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

Recommended Citation

II. PARTNERSHIP AND COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP

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 that means having a broad sense of influence in the world. Therefore, the term is far too wide. In the post-Cold War period and in the 21st century, a Sino-American 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 level of cooperative relationship, including the deepening of people-to-people cooperation and the acceleration of economic cooperation and the opening of some common interests and common goals.

The Sino-American 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 relative relationship to be built by the two countries in the 21st century) is friends or allies on one side or another, and not necessarily in competition or conflict.

The core of “Sino-American strategic partnership” is cooperation, and it means a new type of relation between great powers to be built by the two countries on the international, regional, and bilateral levels in the post-Cold War period and the 21st century. The significance of “building toward a constructive strategic partnership” is that it sends the clear signal to the two countries and the world that the two countries are friends, are not enemies, and do not compete with each other but cooperate with each other in terms of policies and practices towards each other and that the two countries are not enemies with each other.

If there is a term of “strategic partnership” between the U.S. and China, but it is wrong and dangerous for them to deny the huge cooperative areas between the two countries in the post-Cold War and in the 21st century.

II. “STRATEGIC COMPETITION" OR "PARTNERSHIP AND COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP"

When denying the possibility that the China and the U.S. can build a constructive cooperative strategic relationship, American politicians such as George W. Bush and Colin Powell, as well as some American scholars, thus give their definitions of Sino-China relations as being in either "competition" or "strategic competition." They say China is not an American partner but a competitor. Some Chinese scholars also regard Sino-U.S. relations as a sort of competition.

Such a view is completely wrong because it is neither describing the current reality between China and the U.S. nor correctly predicting the trend of global development and the future between China and the U.S. China and the U.S. cannot and should not develop such relationships in the foreseeable future.

First, the two countries are not an economic competition. The U.S. is the world’s largest developed country, and China is the world’s largest developing country. Although China’s economy is growing faster than the U.S., China’s economic reality is still very far from the U.S. in terms of economic output, which has been more than $15 trillion in 2018, whereas China’s GDP was about $10 trillion.

Second, in terms of military strength, the two countries differ greatly. National defense expenditure is an example. At present, the annual military expenditure of the U.S. is approximately US$600 billion, and about 60% of it constitutes the defense cost of the American military. Even if we take the most exaggerated figure provided by some western sources, which said China’s military expenditure is about US$300 billion, China’s defense spending is still six times of the United States. How can a country compete with another military when the latter is spending six times to ten times more on defense? 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, and is likely to escalate into the 21st century.

Third, in geopolitical competition, China does not have, and does not plan to have, a subjective will and a strategy to compete with the United States. The fundamental difference between Sino-American relations in the post-Cold War era and Sino-American relations during the Cold War is that China and the U.S. are not competing for anything geopolitical. China has not and will not contend with the U.S. for the world. Unlike the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the past, China has not tried to scramble for territory in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa or Latin America. The relations between China and the countries in those regions are bilateral in nature, and China’s goal in developing ties with them is to serve China’s modernization drive and reunification, and to promote friendly relations in the post-Cold War era.

Likewise, China has not struggled with the U.S. for Asia, which is of vital interest. China is opposed to US military presence in Asia, strengthening of US-Japan security alliance, and the strengthening of Japan’s military capability. China has not and will not contend with the U.S. for the world. Unlike the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the past, China has not tried to scramble for territory in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa or Latin America. The relations between China and the countries in those regions are bilateral in nature, and China’s goal in developing ties with them is to serve China’s modernization drive and reunification, and to promote friendly relations in the post-Cold War era.

Fourth, China and the U.S. differ in ideology. However, this does not mean that they have different ideas or different concepts. In this regard, we believe that there is no competition or advantage, because the United States and China are not competing for anything. If there is a thing that China and the U.S. are competing for, it is based on the principle that the United States and China are not competing for anything, but rather competing for the development of the world.

The basic reason is that the development of technology and production capability has led to an excessively high price in war and confrontation between major powers. In the new century, any collision between major powers will result in a global catastrophe. Therefore, the United States and China will meet the challenges from the international arena, promote world peace and development, and work together to build a constructive strategic partnership.

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The core of “Sino-American strategic partnership” is cooperation, and it means a new type of relation between great powers to be built by the two countries on the international, regional, and bilateral levels in the post-Cold War period and the 21st century. The significance of “building toward a constructive strategic partnership” is that it sends the clear signal to the two countries and the world that the two countries are friends, are not enemies, and do not compete with each other but cooperate with each other in terms of policies and practices towards each other and that the two countries are not enemies with each other.

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