

Chinese Perception of the US – Exploring China’s Foreign Policy Motivations¹

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This paper tries to explore China’s foreign policy motivations vis-à-vis the United States in the 1990s and in the current period. This research indicates that in terms of national interest, China’s dominant inclinations toward the US in the 1990s were appeasement and cooperation. The findings regarding the perceptions of American economy and politics indicate that when national interest was not directly involved, for the Chinese the great differences between the US and Chinese economic and political systems would not necessarily lead to conflict between the two countries and would rather provide a basis for cooperation. In the 1990s, the dominant images of the US in China were as follows: a partner, a role model, an imperialist power. All these images support the proposition that China was a status quo power. This paper tries to explore China’s motivation toward the United States in the current period via case studies and literature survey. The two cases studied are the South China Sea disputes and the Chinese proposal of forging a ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’ between the US and China. These two cases suggest that currently the United States is perceived in China mainly as a partner and an imperialist power. The behavioural implications of these two images are that promoting cooperation and avoiding confrontation remain China’s foreign policy motivation regarding the United States. This conclusion is supported by a survey of relevant documents and academic literature.

Keywords: US–China relations, foreign policy motivation, perception, image

Chinese Perceptions of the United States in the 1990s

Since the early 1990s, heated debates have been going on regarding the implications of the rise of China for the future global order. However, one understudied aspect is China’s foreign policy motivations. To consider whether there is a Chinese threat to the United States, it is necessary to address two fundamental questions: whether

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China has the capabilities to challenge the US and whether China has the motivations to do so. This paper will analyse China's foreign policy motivations vis-à-vis the US systematically, and it will look at the following aspects:

- Chinese perceptions of American power,
- Chinese perceptions of threat and opportunity from the United States,
- Chinese perceptions of American economy, and
- Chinese perceptions of American politics.

I. Chinese perceptions of American power

Chinese scholars generally accepted that throughout the 1990s the United States was undisputedly an unrivalled power and that no country in the near future would be in a position to challenge the US's status as the sole superpower or catch up with the US in any major power dimension.

In the 1990s, Chinese scholars generally perceived the US as an economic behemoth, the most advanced capitalist country. The US's GDP accounted for 25–30 per cent of the world's total. In the beginning of the 1990s, one influential opinion was that the US was the sole superpower but one in relative decline, with the European Community and Japan emerging as strong competitors. As the decade drew on, the United States' status as an economic giant loomed larger and larger. Towards the late 1990s, compared with other Western countries, the US economy was considered the only flower in the garden that was blooming.²

Militarily, the United States was considered unquestionably the dominant power in both conventional and nuclear capabilities. The US military expenditure was about three times that of Russia and more than 10 times that of China. It was so strong that it was capable of intervening frequently in other countries' internal affairs. The end of the Cold War in the US's favour and the breath-taking victory in Operation Desert Storm symbolised the emergence of the US as the sole superpower. The United States and Russia jointly possessed over 95 per cent of all the nuclear weapons in the world. At the end of the Cold War, the US and Russia were roughly on a par in terms of nuclear weapons. After the end of the Cold War, the US was perceived as enjoying superiority over Russia, but long after the end of the Cold War Russia was still regarded as the only country capable of militarily balancing the US.³

² Wu Tianbo, '美欧日经济力量对比及其变化趋势' [A Comparison of the Economic Capabilities of the US, Europe, and Japan and the Future Trend], 国际问题研究 (Winter 1992), p. 13; Zhang Xiaotang, '评美国衰落论的四大经济支柱' [On the Four Economic Pillars of American Decline Thesis], 世界经济与政治 (January 1997), p. 71; Gu Wenyan, '美国经济在西方何以一枝独秀?' [Why Is US Economy the Only Flower in the Western Garden That Is Blooming?], 现代国际关系 (June 1998), p. 7.

³ Wang Jisi, '高处不胜寒' [It is Cold at the Top], 美国研究 (Autumn 1997), p. 32; Wu Zhan, '美国当前的核武器政策与核裁军' [The US's Current Nuclear Weapons Policy and Nuclear Disarmament], 美国研究 (Summer 1998), pp. 9–16, 24, 26–27; Zhang Yeliang, '试论美国的防扩散战略' [A Tentative Analysis of the US Anti-Proliferation Strategy], 美国研究 (Winter 1996), p. 89.

The United States was the country with the greatest capabilities in science and technology. It occupied the leading position in most key technology areas. The US’s expenditure on scientific research was more than the combined total of that of Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom. The number of its science and technology personnel exceeded the combined total of those of Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. Its R&D personnel’s per capita research expenditure was the highest among developed countries. China’s overall level of technology was around 20 years behind the West. Its R&D expenditure in 1996 was about 1/43 of that of the US in 1995. Its per capita expenditure on R&D personnel in 1996 was 120,000 yuan, around 1/123 of the US average in 1995. The number of patents in the US in 1990 was around ten times the number of patents in China in 1996.⁴

The end of the Cold War was perceived as testifying to the superiority of the United States’ soft power. Procedural democracy, freedom of speech, human rights, market economy, and international institutions and regimes that the US helped establish all contributed to the its significant soft power. But the robust economic development of non-Western countries and serious social problems in the United States seemed to cast doubt on the US model.⁵

II. Chinese perceptions of threat and opportunity from the United States

Chinese scholars regularly perceived the United States as a source of threat. This included a threat to China’s national security, especially a US intervention in mainland–Taiwan reunification, strategic encirclement of China, and reducing China’s nuclear deterrence; threat to China’s political system and internal stability, especially the US’s insistence on promoting human rights in China, which in 1989 almost toppled the Chinese government; threat to China’s economic well-being, especially disputes concerning intellectual property rights, the annual MFN debate, obstruction of China’s WTO membership and RMB exchange rate disputes; threat to China’s national prestige, especially obstruction of China’s bid for hosting the Olympic Games in 2000, the annual ‘trial’ of China in the UN Human Rights Commission, and China bashing in US media; and threat to China’s favoured world order, especially the US’s efforts to promote a unipolar world.⁶

⁴ Ge Chengqun, ‘美国提高研究与开发能力的基本经验及启示’ [Basic Experiences and Lessons of the US’s Efforts to Promote R&D Capabilities], *世界经济与政治* (January 1999), pp. 73–75; Lang Ping, ‘浅析美国“新经济”’ [A Tentative Analysis of the US’s New Economy], *世界经济与政治* (April 1998) p. 30; Wu Yonghong, ‘美国在世界经济中地位的变化’ [The Change of the US’s Status in World Economy], *世界经济与政治* (July 1997), p. 67; Li Bing, ‘从美国“新经济”看加速我国高技术产业的发展’ [Analyzing the Development of China’s High-Tech Industry from the Perspective of the US’s ‘New Economy’], *世界经济与政治* (August 1998), p. 43.

⁵ Wang Jisi, ‘高处不胜寒,’ pp. 22–24.

⁶ Li Shouyuan, ‘“冷战思维”与冷战后美国的对华政策’ [‘Cold War Thinking’ and the US’s Post-Cold War China Policy], *外交学院学报* (Autumn 1996), p.23; Wang Haihan, ‘论克林顿政府的对华政策及其

At the same time, Chinese scholars also perceived opportunities in engaging seriously with the United States. This includes potential benefits for China's national security, especially the US's commitment to peace, its engagement policy toward China, and its role in containing Japanese militarism; opportunities for China's economic well-being, especially its trade with and investments in China; opportunities for China's national prestige, especially its role to enhance China's status in the world; and opportunities for China's favoured world order, especially the US's role in promoting regional and world peace, and its efforts in defeating aggressions such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and its practice of 'resorting to apparently universal values rather than pressuring other countries with brute force'.⁷

As Chinese scholars perceived the United States as the source of both threats and opportunities, one important question is whether the US in fact presented more a threat or an opportunity to China. In terms of China's national security, the most serious threat from the US was its role in frustrating China's plans with regard to Taiwan, while the greatest opportunity from the US was its commitment to peace and its engagement policy towards China. As a peaceful environment is much more important for China than the postponed resumption of control over the tiny Taiwan, even though there were additional nuisances between the two countries such as the perceived encirclement of China, it is perhaps reasonable to say that in terms of national security, the US represented more an opportunity than a threat to China.

During the first Clinton Administration, because of constant disputes over China's human rights record, the threat from the United States to China's political system and internal stability was substantial. After the US decided to delink human rights and MFN, human rights no longer occupied a prominent position in the US's China policy and the US may even have played a more or less positive role in China's political reform. Premier Wen Jiabao's repeated emphasis on promoting democracy in China could be construed to some extent as a response to the United States' appeal. Since the late 1990s, there has therefore been perhaps more opportunity than threat from the US in terms of China's political system and internal stability.

As for economic development, the United States has been one of China's major trade partners, investors, and sources of technology and management skills, and US–China relations have contributed importantly to China's economic growth. After the two countries resolved their constant disputes, such as those over intellectual property

前景' [On Clinton Administration's China Policy and its Prospect], 国际问题研究(Spring 1997), p. 7; Wu Jiong, '评美国“全面遏制中国”论' [On the US's 'Comprehensive Containment of China'], 现代国际关系(November 1996), p. 10; Shi Yinghong, '西方对非西方: 当今美国对华态度的根本原因' [West vs. non-West: The Fundamental Root of the US's Current Attitude toward China], 战略与管理(May/June 1996), p. 8.

⁷ Liu Jiangyong, '美日重建安全体制与中美日关系' [The Re-establishment of US–Japan Security System and the China–US–Japan Relations], 外交学院学报(Winter 1996), p. 32; Zhu Feng, '人权问题和中美关系: 变化与挑战' [Human Rights Problem and China–US Relations: Changes and Challenges], 世界经济与政治(July 2000), pp. 20–21, 23–24; Zhang Qingmin, '中美关系中的美国对华技术转让问题' [Technology Transfer to China in China–US Relations], 战略与管理(July/August 1999), pp. 23–24.

rights, China’s WTO membership, the US’s role as China’s economic partner became more salient. Chinese scholars generally regarded economic cooperation between the two countries as a win-win situation.

In the early 1990s, the United States presented a serious threat to China’s national prestige. But after the two countries tried to establish a strategic partnership, US media became much less critical of China and began to run articles touting the importance of the bilateral relationship as well as China’s progress in economic reform and human rights. American scholars even coined the term G-2, which significantly enhanced China’s status.

In the 1990s, many Chinese scholars believed that the United States intended to pursue a unipolar agenda, but in the 21st century, especially under the Obama administration, more Chinese scholars agreed that the US would be willing to accept a multipolar world where it would more readily respect the sovereignty and independence of other countries. Considering the above, I would conclude that on the whole, in the 1990s the US constituted more an opportunity than a threat to China.

III. Chinese perceptions of the American economy

In terms of the Chinese perceptions of market economy, in the 1990s most Chinese scholars enthusiastically embraced the market economy not only as the main stream of world economic practice but also as a highly successful approach to economic management. Chinese scholars not only had a positive opinion of the market economy system as a whole but were also quite positive about sub-level practices of the system such as business annexation, investment funds, and stock (share) system. Even though they believed the US economy was not without problems, they seemed to agree that most of the problems could be resolved within the framework of the system.⁸

As for their assessment of the United States’ economic performance, many more Chinese authors focused on the US’s economic successes than on failures. The United States was perceived as not only having achieved sustained growth in the 1990s but also as being much more competitive than other countries. The findings in this paper represented a sharp departure from the perceptions before the 1990s as presented by David Shambaugh in *Beautiful Imperialist*.

Chinese authors attributed the United States’ great economic success to both the economic system and to factors not necessarily related to that system. Some scholars regarded the US market economy system as having played an important role in its success story, but many more scholars focused on non-system related factors such as great emphasis on science and technology, effective management of economic relations

⁸ Gao Feng, ‘美日欧经济实力对比的新动向’ [New Distribution of Economic Power Among the US, Japan, and Europe], *世界经济与政治* (April 1995), p. 35; Xiao Chen, ‘论美国的“法制设计”对其经济效率的支持’ [On the Compatibility of Law-Governing to Economic Efficiency in America], *美国研究* (Autumn 1995), pp. 67–89.

with other countries, successful management of the economy by the US government and businesses, peace dividends and Americans' hard work.

Many Chinese scholars straightforwardly advocated learning economic management from the United States. They did not hesitate to recommend adopting US practices closely related with the capitalist economic system, especially the market, property rights, and the legal background of market economy. Many scholars also advised against proceeding too rapidly in adopting US economic practices. In doing so, however, they usually did not denigrate the US's economic practices but more often deplored the fact that China's local conditions were not yet ripe for hasty acceptance of the US approach.⁹

Chinese experts in US economy usually welcomed US economic prosperity. They perceived the US as the leader in the world economy, playing a vitally important role in promoting world prosperity, economic liberalisation, and setting the direction for the future of world economy. More or less in recognition of the interdependence of interests, they agreed that when the US economy was prosperous, other countries, including China, benefited, and when the US economy was in trouble, other countries, including China, also suffered.¹⁰

IV. Chinese perceptions of American politics

Regarding the Chinese perceptions of democracy, evidence found in this research indicates that in the 1990s Chinese scholars generally accepted democracy as a laudable form of governance, representing the right direction in human political development. Some observers enthusiastically embraced democracy, regarding it as inevitable, while others, albeit with some reservations as to the actual practice of democracy, had nonetheless accepted its basic ideas.¹¹

As for whether democracy in the United States was genuine or not, Chinese scholars agreed that money did play an important role in American politics, but their dominant views were that it was mainly the voters' will that ultimately determined the outcome of elections in the United States. On the whole, Chinese scholars had a predominantly favourable image of the political leaders elected in the United States, regarding them as quite capable in managing the country and believing that their characters appealed to most voters. According to some traditional Marxist scholars, the political system

⁹ Zhang Ling, '美国投资基金法律规范和最新立法动态研究' [The US Laws Concerning Investment Capital and the Latest Relevant Legislature], *世界经济与政治* (March 1996), pp. 37–39; Zhang Xuesong, '美国“新企业文化”给我国企业发展带来的启示' [The Revelation of the US's 'New Business Culture' to the Development of our Businesses], *世界经济与政治* (March 1997), pp. 46–47.

¹⁰ Chen Baosen, '美国经济的现状、问题及其世界影响' [The Current Conditions and Problems of the US Economy and the Impact on the World], *世界经济与政治* (January 2000), p. 32.

¹¹ Zhou Qi, '美国对西方近代民主制的贡献—代议制民主' [American Contribution to Modern Western Democracy -- Representative Democracy], *美国研究* (Winter 1994), p. 57.

of the United States served the interest of the ruling class, but most Chinese scholars agreed that this system served the American people as a whole, rich and poor included.¹²

As for the efficiency of the American political system, i.e. the mechanism of checks and balances, although some scholars regarded it as too inefficient in decision making, more of them saw many more advantages than disadvantages in the system, including inducing moderate policies, encouraging greater participation of various groups in the society, and improving the quality of decision making. Some scholars even saw real efficiency in the checks and balances system, because a wrong policy would be much more costly and inefficient than slow decision making.¹³

There were many more positive than negative articles regarding the overall perceptions of the American political system. Although only a few articles specifically argued for learning from the US political system, quite a few implicitly endorsed this idea.

V. Exploring the Chinese motivations

After studying the Chinese perceptions of the United States, we are now in the position to see how the study would reveal China’s motivations. We will do the analysis by resorting to three approaches.

1. How consideration of national interest affected China’s motivations?

According to findings regarding the perceptions of American power, Chinese scholars accepted that the United States was superior to China in every major dimension of national power. The findings regarding perceptions of threat demonstrate that the US was perceived as sometimes using its superior power in a way that harmed China’s national interests. The implications of the research regarding perceptions of power and threat were that the Chinese were more or less resentful of the United States interfering in China’s internal affairs. The more important behavioural implications of the research were that China would on the whole adopt an appeasement approach towards the United States. On the other hand, as revealed in the findings regarding the perceptions of power and opportunity, the United States was also perceived as having employed its superior power in a way that promoted China’s national interests. The implications of the research regarding the perceptions of power and opportunity were that Chinese scholars were also appreciative of the United States’

¹² Wang Guang, ‘美国处于过渡时期’ [The US in Transition], 现代国际关系(January 1997), pp. 10–11; Zhang Minqian, ‘试论美国的廉政及其借鉴意义’ [A Tentative Analysis of the US’s Clean Government Construction and its Lessons to Us], 世界经济与政治(August 1994), p. 42.

¹³ Lu Qichang, ‘当前美国国内政治形势’ [Domestic Political Situations in the Current US], 现代国际关系(June 1998), p. 12; Lin Hongyu, ‘美国公众舆论与美国对华政策’ [Public Opinion in the US and its China Policy], 世界经济与政治(August 1997), pp. 67–70.

role in promoting China's national interest, especially its role in facilitating China's economic development. The behavioural implications of China's perceptions of opportunities provided by the United States were that promoting cooperation would be another of China's predominant policy inclinations towards the US. Thus, from the angle of national interest, China's dominant inclinations in its policy toward the United States would be appeasement and cooperation. The exploration of the national interest involved in the US–China relations suggests therefore that China's rational policy preference would be to remain a status quo country.

2. How consideration of the key characteristics of the United States affected China's motivation?

We have explored Chinese perceptions of US economy and politics, two of the defining characteristics of the Western world represented by the United States. In the 1990s, Chinese authors generally accepted that market economy was the ideal form of economic management. They regarded the economic performance of the United States in the 1990s as highly successful. They acknowledged the US's leader status in world economy and often expressed an earnest desire to learn from the US in many aspects of economic management. Evidence strongly suggests that shaping China's economic management more or less according to the American model would be quite likely and from the Chinese perspective, differences in the economic systems between the two countries did not constitute a source of conflict between them.

Usually implicitly, but occasionally explicitly, Chinese authors accepted that the United States' political system represented a genuine democracy rather than a sham one. One of its defining features, checks and balances, was generally perceived as working very well. The overall perceptions of American politics were more positive than negative, and some authors in authoritative Chinese journals occasionally argued directly for learning from the US political system. Thus, evidence suggests that differences in political systems, again from the Chinese perspective, would not constitute a serious cause of contention between the United States and China.

3. How China's perceptions of the United States reveal China's motivations?

The research conducted as part of this project indicates that one of the major images of the United States in China in the 1990s was that of a 'partner'. Chinese scholars generally agreed that China–US cooperation was mutually beneficial. The partner image was especially salient in the area of economic cooperation. The research indicates that the role model image was also prevalent in the Chinese perception of the United States in the 1990s. Chinese authors generally accepted that the American economic model was worthy of emulation, and the role model image in this respect was prevalent, strong,

and explicit. As for the Chinese perceptions of the American political model, Chinese authors had also accepted the merits of democracy and often agreed that the American political model worked very well in the United States. The Chinese perception of the United States as a role model in this respect was tentative, moderate, and usually implicit. The role model image was also prevalent as regards learning from the United States in the field of science and technology. The research conducted as part of this project, especially the evidence regarding the perceptions of power and threat, supports the imperialist image described in the existing academic literature. The United States was described as greatly superior to China in various major dimensions of power, and the United States was presented as having used its superior power in a way that harmed China’s national interests.

The perception of the United States as a partner demonstrated China’s desire to integrate itself into the international community, and it thus supported the proposition that China was a status quo country. The role model image carried the implications that China not only did not regard differences between the two countries as a source of conflict but in fact regarded them as offering opportunities for cooperation between the two countries. This image therefore also supported the proposition that China was a status quo country. China’s perception of the United States as an imperialist power indicated that there were some elements of resentment and conflict in China’s policy towards the US. But the image also indicated that when China resorted to confrontation, it was usually done in a defensive and reactive way. The supposedly defensive and reactive nature of China’s policy towards the US suggests that China was a status quo country or at least that it wished to be one. On the whole, all the three dominant images of the United States suggested that China was a status quo country, having a strong desire to cooperate with the United States and to integrate itself into the international community.

Chinese motivation towards the United States in the 21st century

After the world entered the 21st century, Chinese perceptions of the United States have undergone significant changes. Because of sustained economic development, Chinese scholars now perceive the power gap between the US and China as having greatly narrowed. Chinese media now accept that China is the second largest economy in the world, second only to the United States.¹⁴ In 2014, a World Bank report claimed that the Chinese GDP (PPP) would surpass that of the US by the end of the year. According to the CIA World Fact Book, in 2015, Chinese GDP (PPP) was already No. 1 in the world.¹⁵ As regards military power, Chinese scholars now believe that

¹⁴ <http://finance.qq.com/a/20150909/027937.htm> (accessed on 6 March 2016).

¹⁵ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html> (accessed on 6 March 2016).

China is capable of defending its interests should there be a serious clash between the United States and China. In terms of strategic nuclear forces, some Chinese military officers suggest that the United States and China are already in the state of mutually assured destruction even though the US has not yet accepted it.¹⁶ And in terms of technology, even though Chinese scholars admit that China still lags far behind the US in this aspect, China nonetheless has made considerable progress.

There have also been new developments in foreign policy behaviours of the United States and China. Chinese behaviours have been perceived by some Americans as more confident and assertive, and the US's behaviours have been regarded by some Chinese scholars as more confrontational and domineering. On the Chinese part, major actions in recent years include the following: declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, land reclamation in the South China Sea, founding of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the initiative of One Road and One Belt. While Chinese behaviours in the above did not target the United States, the US nonetheless feels more or less uncomfortable.

On the American part, three of the most important actions perceived as targeting China are as follows. In strategic terms, after the United States basically terminated its actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, it declared a return to Southeast Asia in a high-profile way. Chinese scholars believe that the United States' return basically targets China, and Chinese interests have been affected in a number of ways.¹⁷ In the economic sphere, after long negotiation the United States and other 11 countries signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This agreement has been considered as having the purpose of establishing a club specifically excluding China.¹⁸ As regards military relations, the United States has also become more assertive with regard to China in recent years. The most salient example is the US's behaviour regarding the South China Sea. In the past, the US always claimed to remain neutral with regard to disputes in the South China Sea. Recently, however, it has become proactive, trying to counter China's interests in this region.¹⁹

With new distribution of power between the United States and China and the new state of US–China relations, has China's foreign policy motivation remained the same? Let's now look at two cases in greater detail.

¹⁶ http://www.weixinyidu.com/n_1509124 (accessed on 6 March 2016).

¹⁷ Biwu Zhang, 'Chinese Perceptions of US Return to Southeast Asia and the Prospect of China's Peaceful Rise', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 24, Issue 91, 2015.

¹⁸ Biwu Zhang, '营造良好国际环境 推动中国和平崛起' [Cultivating Favourable International Environment and Promoting China's Peaceful Rise], 人民论坛, 11 January 2016.

¹⁹ 环球时报[Global Times], May 14, 2015, <http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2015-05/6431065.html> (accessed on 4 March 2016), Biwu Zhang, *ibid.*

I. South China Sea disputes

In recent years, the South China Sea has been considered one of the most dangerous places where a war between the United States and China might break out. As a matter of fact, China believes that it was the US that caused trouble in this region. After the end of the Cold War, relations between China and the ASEAN countries developed rapidly. The South China Sea for over a decade was a region of peace and friendship. In 1992, China became ASEAN’s consultation partner. In 1996, China became ASEAN’s comprehensive dialogue partner. And in 2002, China and the ASEAN countries signed the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea.

China believes that it owns the Spratly Islands. After the end of World War II, Japan gave up territories seized from other countries and China regained Taiwan, the Pescadores, the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands and others. In 1946, the ROC dispatched military vessels to the Spratly Islands and stationed troops in Itu Aba to demonstrate its sovereignty over the territory. In 1947, the ROC renamed 159 islands, rocks and low-tide elevations throughout the South China Sea and drew an 11-dash line to indicate Chinese areas in the South China Sea. After the PRC was founded, it inherited this line. In 1953, the line was changed to a 9-dash line because of China’s special relations with Vietnam at that time. Chinese position in the South China Sea was widely accepted by the international community. In late 1940’s, Chinese troops went to recover the Spratly Islands on vessels provided by the United States. Various atlases, encyclopaedias, and other books published in the US, Russia, Japan, France, Germany, the UK, and other countries recognised Chinese sovereignty in this region. And several times the US applied for permission from the Chinese authorities to conduct surveys there.²⁰ The Philippines does not have a legitimate claim over the Spratly Islands. According to the Treaty of Paris (1898) between the United States and Spain, the Treaty of Washington (1900) between the United States and Spain, and the Treaty between the United Kingdom and the United States (1930), the Philippine territory is limited to 118 degrees east longitude. Islands/rocks claimed by China are all beyond the territory defined by various international treaties.²¹ Vietnam does not have a legitimate claim against China either. Before 1974, Vietnam never challenged China’s sovereignty in the South China Sea. And it made it clear several times that the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands belonged to China. For instance, in 1956, when Vietnam’s Deputy Foreign Minister met China’s charge d’affaires, Li Zhiming, he made a solemn declaration: ‘According to Vietnamese materials, the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands historically should belong to China’.²² According to the principle

²⁰ <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/100892.html> (accessed on 1 September 2016).

²¹ http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2014-09/16/content_1478243.htm (accessed on 1 September 2016).

²² http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2014-06/10/content_1438982.htm (accessed on 1 September 2016).

of equitable estoppel, Vietnam should no longer challenge China's sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Things began to change after the United States became involved in the disputes in this region. In June 1995, Joseph Nye, then Assistant Secretary of Defence, publicly asserted that if military actions around the Spratly Islands hindered free navigation, the United States would be ready to provide military escorts. In July 1996, the US presented a note to China, challenging China's claim in the South China Sea. In 2011, Hillary Clinton, then Secretary of State, in 'America's Pacific Century' advocated a strategy of shifting its focus from Europe to Asia. And President Obama adopted the strategy of rebalancing to Asia. China believes that trouble in the South China Sea began with the United States' new strategy as its background. Just as China's former senior official Dai Bingguo pointed out, 'As a matter of fact, there is malevolent political conspiracy behind the intensification of the South China Sea problems. Some people tried to provoke conflicts, purposely instigate troubles, and encourage confrontation. They simply do not want to see peace in the South China Sea'.

After the Philippines submitted the South China Sea disputes to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013, the Chinese government and most scholars in China argue that the Court does not have jurisdiction over this case. According to UNCLOS, UNCLOS should not rule over issues regarding sovereignty, but in this case, the Court indirectly ruled over sovereignty, thus violating the original purpose of UNCLOS.

As the US military became more and more active in the South China Sea, Chinese scholars began to discuss the possibility of a military confrontation between the two countries. Some Chinese scholars argue that China is not afraid of a military showdown with the United States. After the end of the Cold War, the US has become used to fighting wars by heavily relying on its air supremacy. But in the event of a military confrontation with China, China's anti-ship missiles are now capable of attacking aircraft carriers, and its cruise missiles and ballistic missiles are capable of shutting down American bases in Asia. China's nuclear capability also keeps steadily increasing. Some Chinese scholars suggest that even though China now still insists on non-first use of nuclear weapons, if China is backed into a corner, accidental use of nuclear weapons cannot be completely ruled out.

Some Chinese observers point out that the United States does not have a strong motivation to fight a war with China. Even though it has the option to initiate a war with China, it will not be able to determine when and how the war would end. If the war led to nuclear exchanges, mutual annihilation would be equally unacceptable to the US. And the US does not have the capability to win a conventional war with China either. There is a strategic principle for the US: not to fight a war with a major power in the vicinity of a great power. The Korean War and the Vietnam War were two examples. When the US was pushing for NATO expansion, Russia resorted to military actions in Georgia and Ukraine. The US should also expect that China would strongly defend its vital national interest. If the US and China eventually go to war

over the South China Sea, Russia and Europe will seize the opportunity for expansion, and anti-US forces in the Middle East will try to eliminate American influence in that region. Consequently, a war with China would mean the end of Pax Americana.²³

II. The new type of great power relations

In February 2012, when Xi Jinping visited the United States as China’s vice president, he suggested establishing a ‘new type of great power relations’ between the US and China. According to Chinese scholars and official media, the US response to this idea was initially positive. In June 2013, when President Xi met with President Obama, the two leaders confirmed that both countries should try hard to build this new type of relationship, respect each other, and cooperate for mutual gains. In a 2014 meeting, President Xi again got confirmation from President Obama regarding this idea.²⁴

Why is this a new type of great power relations? According to Chinese scholars, this concept could be understood as follows. New actors: the United States as an established power and China as an emerging power are different from traditional powers. The US does not seek to contain China’s rise, and China is a participant, builder, and contributor to the current international system and does not intend to overthrow the existing international system. New status: China’s international status has been greatly enhanced, and China now is important to the US economy. China’s development is good for world peace. New strategy: cooperation and mutual gains would be beneficial to both countries, and conflict and confrontation would be disastrous to both countries and to the whole world. New areas of cooperation: the two countries now can cooperate in many areas, including environmental protection, financial problems, natural resources, anti-terrorism, security, food, drug-trafficking, health problems, the Internet, etc. The more China develops, the more areas there will be for cooperation between the two countries. And new problems for the two countries: the US and China are different in many aspects, and the process of cooperation between the two countries would understandably face many challenges.²⁵ On the whole, the key words for this new model are cooperation, mutual respect, and joint gains.

Since 2012, President Xi has mentioned this concept at least 32 times, but President Obama has directly made responses for only eight times, and in the last two years President Obama rarely made direct responses. On the whole, China’s attitude regarding this new definition of the bilateral relations has been enthusiastic and proactive, while the US’s attitude has been lukewarm and reactive.²⁶

²³ <http://mt.sohu.com/20151125/n428117493.shtml> (accessed on 3 September 2016).

²⁴ http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2013-06/09/c_116097150.htm (accessed on 15 August 2016). <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0606/c1001-21765022.html> (accessed on 15 August 2016). <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0608/c1026-21786726.html> (accessed on 15 August 2016).

²⁵ http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/10/c_128304683.htm (accessed on 20 August 2016).

²⁶ http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160606/48928243_0.shtml (accessed on 20 August 2016).

The United States is more or less reluctant to accept this new model for the following reasons. In the past, China was more reactive than proactive in the US–China relations. This was perhaps the first time that China suggested a major framework for the bilateral relations and asked the US to accept it. As a matter of fact, just as a British journalist points out, China’s suggestion is basically a reframing of the idea of the G-2 between the US and China, which was put forward by the American side around 2008. This new model might also suggest that China is more or less on an equal footing with the US. Consequently, the US as the sole superpower might not be totally happy with this connotation. While in the past the US had many carrots to employ in its management of international politics, it now has many more sticks than carrots. Accepting China’s new model might mean more constraint on the US when it tries to manage the US–China relations by resorting to military forces.²⁷

In an article published in August 2016, Dai Bingguo, former Deputy Foreign Minister and State Councillor, perhaps expresses an authoritative Chinese voice: ‘The only correct option for the US and China is to construct a new type of great power relationship. There are no other options’. To give assurance to the United States, he points out that the US will remain the number one power during the 21st century and that ‘China is a country having become stronger within the framework of the current international system. It holds no grudge against the current system and does not want to challenge the system’. He further argues that China’s peaceful rise and rejuvenation will be irresistible because a war between the US and China will only end in mutual destruction and will also bring catastrophe to the whole world: ‘Whichever country initiates a war between the US and China will be committing the most heinous crime against the humanity and will be judged harshly by history’.²⁸

Based on the two cases presented above, we may draw some conclusions on China’s foreign policy motivation regarding the United States in the current period. In the 1990s, the United States was perceived in China primarily as a partner, a role model and an imperialist power. In the current period, the United States is still perceived mainly as a partner and an imperialist power, while its image of a role model has become much weaker. China still believes that the United States is the strongest actor in the world and will remain so well into the 21st century, but China is also confident that it is able to effectively defend its vital interests in the event of a serious conflict between the two countries. Acknowledging the superior power of the US, China remains reluctant to challenge it, and seeing opportunities for mutual gains, China still wishes to promote cooperation between the two countries.

²⁷ http://phtv.ifeng.com/a/20160728/44428461_0.shtml (accessed on 26 August 2016).

²⁸ <http://military.china.com/news/568/20160815/23292639.html> (accessed on 26 August 2016).

III. Evidence based on documents and literature

While in the 1990s the dominant Chinese motivation with regard to the United States was to promote cooperation and avoid confrontation, a careful look at China’s policy statements and the existing literature indicates that China remains unchanged in its motivation regarding the US in the current period. China insists that it would remain a status quo power. On 17 May 2013, in an interview with *Foreign Affairs*’s managing editor Jonathan Tepperman, Chinese ambassador Cui Tiankai pointed out that China had no intention of overthrowing the international system or setting up an entirely new one.²⁹ On 27 June 2015, Wang Yi, Chinese foreign minister, solemnly pledged: ‘Here I wish to say to you on record that China will always be a participant in the international order, not challenger; a facilitator, not trouble-maker; and a contributor, not a “free-rider”. This was, is and will be the case in the future’.³⁰ And in December 2015, Fu Ying, Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee, National People’s Congress of China, again sent a signal to the United States during emerging complications between the US and China over the South China Sea that China did not want a confrontation with the US. She pointed out: ‘It is fair to say that poverty remains the principal enemy for China, and every second counts in fighting its scourge. ... Some American friends often worry that China may jockey for global power with the US and that China wants to squeeze the US out of Asia. My observation is that the outside world tends to look at China as if it is another traditional power and thus loses sight of what is really going on inside China’.³¹

Chinese scholars also generally agree that it would be advisable for China to be on good terms with the United States. Niu Jun, a prominent America watcher in China, points out that China’s efforts to promote cooperation with the US is a long term strategy, set forth by Deng Xiaoping, not a short term tactic.³² Qu Xing, director of the China International Studies Institute, argues that the current international order provides China with great opportunities for development and that China does not have the intention of challenging the US.³³ At a conference held in May 2015, prominent scholars from both China and the US generally agreed that China’s initiatives, such as AIIB, were not meant to challenge the international order dominated by the US but were useful complements to the existing order.³⁴ Chinese authors repeatedly emphasise that China is still a developing country, with a deplorably low GDP per capita, and its

²⁹ Beijing’s Brand Ambassador, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2013-05-15/beijings-brand-ambassador> (accessed on 7 March 2016).

³⁰ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-06/28/c_134361597.htm (accessed on 4 March 2016).

³¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/fu-ying/poverty-remains-arch-enemy-in-china_b_8851152.html (accessed on 5 March 2016).

³² Niu Jun, ‘与美国合作是战略，不是策略和权宜之计’[Cooperation with the US is a Long-Term Strategy, not a Short-Term Tactic], 美国研究, No. 6, 2015.

³³ <http://www.chinanews.com/gj/2014/01-19/5753359.shtml> (accessed on 6 March 2016).

³⁴ <http://war.163.com/15/0507/09/AP0JIHBR00011MTO.html> (accessed on 6 March 2016).

main task for a very long time to come is to lift a significant portion of the Chinese population out of poverty and to further improve the Chinese people's living standard. We may conclude therefore that promoting cooperation and avoiding confrontation will remain the Chinese motivation with regard to the United States in the foreseeable future. When China does indeed confront the US in a more or less reluctant way, it will be when China's vital interests are involved and when China feels perfectly legitimate in standing up for its interests. While traditionally many scholars tend to assume that a rising power is likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo, more and more scholars now are concerned that a real danger to the peaceful international order might come instead from a dominant power unwilling to accept the peaceful rise of another great power.³⁵

³⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ivan-eland/the-united-states-should_b_9231996.html (accessed on 7 March 2016); Yuan Peng, '误判大势或致美再犯战略错误 [The US Might Make Another Strategic Blunder If It Misjudges the World Situation]', 环球时报, 25 February 2016.