

**Between New Terms and Classical Thoughts:  
Logic of 'Strategic Partnership' of Chinese Foreign Policy \***

**Masayuki Masuda  
Keio University**

**Introduction**

The People Republic of China (PRC) has clearly begun to put the emphasis of her foreign policy on its relations between great powers since the second half of the 1990's, for the PRC is hypothesizing "one superpower and four great nations" as main actors that exert a decisive influence on the international relations in the post cold-war era. "One superpower," China assumes, is the United States that has survived after the demise of the Soviet Union in the late of 1991. "Four great powers", otherwise, are Russia, European Union (EU), Japan and China itself.

What China is esteeming as the framework of the relations with the "one superpower and four great nations" is the establishment of "Strategic Partnership (*zhanlue huoban guanxi*)". China agreed to "establish a strategic cooperative partnership" with Russia in April 1996 when President Yeltsin came to Beijing.<sup>1</sup> China and the United States, on the other hand, agreed the two countries "should strengthen cooperation and endeavor to build a constructive, strategic partnership oriented towards the 21st century" in October 1997 when President Jiang Zemin visited the United States.<sup>2</sup>

China and Japan also "expressed their resolve to establish a partnership of friendship and cooperation for peace and development toward the twenty-first century" when President Jiang visited Tokyo in November 1998.<sup>3</sup> Sino-Japan Joint Declaration also said:

Both sides shared the view that under the current situation cooperation between the two countries is growing in importance, and that further strengthening and developing the friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries not only serve the

---

\* This paper was prepared to an international conference, *Forum 21* held at College of William and Mary in September 2000. The author is thankful to Dr. Tomoyuki Kojima and Dr. Peter Van Ness for their Comment on earlier version of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> *Renmin ribao*, April 26, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> *Xinhua*[Washington D.C.], October 29, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> "Japan-China Joint Declaration On Building a Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation for Peace and Development," 26 November 1998. Available from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/visit98/joint.html>.

fundamental interests of their peoples, but also positively contribute to the peace and development of the Asia-Pacific region and the world as a whole. Both sides reaffirmed that the Japan-China relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships for the respective country, deeply recognized the role and responsibility of both countries in achieving peace and development, and expressed their resolve to establish a partnership of friendship and cooperation for peace and development toward the twenty-first century.

The meaning that China is loading in the “strategic” of “strategic partnership” includes: 1) the influence of the two nations’ relations should extend over long time; 2) the influence should extend over the region or the world; and 3) the contents of the relations are to be “inclusive” not only with economy but with politics and security.

Certainly Sino-Japan “partnership of friendship and cooperation” is not same as China’s “strategic partnership” with the United States or with Russia. But the influence of Sino-Japan “partnership of friendship and cooperation” to be extend over the region, the declaration saying that the both country aim to “positively contribute to the peace and development of the Asia-Pacific region and the world as a whole”. The influence also to be reach “toward the twenty-first century”, the contents of the relations include not only economic “development” also “peace” in the region’s security. Sino-Japan “partnership of friendship and cooperation” can be positioned closely to “strategic partnership” in Beijing terms.

China has also estimated both “strategic partnership,” intending for “one superpower and four great powers,” and “partnership” as “a new model” for a state-to-state relations after the end of the cold war. In this paper, the author attempt to close the meaning of “strategic partnership” in Chinese foreign policy especially focusing on China’s perceptions toward the international conditions in the end of 20th century.

### **The Concept of "Partnership" in Chinese Foreign Policy**

A keyword of Chinese foreign policy in the late of 1990s is " Partnership (*huoban guanxi*)." Qian Qichen, minister of foreign affairs of the PRC, reviewed China's diplomacy in the late of 1997 and mentioned, “its diplomacy obtained dazzling fruits”.<sup>4</sup> "Dazzling fruits" of Chinese diplomacy in 1997, according to Qian, was especially China improved and enforced its relations with great powers ("one superpower and four great powers"), pushing forward to establish "a new framework" of relations among nation states.

"A new framework" for state-to-state relations, China esteeming, is "partnership (*huoban guanxi*)". The reason why "partnership (*huoban guanxi*)" is "a new framework", according to Li Peng, former premier of the PRC, is based on the "Five Principle of Coexistence", which China has been esteemed since 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The "strategic partnership (*zhanlue huoban guanxi*)" with the United States was reached a consensus to "endeavor to build" in October 1997, which result in China's propaganda of "partnership (*huoban guanxi*)" as "a new model" for a state-to-state relations and of China's "peculiar and constructive role to promote world's peace and development".<sup>6</sup>

The term of "partnership (*huoban guanxi*)", however, had not been used consciously by any Chinese leaders or newspapers until the late of 1996. Even China's "partnership" with Russia had estimated not as "a new model" or "a new framework" of relations among nations but only in bilateral relations when Jiang and Yeltsin agreed to establish in April 1996.<sup>7</sup>

### **Sino-Russian "strategic cooperative partnership": The 1996 communiqué**

In April 1996, the third Yeltsin-Jiang summit held in Beijing. Both top leaders came to agreement to establish Sino-Russian "strategic cooperative partnership". The communiqué of pledged the two sides "to develop a strategic cooperative partnership (*zhanlue xiecuo huoban guanxi*) of equality, mutual confidence and mutual coordination".<sup>8</sup> The Sino-Russian relationship thereby advanced from "constructive partnership"<sup>9</sup> to "strategic cooperative partnership."

Some Western analysts and newspapers emphasis that Sino-Russian "strategic cooperative partnership" is against US-leading world order or threatening US interest as John Garver mentioned:

The unstated premise underlying the Sino-Russian "strategic cooperative partnership" is that the United States is a hegemonic power driving for global domination via "unipolarity"

<sup>4</sup> *Renmin ribao*[Beijing], December 18, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> *Renmin ribao*[Beijing], June 29, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> *Renmin ribao*[Beijing], June 29, 1995. See also, Zhao Gangzhen, "Daguoguanxi 'huobanguanxire',[A fashion of partnership among great powers]" *Renmin ribao*[Beijing], April 21, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> More details on the concept of "partnership," see Masayuki Masuda, "Chugokugaikou ni okeru senryaku patonassipu"[Strategic partnership of Chinese foreign policy], *Hougaku Seijigaku Ronkyu*[Journal of law and political studies], No. 47, Winter 2000(forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> *Xinhua*[Beijing], April 25, 1996. The 1996 communiqué is translated to English in FBIS, *DRC*, April 26, 1996, pp.14-17.

<sup>9</sup> The 1994 joint declaration between China and Russia declared that the relations advanced from "good neighbor and friendship" to "constructive partnership" in September 1994. President Yeltsin proposed "constructive partnership" in a letter to President Jiang in January 1994. Not until September 1994 than had *Renmin Ribao* reported Yeltsin proposal. See *Renmin ribao*[Beijing], January 29, 1994; *Renmin Ribao*[Beijing], August 30, 1994.

and trying to achieve this goal by weakening both China and Russia. The "partnership" of those two countries is directed toward thwarting American hegemonic efforts.<sup>10</sup>

The 1996 communiqué between China and Russia, actually, expressed their sense impending of crisis toward international conditions "World is not at peace. Hegemonism, consistent pressure and power politics still remain today. Block politics is showing a new shape. And world peace and development still face serious challenges".

However, Jiang Zemin also explained the basis of China's "strategic cooperative partnership" with Russia including four points: 1). Sino-Russian neighbor; 2). huge domestic market; 3). Permanent member of the U.N. Security Council; and 4). Sino-Russian traditional friendship.<sup>11</sup> In reality Sino-Russian relations at that time was not so special but mere extension of the framework of "good neighbor and friendship" after the first Jiang-Yeltsin summit in 1992, although China and Russia pledged the two sides "to develop a strategic cooperative partnership".

Furthermore, China did not take positive attitude toward advancement from "constructive partnership" to "strategic" cooperative partnership, for "strategic partnership" could remind outside world of "Sino-Russian Alliance" against the United States or US leading world order. Rather, Yeltsin proposed the term "strategic" be used to the partnership with China when he was on the way to Beijing in the air.<sup>12</sup> China just accepted the Yeltsin's proposal.

China has also officially been opposed against the alliance. In his report on the work of the government delivered at the fifth session of the Sixth National People's Congress on March 25 1987, Premier Zhao Ziyang stated that "China will not enter into alliance with the superpowers, and it will endeavor to establish and expand friendly relations and cooperation with all countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peace Coexistence."<sup>13</sup>

When China agreed to "to develop a strategic cooperative partnership of equality, mutual confidence and mutual coordination," China never recognized that "strategic partnership" was "a new model for relations among countries" like China is emphasizing today.

### **China's redefinition of "partnership": 1997 1998**

Chinese leaders have not given many details on the concept of "strategic partnership" or "partnership," though they often emphasize that a "strategic partnership" does not imply an

---

<sup>10</sup> John W. Garver, "Sino-Russian Relations," in Samuel S. Kim ed., *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1998, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> *Renmin ribao*[Beijing], April 26, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Taiping ed., *Xin Zhongguo Waijiao Wushi nian*[China's Diplomacy in 50 years], Beijing: Beijing Press, 1999, p.975.

<sup>13</sup> *Beijing Review*, Vol. 30, No. 16, April 20, 1987, p. 20.

alliance. As the author already pointed out, China has officially been opposed against the alliance. The Chinese leadership has no intention of changing the basic tenets of its foreign policy, for China is still "the biggest developing country", which makes Chinese leaders take the top priority of the all policies over domestic economy building. China can never give up "friendly relations" with all countries even including the United States, though the United States strengthens its "hegemonism and power politics" in China's view.

The period China redefined "partnership" and "strategic partnership" is in the time after she agreed to "develop a strategic cooperative partnership" with Russia in April 1996. China explained that "partnership was a new relations basis on the Five Principles of Coexistence" before. Now China defines that "partnership does not imply an alliance and is a fresh thing in an era with multipolarization."<sup>14</sup>

"Partnership" has three general characters: 1). bilateral cooperation will not result in a military alliance, but is based on various common interests<sup>15</sup>; 2). both countries aim to resolve any differences of their opinion and conflict not by opposition but by dialogue; 3). progress of bilateral relations will not target any third country.

According to China, great powers should aim to establish "strategic partnership" with each other. Its characters include three points: 1)the influence of the two nations' relations should extend over long time; 2)the influence should extend over the region or the world; and 3)the contents of the relations are to be "inclusive" not only with economy but with politics and security.

As China explains, a framework of "strategic partnership" can be apply to any relations with great powers, for China redefined "strategic partnership" in a cooperative context. China can agree to "endeavor to build a constructive strategic partnership" with the United States in October 1997. But this does never mean that China and the United States share the common strategy or worldviews. Both sides simply want to oppose each other. The 1997 communiqué between China and the United States said that both sides agreed to "*endeavor to build a constructive strategic partnership.*" A Sino-US "constructive strategic partnership" has not been established yet.

### **China's worldview and "strategic partnership"**

What has made China take positive attitude to use or apply its "strategic partnership" or

---

<sup>14</sup> See for examples, Yu Xiaoqiu, "Zhengzai xingcheng de 'xinanquanguan'"[A 'new security concept' forming], *Shijie zhizhi*[World Affairs], No. 24(1998), pp. 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> "Various common interests" include politics, security, trade, energy, science technology and so on.

"partnership" with other countries, although China was not necessary willing to use "strategic" to the partnership with Russia even when Jiang Zemin accepted Yeltsin's proposal in April 1996? To answer this question, attention has to be paid to China's perception toward the international conditions in 1996-1997.

The Chinese leaders had perceived the 1990s as a transitional period between bipolarity and multipolarity, and they consider that such a transition will last until at least the end of 20th century. "Russia, European countries and developing countries have come to play their own role," in Beijing view, which has resulted in "US decline of its capability to manage international affairs".<sup>16</sup> As for relations among "one superpower and four great powers," China considered that "sphere of influence of great powers was not still settled," and "a struggle for power was now developing and would last for a considerable length of time."<sup>17</sup>

In 1995-1996, a serious change for China occurred in "a struggle for power," considered to be lasted for a considerable length of time. This is US settlement of its alliance strategies: 1). the United States and European countries decided a strategy to enlarge NATO eastward at Budapest summit in December 1994; 2). the United States and Japan agreed to strengthen US-Japan security alliance for Asia-Pacific stability in April 1996. China considers these situations as that "unipolar-domination" pressure by the United States strengthened.

China's official and desirable perception toward international conditions is "multipolar world" or "multipolar progress." Chinese leaders can/must not sit idle and watch the United States strengthening its "unipolar-domination" pressure. Yet some Chinese opinions could not decide whether or not US "unipolar-domination" pressure come to be realized even when US-Japan joint declaration on their security treaty in April 1996.<sup>18</sup>

*Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), an official bulletin of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), commented on US-Japan joint declaration on their security treaty that "(US-Japan) joint declaration does not have legal binding force and the countries just expressed their policy as in the past as usual. Any policies have not come to be realized."<sup>19</sup>

Some Chinese analysts on international politics, on the other hand, showed doubts about the official view. Guo Yuanzhen said, "US ability to influence and manage international affairs would rank first for a long length of time and any powers (Russia, Japan and EU) can get close to US position in some aspect, but can never do comprehensively in a foreseeable future."<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> *Beijing Review*[Japanese edition], No. 4(1995).

<sup>17</sup> Chen Qimao, "Lengzhanhou daguo zhengzhi juezhu de xindongxiang"[a new tend of post cold-war contending of great powers], *Qiushi*[Seeking Truth], No. 6(1995).

<sup>18</sup> Masayuki Masuda, "Reisengo no nichibei anzenhoshotaisei to Chugoku"[The US-Japan Alliance and China in the post cold-war era], *Minshushugikenkyukai Kiyō*[The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Democracy], Vol. 28(November 1999), pp. 23-50.

<sup>19</sup> *Renmin ribao*[Beijing], April 19, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Guo Yuanzhen, "Liyi chonghe yu chongtu riyi mingxian", *Shijie zhizhi*[World Affairs], No. 24(1996).

Yang Zheizhou also mentioned that any great powers including China itself "can never become a pole" and "only the United States had the capacity to be a pole."<sup>21</sup> Yang also said, "a period when the United States hold the status as 'one superpower' can last for thirty years and a new international system has already concluded."

Chinese leaders, however, could not accept officially these perceptions, since it would mean the denial of the governmental and CCP's perception toward international condition. And China could not sit idle and watch US action aiming to "expand and strengthen its military block"<sup>22</sup> such as strengthening US-Japan alliance and enlargement of NATO eastward.

As for the perceptions toward international conditions, China denied possibility of "unipolar-domination" by the United States and emphasized "mutipolar progress" in international arena. "The year of 1996 is a transitional one when the world after the end of bipolarity would go to multipolarity."<sup>23</sup> "US trial to establish a unipolar world" was opposed against by each country especially by great powers. World is bound for multipolar one."

Although 'US hegemonism was opposed against by each country,' the United States 'can never give up the basic policy in a foreseeable future.'<sup>24</sup> Though, US pressure by strengthening "unipolar domination" such as strengthening its alliance with Japan and NATO is "out of date" and the tendency of "multipolarization" can not be opposed or rejected, how China deal with its relations with great powers and the United States is still "core" of China's foreign policy.<sup>25</sup>

Sino-Russian "Strategic cooperative partnership" started to be emphasized in a context of China's opposing US pressure of "unipolar domination" after the end of 1996. The fifth Jiang-Yeltsin summit in Moscow, in 1997, produced a declaration "On the Multipolarization of the World and the Establishment of a New International Order."<sup>26</sup> This declared, "based on the spirit of partnership, both sides will endeavor to develop the multipolarization of the world and to establish a new international order." The declaration also said that "any cold-war thoughts" should be given up and (both side) need to oppose against block politics," with keeping strengthening of US-Japan alliance and NATO in their mind. China and Russia, however, did not intend to face serious opposition with the United States, the declaration mentioned that the Sino-Russian "strategic cooperative partnership" was "not directed against any third country" as

---

<sup>21</sup> Yang Zheizhou, "Yichaosijiang duoyuan geju"[Multipolar structure of one superpower and four great powers], *Shijie zhizhi*[World Affairs], No. 24(1996), p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Jiefang ribao*[Shanghai], November 13, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Sa Benwang, "Daguo guanxi yu shijie geju"[relations among great powers and world structure], *Liaowang*, No. 52(1996), pp. 42-43.

<sup>24</sup> Li Jingjie, "Shilun zhongge zhanlue huoban xiecuo guanxi"[An essay on Sino-Russian strategic cooperative partnership], *Donggouzhongya yanjiu*[East European, Russian & Central Asian Studies], No.2(1997), pp. 3-15.

<sup>25</sup> Huang Zhengji, "Shijie Duojuhua buke kangju"[multipolar progress of the world can not be rejected], *Guoji zhanlue yanjiu*[international strategy studies], No.4(1997).

<sup>26</sup> *Xinhua*[Moscow], April 23, 1997. This declaration is translated into English in *Beijing Review*, May

well.

Furthermore, China showed its strong opposition toward the settlement of a "new guideline" on defense cooperation between the United States and Japan in September 1997. Qian Qichen, foreign minister, presented China's opposition against military alliance being strengthened at the United Nations General Assembly in September 1997:

In a historical stream of the progress that world structure is going to multipolarization, to expand any military blocks and strengthen a military alliance does not help promote the security.<sup>27</sup>

The reason why China begun to take positive attitude to use "strategic partnership" and "partnership," as a new model for relations among countries was that China felt opposition against US military strategy. But this does not directly result in China gave up maintaining "friendly relations" with the United States. Being explained before, China has been discreet to use the term, "strategic partnership," in the usage of a "strategic cooperative partnership" with Russia, China always implied the relations was not directly against the United States by saying Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" was "not directed against any third country." And China also was willing to apply the framework with the United States in October 1997, though a "Strategic Partnership" with the United States has yet not been established.

### **Conclusion: antinomy of "strategic partnership"**

A foreign policy by China that aims to establish "strategic partnership" with great powers ("one superpower and four great powers") from the latter half of 1990's is showing that China is cooperative to the international order, seeing from an "operational level." This is clear from the meaning China gave to the "strategic partnership." China was prudent to the rhetoric, "strategic," to its partnership with Russia, not aiming at a construction of an alliance with Russia. The meaning that China loaded in "strategic partnership" was a self-restrain one and extremely inclusive that includes energy, science technology, and economic as well as political and military aspects. Therefore China could reach an agreement to "endeavour to build a constructive strategic partnership" with the United States.

The logic, however, called "strategic partnership" is connoting weak nature. For China, the premise underlying "strategic partnership" is that "multipolarization of politics" and

---

12-18, 1997, pp. 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Wenhuibao*[Shanghai], September 25, 1997.



“globalization of the economy” in the international condition is developing. Especially “multipolarization of politics” is a way of power balance China hopes as well as the international situation that China recognises. This means that “multipolarization of politics” has not materialised yet for Chinese leaders. China logically cannot help but aim at the “multipolarization of politics” that it hopes.

Therefore, the context of the cooperation loaded to “strategic partnership” will retreat and the logic requesting the break of the present condition of the world will be in the entire surface, when “multipolarization of politics” is hindered. China emphasised the spirit of “partnership” and “strategic partnership” so that China could oppose strongly against “US-leading” world order (i.e. the strength of US-Japan alliance and the expansion of NATO to the east).

Some people easily misunderstand about Sino-US “strategic partnership.” China has not agreed with the United States to the strategy of literal meaning. Chinese leaders is aiming to establish *Chinese* “strategic partnership” with the United States, never admitting the movement of “unipolar domination” by the United States. For example, China openly showed its strong repulsion and emphasised “strategic cooperative partnership” with Russia during the NATO air raid to Kosovo from March 1999, especially wrong bombardment to Chinese embassy in Beograd on May 5 1999. China, however, is still “the biggest developing country,” she can not disregard the hold of the cooperative relations with the United States, “the biggest advanced country”, as long as economic development is put on the highest priority by Chinese leaders.