

Let's Not Be Friends

BY YAN XUETONG JUNE 6, 2013

On June 7 and 8, President Barack Obama will meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping to "discuss ways to enhance cooperation" between the two countries. With Sino-U.S. relations in a state of deterioration ever since the December 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, the meeting couldn't come at a more important time.

Both Beijing and Washington seem to believe that a lack of trust is the reason for this unfortunate state of affairs. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama argued, "we still have to do serious work if we are to create the level of mutual trust necessary for long-term cooperation." Chinese President Hu Jintao reiterated that sentiment during a meeting with Obama in June, speaking of the need for "mutual trust" to bring the two countries closer together.

Fortunately, the task of getting the Sino-U.S. relationship back on track may not be so daunting. There are thousands of examples of strategic cooperation without mutual trust between major powers throughout human history. Britain established strategic cooperation with the Soviet Union in World War II based on their common interest in fighting against Nazi Germany -- even though Winston Churchill detested Joseph Stalin. China and the United States developed it in 1972, even though Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon did not trust each other. Faced with several decades of military confrontation, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan agreed to reduce their nuclear arsenals in 1988, which heralded the end of the Cold War. And Jiang Zemin and George W. Bush cooperated on a counter-terrorism campaign just a few months after the collision of Chinese and U.S. military aircraft over the South China Sea in April 2001. Indeed, cooperation is the norm rather than the exception.

China and the United States have lacked mutual trust since June 4, 1989, and the relationship has been characterized ever since by ebbs and flows of cooperation and deterioration. Political scientist David Lampton coined the term "same bed, different dreams" to capture the idea that both powers are closely entangled, but have very different aspirations.

States cooperate not because of mutual trust, but because of shared interests that make cooperation safe and productive. China and the United States should look hard to identify what these incentives and shared interests are -- and focus on developing positive cooperation when their interests overlap or complement one another, such as on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and preventive cooperation when their interests conflict, such as on preventing collisions in South China Sea.

Sino-U.S. military cooperation should be expanded. China and the United States should work together for international norms guiding cyber security, non-militarization of space, maritime security, and especially China's Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan, the United States' most important alley in East Asia. Military collaboration on humanitarian assistance operations, search and rescue missions, and other non-traditional types of security cooperation can also help build military-to-military relationships at all levels. This type of cooperation will help to prevent conflicts that might have resulted from miscommunications, and form the building blocks of mutual trust.

Preventive cooperation differs from positive cooperation because it is based on conflicting --

rather than shared -- interests. In the late 1990s, for instance, Beijing and Washington agreed to stop targeting nuclear weapons at each other, which helped to stabilize bilateral relations. Areas of friction are likely to become more common in the coming years, but the two countries can skillfully manage their competition if they work to minimize these emerging conflicts -- not only in the military sector but also in nontraditional security sectors such as energy, finance, counterterrorism in the Middle East, anti-piracy in Somali Sea, and even climate change.

Encouraging China and the United States to prioritize preventive cooperation does not mean they should abandon efforts to build mutual trust. However, it does mean the two countries can stabilize their strategic relations without it. The worst-case scenario is not that China and the United States will face more strategic conflicts in the coming years, but that they never learn how to develop cooperation based on lack of mutual trust, thus allowing a small conflict to escalate into a major one.

In order to keep unavoidable conflicts manageable, China and the United States should adopt the principle of "peaceful competition" for their strategic relationship. This idea harkens back to the 1950s, when Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev relaxed the strategic tension between the Soviet Union and the United States -- even as mistrust between the two superpowers was as strong as ever. We should learn from their positive experience of handling strategic competition between the United States and the Soviets during the Cold War, to prevent China-U.S. relations from slipping into a new cold war. Beijing appears receptive: When U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited China in October 2011, Xi suggested to him that their two countries should develop a new type of major power relations, comprised of "healthy competition."

Washington has not objected to this idea, to the best of my knowledge, and there are good reasons for U.S. officials to embrace it. China and the United States should be able to agree to healthy competition, or at least to peaceful competition.

Here's what this would mean in practice: Each side would clearly define the other as a political competitor, and, crucially, clarify their competitiveness as that between a rising superpower and one with superpower status. The United States aims to maintain its global dominance, and China to resume its historical leading position. This structural conflict makes political competition between them inevitable.

Mutual trust is a result rather than precondition of strategic cooperation between major powers. Because they are not allies, neither the United States nor China can expect the other side to always respond favorably to its interests. Each should learn how to calmly respond to the other's unfavorable policies. An unfriendly, but stable relationship would be healthier for both parties than a disingenuous "friendship" that is volatile below the surface.