U.S. AND CHINA IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY: COOPERATION, COMPETITION OR CONFRONTATION?

Recommended Citation

The controversy surrounding the term “constructive strategic partnership” largely comes from a misunderstanding of the concept. This is because, in post-Cold War international relations, “strategic” is a term used to describe the relationship that is not only important for the countries in question, but also critical to the world. Therefore, a strategic relationship is different from other types of relationships.

In the post-Cold War period and in the 21st century, a Sino-US strategic partnership actually means a kind of strategic cooperative relationship, or simply a cooperative relationship between China and the United States. Here, “strategic” no longer has the connotations of “war,” “military,” “threat,” and “defense” in the traditional sense. It refers to comprehensiveness, an overall nature, a long-term nature, a fundamental nature. “Partner” no longer means “cooperation” and “consultation,” it refers to mutual understanding and common interests.

Therefore, a “strategic partnership” actually means an overall, all-dimensional, and long-term cooperative relationship to be built by China and the United States for the common good of both countries and the world.

As for the term “constructive” that precedes it, it means that the overall cooperative relationship to be built by the two countries in the post-Cold War period (unlike the relationship in the Cold War period) is not only important for the two countries and for the world, but it is also good for both countries.

The core of “Sino-American strategic partnership” is cooperation, and it means a new type of relationship between great powers to be built by the two countries on the international, regional, and bilateral levels in the post-Cold War period. The significance of “constructive” is that it changes the hostile practice which threatens Chinese security interests. China views the U.S. as the world’s hegemon, and the U.S. regards China as a challenger and a potential threat, if not a rival. David Shambaugh said: “There is nothing strategic between China and the United States that would stick them together, and there is no consensus concerning no conflicting areas of fundamental national interests.”

It is true that cooperation is neither a negative nor a frightening situation. We cannot deny some kind of competition in international relations. However, the term to generalize and define Sino-US relations to亚太牵涉 is not necessarily describing the real situation and the direction of the relationship in the 21st century. China and the U.S. also differ greatly in military technology. In fact, the gap in military strength between the two countries has been widening - not narrowing - in the past decade of the post-Cold War era.

The real meaning behind “strategic partnership” is cooperation. Therefore, the United States and China can still build a cooperative relationship in the new century without being a “strategic partner” if they use their wisdom, strength, and determination, and if they accord mutually acceptable and friendly cooperation with each other.

Likewise, China has not struggled with the U.S. for the past 20 years. China is used to a position of strength and influence, while the U.S. is used to a position of weakness and influence. However, the U.S. has not confronted China, not because it is too weak to confront China, but because it is too strong not to confront China.

When the world entered the 21st century, the nature and the future of Sino-US relations once again became questionable. The limited consensus of the two governments on building a constructive strategic partnership was broken by the new Bush Administration. Ten years after the end of the Cold War, the nature of Sino-US relations is still uncertain and unclear. Although many people define them as a strategic partnership, misunderstandings and misinterpretations have occurred between the two countries.

The basic reason is that the development of technology and production capabilities has led to an excessively high price in war and confrontation between major powers. In the new century, any country that fails to understand the basic goal of pursuing and realizing its national interest will remain intact. However, the way to realize national interest will have a fundamental difference. It is too costly for great powers to use war and confrontation to realize their national interests, because the simple fact and the logic that lost will be bigger than the gain. We can only imagine the price of trade and economic, technological, information or personal exchanges between major countries in an interdependent, globalized and interconnected world. Alliance-making which always involves cost, and relations in an alliance must strengthen cooperation. Further, cooperation between countries does not need to be used as a matter of conflict.

In summary, based on the past 20 years, and the future, the Sino-US relations in the 21st century need new thinking and a new model. We do not know what it is exactly, but we know and we have known that going into “competition” or confrontation is not a good strategic choice for China, America and the world. Partnership may not be easy to build or even to imagine, but a more cooperative relationship is certainly desirable and achievable. If both countries want to go toward that direction.

[2] Ibid.