

In Response:
***Seeking Truth from Facts: U.S.-China Relations
Require More Than Rhetoric***

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In “Redefining Pragmatic Engagement,” Ryan Mitchell suggests that the United States and China should set aside their differences and embrace the cooperative, “win-win” language associated with China’s proposed “new model of major country relations.” Using a theoretical approach of social constructivism, the author suggests that “embracing China’s ‘new model’ language may, itself, thus enable otherwise unlikely pragmatic achievements.”¹ While Mitchell presents considerable insight into the U.S.-China relationship and a wonderfully optimistic policy recommendation, basing the future of this relationship on an arrangement that relies too heavily on rhetoric and too little on substance raises several concerns.

Three major complications arise from pursuing this constructive power of language as grounds for policy while discarding more concrete and tangible aspects of progress. First, China has not yet demonstrated its ability or willingness to act in accordance with its own rhetoric on a wide variety of issues. Second, the United States stands to gain little from committing to an undefined new type of relationship, while China would benefit greatly by announcing itself the equal of the United States. Mitchell’s recommendation would allow China to take advantage of the

new model's vagueness to redefine the relationship in terms favorable to itself. Finally, the author's own hypothesis rests mainly on the optimism that this approach *may* produce favorable results.

Rather than basing the future of Sino-American relations on hope, a more specific and concrete policy option should be implemented that will either satisfy both actors or make tangible progress toward such ends. In this regard, the United States has pushed for the two parties to "operationalize" the concept, though this has encountered pushback from China and results in the "Catch-22" discussed by Mitchell.² A more palatable option would see both actors simultaneously make any necessary concessions. This approach can be carried out incrementally using a series of minimal but concrete and well-defined agreements implemented over time, complemented by gradual elevation of the rhetoric used to define the relationship to match these new realities. It is highly unlikely that the United States will agree to elevate the status of relations purely out of goodwill. If China desires to declare itself a global power equal to the United States, it must begin acting like one, not merely pledging to do so.

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Recent history provides many examples of China's actions diverging from its rhetoric, a fact that drives American demands for Beijing to demonstrate its intentions through concrete actions. Under president Hu Jintao, China's rhetoric shifted from Deng's "hiding our capacities" to Hu's concept of "peaceful rise," and then two years later to the less threatening version of "peaceful development."³ China's 2011 white paper outlining the official policy of "peaceful development" offers a perfect example of the disconnect between policy rhetoric and empirical reality emerging from Beijing. This document makes many bold assertions that contradict China's actions and thus minimize incentives for the United States to buy into a rhetoric-based "new model" of relations. The white paper asserts that China "never engages in aggression or expansion, never seeks hegemony, and remains a staunch force for upholding regional and world peace and stability."⁴

Yet this document was released in the immediate wake of China's well-documented 2009-10 "period of assertiveness." As noted by prominent China scholar David Shambaugh, during this period China "picked fights and irritated ties with... virtually *every* one of its neighbors."⁵ More recently, China continues to show signs of aggression that are clearly unwanted by its neighbors: the dispute with Vietnam arising in early 2014 after China placed a state-owned oil rig in contested waters in the South China Sea;⁶ a series of 2014 military confrontations with India regarding a long-running border dispute;⁷ the pending Philippines arbitration against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague;⁸ and the highly publicized island disputes with Japan that have led both to China's 2013 unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone covering the contested islands⁹ and the recent expansion of Chinese military capabilities into the area.¹⁰

Just as the observable dichotomy between rhetoric and action regarding peaceful development diminished the overall impact of that policy, the same issues arise with this "new model" of relations. In November 2014, China held its first Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs since 2006, during which president Xi outlined his foreign policy vision. The speech made many broad claims regarding the building of "a sound and stable framework of major-country relations"¹¹ and "win-win cooperation,"¹² but contained almost no specifics as to how such an approach would be built or what it would consist of. Additionally, Xi presented several ideas that not only conflict with themselves, but also with real-world events. Regarding China's core interests, he promised to "firmly uphold China's territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests...properly handle territorial and island disputes...[and to never] allow China's core interests to be undermined."¹³ Meanwhile, he pledged to "uphold justice and pursue shared interests"¹⁴ and to "promote peaceful resolution of differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation..."¹⁵

Analysts struggled to decipher the contradictions both within the speech itself and between the speech and recent acts of aggression. The *New York Times* depicted it as a show of assertiveness.¹⁶ The *Financial Times*

offered a more optimistic analysis entitled “Xi Jinping tones down foreign policy rhetoric.”¹⁷ Finding middle ground, Rory Medcalf of the Lowy Institute stated that the speech was “at least as much about diplomacy as about power.”¹⁸ While the substance of these individual analyses is not important, what does matter is that in China’s most significant foreign policy speech in eight years, the policy articulated by president Xi was so vague and contradictory that it can be interpreted as signifying either increased aggression or a renewed dedication to peace and cooperation.

Under Xi’s leadership, the continued demonstrations of assertiveness coupled with uncertainty over a vaguely-defined policy have amplified mistrust and tension and further created a sense among smaller neighboring states of having to choose between the United States and China. In sum, China’s rhetoric of peaceful development and win-win cooperation does little to advance the trust and collaboration necessary for elevating the U.S.-Chinese relationship to a new status based upon these qualities.

The second point of concern regarding Mitchell’s policy of embracing the “new model” relationship arises from the unequal gains associated with acceptance of such an arrangement. Adopting this strategy elevates China to a perceived status of global power equal to the United States, thus granting Beijing significantly more authority in the creation and

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enforcement of international rules and norms. Given Beijing’s recent demonstrations of assertiveness and refusal to participate in international arbitration, granting China more power to act freely in the international system could prove dangerous. Conceding to some sort of undefined equality based on an ambiguous new model of relationship benefits only

China, and opens the door to potential abuses of the new relationship rather than guarantees of cooperation.

Finally, Mitchell argues that “Embracing China’s ‘new model’ language *may*, itself, thus enable otherwise unlikely pragmatic achievements,” and “...that reluctance to us the phrase is largely unjustified”.¹⁹ This kind of reasoning is not, in fact, a pragmatic way to approach such a crucial issue. Considering that both the United States and China have expressed the idea that confrontation between a rising power and an established power is inevitable, simply relying on optimistic rhetoric could ultimately prove quite dangerous.²⁰ The U.S.-China relationship has not yet reached a point of trust and cooperation wherein rhetoric alone can serve as a driving force for grand strategy concerns. Terms such as “may” and “largely unjustified” fail to appreciate the importance of the relationship or the seriousness of the situation and thus fall well short of providing acceptable motivation for policy formulation.

Mitchell’s recommendation, while contributing significantly to the intellectual discourse on China’s rise and its effect on the U.S.-China relationship, falls short when it comes to the practicality of real world implementation. Several other more pragmatic and viable approaches exist, including gradual operationalization and elevation of relations to make tangible progress toward a specified target. Agreeing to a “new model” in hopes that it eventually facilitates change merely exchanges immediate progress for the hope of future improvements. If both China and the United States are serious about this issue, an agreement should be reached on what terms will satisfactorily define a “new model,” followed by the concurrent signing of commitments to these arrangements and elevation of the status of the relationship. If, on the other hand, one or neither of the actors is in fact genuinely committed to this concept, then no amount of optimistic linguistic manipulation will solve the issues confronting them. A new arrangement of “major power relations” cannot come into existence overnight merely by declaring it so. Rather, this relationship must continue to grow gradually and define itself through empirical realities as opposed to rhetorically labeling it as something new

in the hopes that the act of doing so will eradicate the associated complications and produce a mutually acceptable outcome.

Endnotes

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¹¹ "Xi eyes more enabling int'l environment for China's peaceful development," *Xinhua*, November 30, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/30/c_133822694.htm

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jane Perlez, "Leader Asserts China's Growing Importance on Global Stage," *New York Times*, November 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/01/world/asia/leader-asserts-chinas-growing-role-on-global-stage.html>

¹⁷ Tom Mitchell and David Pilling, "Xi Jinping tones down foreign policy rhetoric," *Financial Times*, December 1, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b95a3730-792f-11e4-a57d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3XlrjOb2S>

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¹⁹ R. Mitchell, 114-115.

²⁰ Erickson and Liff.