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Discussion Paper

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“New Type of Major Power Relations”**

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## China-Europe relations and the European perspectives on the “New Type of Major Power Relations”

*Gudrun Wacker*

The year 2013 is the tenth anniversary since the European Union and China have declared their relationship to be a “strategic partnership”. Much has happened during this decade in China and in the EU as well as globally. These changes have also transformed the relationship between the EU and China. Put very simply, the major difference between today and ten years ago is that the EU appears weaker and China stronger: The EU has yet to overcome the sovereign debt crisis and has been facing an identity crisis caused by more openly diverging visions within the EU – not least between the “big three” - of what the European Union should be or should become. China, despite facing many serious challenges at the domestic and foreign policy front, has successfully driven forward its economic development and modernization process, including in military terms. China has become a member of the G20 and has been playing a more active role in BRICS. However, what has not changed since 2004 is that the EU has been continuously the biggest trading partner of China, and China has been the second biggest trading partner of the EU. So the economic basis of the partnership has proved to be quite resilient, despite the global financial crisis.

During the year 2012, China’s political leaders, including the incoming new leadership, have propagated the concept of a “new type of major (or great) power relationship” (新型大国关系, *xinxing daguo guanxi*). While this concept is clearly and primarily addressed to the United States and focuses on the difficult relationship between the established and the rising power, it has been suggested that relations between the European Union and China could also fall under this category. However, if one searches for “new type of major power relationship” on the Internet, the results are almost exclusively on Sino-U.S. relations. The EU does not figure, and there has been almost no response – official or unofficial – to the concept from the European side. European officials and academics seem to be more inclined to pick up on the “China dream”.

The following short paper will address the concept of the new type of major power relationship, US-China relations and implications for other countries. It comes to the conclusion that the main reasons why the EU and Europeans have not taken up the new concept is first, the lack of clarity which countries *other than the US* are actually seen by China as falling under the category of “major powers” and second, the implications of the concept for China’s partners.

### *New type of major power relations*

The concept of the “new type of major power relations” had been first suggested during Xi Jinping’s trip to the U.S. in February 2012. During his visit to Washington Xi identified four areas to build a new type of major power relationship with the U.S.: 1. Increasing mutual understanding and strategic trust; 2. respecting each side’s “core interests and major concerns”, 3. deepening mutually beneficial cooperation, and 4. enhancing cooperation and coordination in international affairs and on global issues. The topic was raised again by then President Hu Jintao and then State Councilor Dai Bingguo at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing in May 2012.<sup>1</sup> It also played a major role in the forefield of the informal meeting between President Xi Jinping and President Barack Obama in Sunnydale in June 2013.

The main idea behind the “new type of major power relationship” is that conflict between the established power (U.S.) and the emerging or rising power (China) is not inevitable – in other words, that China can avoid the fate of Germany or Japan, whose rise had come at the cost of two devastating wars.<sup>2</sup> Former President of SIIS Yang Jiemian has called this the “new thought” dimension of the concept.<sup>3</sup> For the US, it is natural to see itself as a (if not *the*) “major power”. It is far less clear, however, which other countries (or groupings of countries) qualify as major or great powers from their own and from the Chinese perspective.

Without a doubt, China and the US are at the center of the new type of great power relationship and consequently, most of the Chinese publications on the subject refer to Sino-US relations.

In a co-authored article published in July 2012, Cui Tiankai (at present China’s ambassador to the US) and Pang Hanzhao listed the following obstacles for developing a new type of major power relationship between China and the US: 1. lack of strategic mutual trust, 2. the bottleneck of core national interests (foremost among them: the Taiwan issue), 3. implementation of the principle of treating each other as equals, 4. restructuring the trade mix, and 5. ensuring healthy interactions in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>4</sup> The article by Cui and Pang also lists a series of things the US has to change in order to make the new type of relationship work, like the US has to respect China’s core interests, should stop arms transfers to Taiwan, should give

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael S. Chase: „China’s Search for a ‚New Type of Great Power Relationship‘“, *China Brief* 12 (Sept. 7, 2012) 17.

<sup>2</sup> See interview with Qu Xing: „Zhongguo xuyao zenyang de ‚xinxing daguo guanxi‘“, *Xinjingbao*, June 15, 2013. Qu Xing argues that the new type of great power relationship is *mainly* about US-China relations.

<sup>3</sup> Yang Jiemian: „China’s Vision of New Type of Major Power Relations with US“, *China & US Focus*, April 9, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Cui Tiankai and Pang Hanzhao: „China-US Relations in China’s Overall Diplomacy in the New Era. On China and US Working Together to Build a New Type Relationship Between Major Powers“, July 20, 2012, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceke7eng/zgyw/t953682.htm>.

up the idea of a “peaceful evolution” etc.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, China’s policy vis-à-vis the US does not seem to require any changes, since Beijing has, as the authors point out, never interfered with or undermined US core interests.

High-ranking U.S. politicians as well as academics have picked up the phrase of a new type of relationship. At the political level, it was received positively, but at the same time it was given an interpretation fitting with US interests.<sup>6</sup> Academic reactions in the U.S. to the concept have been more mixed. While some trace its origins<sup>7</sup> or see it – similar to politicians – as a chance to find common ground for Sino-US relations,<sup>8</sup> others perceive it as just another packaging for the old “five principles of peaceful co-existence”<sup>9</sup> or even of a very traditional notion of great powers and spheres of influence.<sup>10</sup> Overall, there has been a broad response on the US side to the concept.

The main criticism of the concept in US publications is that China seems to expect the US to change its policy in order to conform to the new type of relationship envisaged by China’s leaders while Beijing has not given any signals of adjusting its own policy.<sup>11</sup>

When Xi Jinping made his first trip abroad as President of the PRC, which led him to Russia, he declared the Sino-Russian relationship a model (*dianfan*) for the “new type of major power relationship”:

“The China-Russia relationship is one of the most important in the world and also *the best one between major powers* [emphasis added]. A high-level and strong China-Russia relationship is not only in the interests of both countries, but also serves as an important guarantee of international strategic balance and world peace and stability.”<sup>12</sup>

If we assume that the U.S. and Russia qualify as major powers from the Chinese perspective, which states might also fit into the category? What about the

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<sup>5</sup> See the article of Cui Tiankai and Pang Hanzhao.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Donilon, then White House security advisor, stated during his visit to China in May 2013 that the new type of great power relationship focuses on military-to-military relations, economic relations and cyber-security.

<sup>7</sup> Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley: “US-China relations: Creating a New Type of Major Power Relations”, *Comparative Connections*, Sept. 2012.

<sup>8</sup> David Lampton: “A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties”, *Asia Policy*, 16 (July 2013), pp.1-18.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Mattis: „Nothing New About China’s New Concept”, *The National Interest*, June 7, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Brad Glosserman: „A ‚new type of great power relations‘? Hardly”, *PacNet*, No. 40, June 10, 2013. The conclusion that the new type of major power relationships is really about spheres of influence or a new Monroe doctrine came up in the U.S. when Xi Jinping mentioned to the US president that the Pacific Ocean was large enough for China and the U.S.

<sup>11</sup> Glosserman, Mattis, Glaser.

<sup>12</sup> “Xi Jinping Calls for the Building of New Type of International Relations with Win-Win Cooperation at the Core in a Speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations”, March 28, 2013, <http://no.china-embassy.org/eng/zyxw/t1026032.htm>.

rest of the emerging countries, namely, the rest of the BRICS? Does Japan (still) count as a major power and if yes, what would this mean for Sino-Japanese relations? But most importantly, what are the implications of the new concept for the non-major powers, in other words, the many small countries? In a way, the concept of the new type of major power relationship seems to be in conflict with China's traditional idea of the democratization of the international order, where all countries are equal and it does not matter whether a country is big or small, powerful or weak.

In an article in *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, Yang Jiemian argued that China sees US-China relations as the origin of the new type of major power relations, but that the concept is broader and can also be applied to other traditional powers like Europe and Japan as well as to emerging powers like the BRICS. He points out that a series of topics had been brought up in this context, namely the relations between China-Russia as the model, China-US relations as the focal point, China-BRICS as the growth point, China-EU as the effort point and China-Japan as the hard point.<sup>13</sup> Yang also states that different countries had offered different interpretations in reaction to China's new concept.

Qu Xing, President of CIIS, has provided a different answer to the question with which other countries China has to strive for a new type of great power relationship. He argues that the BRICS are not established powers, so China's relationship with them does not fall under the category of the "new type of great power relationship". On the EU, he stated:

Europe is also an established great power and has [its] position in the international system. But between China and Europe, Europe does not perceive the development of China as a threat, only as competition, and moreover mainly as a competition in the market economy.<sup>14</sup>

He concludes, that since the "new type of major power relations" is based on the wish to solve the "evil curse of history" (*lishi de mozhou*), namely the one that creates the inevitability of conflict between the late-coming power and the established power, the core of this new type of relationship are China-US relations. Qu avoids addressing the question whether Russia and Japan are great powers for China, but he sees the relationship between Russia and the US similar to China-US relations.

As can be concluded from the different positions of Yang Jiemian and Qu Xing, the debate on the new type of great power relationship has only just started and the concept is still developing.

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<sup>13</sup> Yang Jiemian: „Xinxing daguo guanxi: Lilun, zhanlüe he zhengce jiangou“, *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, May 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Qu Xing: „Zhongguo xuyao zenyang de ‚xinxing daguo guanxi‘“, *Xinjing bao wang*, June 15, 2013 (Interview with Qu Xing).

### *Implications for the EU*

On the European side, there has not been much reaction yet to the new concept. According to Yang Jiemian's above-cited article, the European Union and the major powers in Europe had some concerns concerning the new type of major power relations, which they basically understood as a variation of "peaceful coexistence". Therefore, the EU did not want the concept mentioned in the joint press statement of the 15<sup>th</sup> EU-China summit in 2012.

The fact that there has been no debate in Europe on the new type of major power relations might partly be due to the fact that the present discourse in the EU is not one on major or great power. Not only is the EU still struggling with the sovereign debt crisis, but it is also facing a broader identity crisis.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the EU as such is not a power in the traditional or classical sense. Much has been written about its unique character as a supra-national entity which has authority over certain areas, while in other areas, sovereignty remains with the member states. Some of the member states might still believe to be great or major powers, foremost France and the UK due to their permanent seats in the United Nations Security Council. But it is also clear that not even one of the EU-3 can bring enough strategic weight on the table to tackle any of the pressing international issues by itself.

With respect to China, where European policy has never been a model of coherence and coordination to begin with, we might say that the position of the European institutions has been weakened over the last two years. Due to the Euro crisis, member states have drifted further apart. Instead of initiating a stronger EU China policy with the support of others Germany, for example, is now widely believed to have an (almost) "special relationship" with China. Of course, nothing is wrong with a strong trade and investment relationship between Germany and China. But in the anti-dumping case against Chinese producers of solar panels, the German government has undermined the EU Commission in the one field where it was strongest in the past, namely trade policy. It is definitely not desirable that such trends become more common in the future.

All these present problems notwithstanding, the EU and its member states have been striving for "effective multilateralism" and they have a strong preference for a rules-based order, including at the international level. Considering this preference, the EU's reluctance to embrace the idea of such a new type of major power relationship is understandable, since some Chinese statements on the new concept have prompted the idea of a "concert of powers", spheres of influence and the like. However, an in-depth analysis of the Chinese concept of the "new type of major power relationship" has yet to take place in Europe.

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<sup>15</sup> The debate in the UK about leaving the European Union is one of the grave symptoms of this fundamental crisis. See Chris Hughes' paper.