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China-US Cooperation without Mutual Trust

The idea that mutual trust is one of the first steps to strategic cooperation is prevalent in the thinking of most policy analysts as well as top leaders in both China and the US. President Obama once said: “America and China have developed a mature, wide-ranging relationship over the past 30-plus years. Yet we still have to do serious work if we are to create the level of mutual trust necessary for long-term cooperation in a rapidly changing region.” During his meeting with President Obama in Los Cabos earlier 2012, President Hu Jintao reiterated the need for “mutual trust” to achieve long term cooperation. This belief is so popular that many people forget the fact that there are thousands of examples of strategic cooperation without mutual trust between major powers throughout human history and has been the norm rather than the exception.

In retrospect, we can find that most of the strategic cooperation between major powers was established without mutual trust. The United Kingdom of Britain established strategic cooperation with the Soviet Union based on common interest against Nazi Germany in World War II even though Winston Churchill detested Stalin. China and the US developed strategic cooperation in 1970 even though Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon did not trust each other. Faced with the several decades of military confrontation, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan reached the agreement of reduction of nuclear arsenals in 1988, announcing the end of the Cold War. Jiang Zemin and George W. Bush developed cooperation on a counter-terrorism campaign a few months after the military collision between Chinese and American air forces over the South China Sea in April 2001.

Except for the American-British partnership, there are very few examples of American relations with other countries that are based on mutual trust. Almost all American

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alliances are based on shared interests rather than mutual trust. For instance, none of the strategic cooperation between the US and Muslim states is based on mutual trust. Saudi Arabia is a clear example. Even the U.S.-France strategic relationship after the Cold War does not support the argument that mutual trust is the basis for strategic cooperation between major powers. France took the lead against the US launched war in Iraq in the first decade of this century. Today the U.S. still prevents Japan from possessing nuclear weapons after being an ally of Japan for more than five decades.

The historical cases listed above illustrate that strategic cooperation between states is not because of mutual trust between them, but because of the incentives that make cooperation safe and productive for them. This implies that finding similar interests between China and the US is the key to their stable relations in the future. No matter if China and the U.S. have mutual trust or not, they will have many chances to develop strategic cooperation in the coming years as long as they focus on similar interests.

Mutual trust is a result rather than precondition of long term strategic cooperation between major powers. It would be beneficial to both China and the US if they abandon the misperception that mutual trust is the premise for developing strategic cooperation. Clarifying their political relationship as strategic competitors would stabilize China–US relations without mutual trust. They should get used to the other’s unfavorable policy and restrict any retaliation to the level within mutual expectations. Although this would not improve bilateral political relations, it would prevent any worsening of already unfriendly political relations. A stable unfriendly political relationship would be healthier than a fluctuating superficial friendship for both China and the United States during China’s rise. They could consider an agreement on developing peaceful competition towards healthy competition. The world benefits from their competition because peaceful competition is an engine for social progress.

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