Chapter 7

An Exploration of Conditions for Building a New Type of Major Power Relationship between China and the United States

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Abstract

The development of Sino-US relations is a process of dynamic evolution. China and the United States have time and again adjusted their political positioning for each other. A new type of major power relationship between China and the United States is the latest round of political positioning, aiming to provide an answer for the historical problem of great-power conflicts and to prevent the two countries from falling into the “Thucydides Trap.” With the growth of China’s strength, new issues arise in the Sino-US relationship as the two countries compete with each other over eight aspects: regional leadership; Chinese military modernization; aerospace, electronics and cyberspace; industrial upgrades; maritime strategy; political diversification; development models; and strategic trust. But there are also favorable conditions that China and the United States can use to build a new type of major power relationship. In subjective status, the two countries are both supersized civilizational states, a fact that distinguishes the nature of their relationship from that of the relationship between an emerging power and an established superpower. In objective conditions, historical, technological, and epochal conditions all help maintain the stability of Sino-US relations. In the specialty of their bilateral relationship, the close ties between the two countries have a basis for co-evolution. The authors believe that it is possible to successfully build a new type of major-power relationship between China and the United States if the two countries make full use of these favorable conditions and choose the right path.

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1 The Dynamic Evolution of Sino-US Strategic Positioning

According to the laws of the development of history, the change of relative strength among great powers will definitely affect their relations. So goes the development of Sino-US relations. China’s strength has been significantly enhanced by more than three decades of peaceful development since it adopted reform and opening-up policies, giving rise to new changes in relative strength between China and the United States. The political positioning of the Sino-US relationship has also been constantly adjusted to incorporate dynamic evolution.

Between 1972 and 1997, China and the United States, two nuclear powers, went through a process of contact and adjustment, including periods of ice-breaking, establishment of the Sino-US diplomatic relationship, a short honeymoon, and further development with twists and turns. Though China and the United States had not formed a political structure and positioning for each other, they had initially developed a guideline for the bilateral relationship. For instance, former leader Deng Xiaoping insisted that the bilateral relationship should be dealt with from a long-term strategic perspective and concluded that Sino-US relations would eventually become good. In 1993, China’s then-President Jiang Zemin proposed a guideline for dealing with the United States that would “increase trust, reduce trouble, develop cooperation, and avoid confrontation.” These thoughts provided not only a guideline for China’s US policy but also a strategic view for future positioning of Sino-US relations, laying a foundation for dynamic adjustment of the bilateral relationship.

The positioning of Sino-US relations was first clarified in the China-US Joint Statement in 1997. China defined the bilateral relationship as building toward “a 21st century-oriented constructive strategic partnership. When then-US President George W. Bush visited China in November 2005, China positioned the bilateral relationship for the second time as the constructive and cooperative China-US relationship in the 21st century and established the mechanism of the China-US strategic economic dialogue. When then-Chinese President Hu Jintao first met US President Barack Obama at the G20 summit in London in April 2009, China proposed to endeavor to build a positive, cooperative, and