnected from the development and real situation of China-US relations. Even though it is said that both leaders have reached the consensus that the two countries should not fall into a 'Thucydides Trap', there are nonetheless great chances that China and the United States will become involved in conflicts, especially on security issues. The United States has long expressed concern about China's claims to islands in the South China Sea, and the US military is demanding access to within the 12 nautical miles of China's artificial islands.<sup>69</sup> Whether or not the United States takes any substantial action in the near future, the dispute between China and the United States in the South China Sea will be a long-standing flashpoint for the bilateral tie, as long as China insists on its claim of sovereignty over these islands and waters. Also, on the issue of cyber security, it seems impossible for the United States and China to manage their disagreements effectively due to their different perception of cyber security and espionage. Different from the traditional troubles between China and the United States, like the Taiwan and Tibet issues, these newly emerged security problems are closely related to power redistribution and rule-making, and so pose a challenge to the dominant status of the United States. Taking all these issues into account, it would be unwise for both countries to underestimate the potential danger in their relations. Therefore, managing their disputes with great caution and keeping conflicts under control remains a vital task for the two countries.

Beside the disconnection of the concept and reality, rephrasing the concept may increase the illusion with what China continues to have unrealistic expectation from the United States, thus maintaining the pattern of high instability of China-US relations for a while. The revised new relations of 'mutual respect and win-win cooperation' may signify a continuation of the false-but-nice description of China-US relations, defined by Yan Xuetong as superficial friendship.<sup>70</sup> As argued by Yan Xuetong, the policy of pretending to be friends would make countries more disappointed and upset when confronted with the break out of shelved conflicts of interests.

It seems China strives to push China-US relations to higher level through the revision of the concept, but lowering the risk for China and the United States to get into conflict would only increase their hostility to each other were the conflicts not handled appropriately. In terms of security, China's statements are expanding the gap of perception between China and the United States. For instance, Xi Jinping said during his state visit that China does

68 Cheng Li and Lucy Xu, 'Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism Over the "New Type of Great Power Relations"', 4 December, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/12/05-chinese-pessimism-american-cynicism-great-power-li-xu>.

69 'US May Dispatch Planes and Ships near Disputed South China Sea Islands', 13 May, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/13/asia-pacific/pentagon-may-dispatch-planes-ships-near-disputed-south-china-sea-islands/#.Vhz3PrE7PnB>.

70 Yan Xuetong, 'The Instability of China-U.S. Relations', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2010), pp. 263-92.

not intend to pursue militarization of Nansha Islands in South China Sea.<sup>71</sup> This statement may be somewhat misperceived by the United States that China would bring a halt to its military deployment on the islands of South China Sea, which is not the real case.<sup>72</sup> In the same way, in the respect of economy, both China and the United States attempt to convince each other that they intend not to isolate the other side in forging new regional economic and trade institutions. But as a matter of fact, both China and the United States aim to acquire more economic clout through building their respective institutions and rewriting the rules for regional economic development.<sup>73</sup> The superficial friendship and real competition may gradually bring tougher policy by both countries towards the other side, implying a de facto decline of the relations. In that case, the revised new relations proposal would only be used to hide the competitive nature of China–US relations.

## Conclusion

This article reviews the debates among Chinese scholars about the concept of a new type of great power relations. There exist many disparities within Chinese academic circles on the subjects and features of the new relations. The debates are concentrated on two points. The first is how to define a ‘great power’. Does it refer to major countries in general, or countries facing a power transition? The second is that of what the new relations feature. Is it a relationship of strategic competition, or cooperation? The academic debates could be largely attributed to the vagueness of the diplomatic practice with regard to this concept, which has been subjected to continuous and ambiguous changes. As the official use of the concept has been narrowed to refer solely to US–China relations, it could be predicted that the debate among Chinese scholars on who the great powers are will come to an end, but the debate on how to characterize the new relations will continue in its way as no clear direction of US–China relations exists.

With the expression of the new relations revised after Xi’s visit to the United States, there is still no consensus within Chinese discourse on the nature of US–China relations, which implies that the revised version of the new relations may become disconnected from the real situation and academic study. As to the nature of US–China relations, some scholars still prefer to view it from the perspective of power transition that may get out of control unless the United States and China address the various conflicts or flashpoints in their relations with sufficient caution. But on how to achieve mutual respect and win–win cooperation, there exist no consensus or even no feasible suggestions.

Although China and the US leaders may have achieved a consensus that they would not get into overall confrontation like those happened between emerging and established powers in history, the revised new type of great power relations still offers no effective guidance for China–US relations. Just as debated by some Chinese scholars above, mutual respect may not be accessible in the foreseeable future due to the lack of mutual trust. In addition, the new type of relations that features only the latter two principles would

71 ‘China Not to Pursue Militarization of Nansha Islands in South China Sea: Xi’, September 26, 2015, <http://english.cntv.cn/2015/09/26/ART11443227316849618.shtml>.

72 Foreign ministry Spokesman Hu Chunying hosts the press conference, October 14, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt\\_673021/t1305835.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1305835.shtml).

73 ‘U.S. Should Write Laws of Global Economy, Not China’, April 17, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/business/250497-obama-economy-china-trade/>.

make it a Chinese version of G2, which was formerly rejected by China, or more precisely C2, which was used by Chinese high officials as an alternative of G2.<sup>74</sup> Thus the uniqueness of the new relations proposal may disappear, or as analysed by some scholars, the new relations proposal is a way of justifying China's domestic need to be recognized by the United States as a great power.<sup>75</sup>

Based on the existing academic studies and official interpretation of the new relations concept, it is unclear how Chinese leaders would perceive the direction of China-US relations. If China were to insist on its 'striving for achievement' policy initiated by Xi Jinping, the two countries would inevitably be confronted with more competition. The revised version of the new relations would thus be more symbolic than practical for China-US relations. But that does not mean that China and the United States cannot achieve the new relations in its true sense, which may require reflection and compromises on both sides.

74 Dai Bingguo, 'ZhongMei bugao G2, dan keyi gao C2' ('China and U.S. Should Make a C2 Instead of G2'), May 4, 2012, <http://china.huanqiu.com/politics/2012-05/2686598.html>.

75 Cheng Li and Lucy Xu, 'Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism Over the "New Type of Great Power Relations"'.