Dragon-slayer or Panda-hugger?
Chinese Perspectives on “Responsible Stakeholder” Diplomacy

By Jonathan Czin

The rise of a great power is a process fraught with danger. Examining the interstate politics of ancient Greece, Thucydides argued that the “growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused Sparta” made the Peloponnesian War inevitable. Similarly, the way the United States deals with a rising China constitutes a critical challenge for U.S. foreign policy. To provide a conceptual framework for addressing this challenge, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick invited China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in a speech to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations on September 21, 2005. While Zoellick has since left the administration, his idea remains central to the discourse on arguably the most important bilateral relationship in international politics. Although Zoellick’s term indicates a concept rather than a precise American policy toward China, the idea represents an important moment in Sino-American relations. Since “reform and opening” began in 1978, China has not only stopped promoting revolution abroad, but also now works with and through international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Simultaneously, China’s size and the growth spurred by its reform have made it a great power in the international system. As such, Zoellick’s concept is the American answer to the question of “What’s next for China?” in international politics. Zoellick’s preventative measure seeks to ensure that China bears its share of the burden for maintaining that system.

Across the Pacific, this new phrase has attracted much attention in China’s foreign-policy journals and think tanks. These institutions constitute key

Jonathan Czin is a graduate student in International Relations at Yale University.
players in the Chinese foreign policymaking process since the commentators frequently have personal or institutional ties to the government. 4 Members of these institutions have engaged in a public debate about the meaning of Zoellick’s term in various foreign-policy journals; since the government regulates discussion of sensitive policy issues such as Sino-American relations, these debates are government-sanctioned discussions, which define the parameters of official thinking on the issue. Unfortunately, such debates in foreign policy journals remain a “greatly under-utilized database on the range of policy opinions inside the Chinese government.” 5 The relevance of these discussions for Beijing’s thinking about its U.S. policy warrants a thorough analysis of an important idea in U.S.-China diplomacy. In this Chinese discussion, two camps have emerged: those who embrace Zoellick’s stakeholder terminology with varying degrees of wariness; and skeptics who see the term as a discursive weapon for criticizing China.

Genesis

Zoellick’s phrase differs markedly from the rhetoric of President George Bush’s foreign policy team during the 2000 presidential campaign. On August 19, 1999, Bush described China as a “strategic competitor” in an effort to distinguish his approach from Bill Clinton’s vision of China as a “strategic partner.” 6 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice subsequently used Bush’s term in her January 2000 Foreign Affairs article, “Promoting the National Interest.” Once in office, however, Bush shied from the phrase, as two early events shaped the administration’s subsequent China policy: first, the sobering EP-3 spy plane incident of April 2001, in which a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet, destroying the jet and forcing the U.S. aircraft to land on Hainan Island. For eleven tense days, the Chinese held the pilot and crew. Although it was a low point in recent Sino-American relations, the administration gained significant insight from the crisis, realizing that pursuing an antagonistic “Dragon-Slayer” policy towards China, in which China would be treated as a “strategic competitor,” was both risky and dangerous. 7 Second, the terrorist attacks later that year shifted the focus of U.S. foreign policy and modified its threat perceptions. Whereas rising powers such as China had occupied the foreground early in the Bush administration’s tenure, the spectacular attacks of September 11 transfixed the United States on the problem of terrorism, and moved the country’s focus away from traditional state-centric issues.

Due to the focus on the Middle East and the change in approach to China, some time elapsed before the administration’s new policy and rhetoric acquired
conceptual coherence. Indeed, that a statement by a Deputy Secretary of State has drawn so much attention from both domestic and international audiences reflects the absence of a conceptual framework for the Bush administration’s previous China policy. The “responsible stakeholder” concept does not necessarily mark a shift in the administration’s China policy; instead, it encapsulated the administration’s evolving policy in bumper sticker format.  

Etymologically, the term “stakeholder” comes from the old American West: one who put down a wooden stake on uninhabited land, thereby differentiating himself from gold-rushers and other transients. The term reflects the U.S. vision for China’s broader role in the international system, not merely a conception of the Sino-American bilateral relationship. Zoellick wanted China to become a trustee rather than a mere member of the international system, concerned that if China remains just a member, it will become a free rider benefiting from U.S. leadership, while potentially undermining American power in the long-term. By realizing the transformation of China into a stakeholder, he suggested that it could “transcend the traditional ways for great powers to emerge,” a euphemism for the bloody wars that accompanied the rise of Japan and Germany in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Zoellick thus put no small task before China and the United States. China’s role as a responsible stakeholder is the natural next step following the consummation of the “integration policy” the United States has pursued since Nixon’s overture to China in 1972. By Zoellick’s logic, the change is evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Zoellick was not only speaking to the Chinese. A transformation of the Sino-American relationship will require the Bush administration and its successors “to build the foundation of support at home.” In his New York speech to the National Council on U.S.-China Relations, Zoellick clearly sought to build that foundation by placing his hand on the rudder of American public opinion. Some have speculated that he also had the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy—particularly the so-called Pentagon “panda-punchers”—in mind when he made the speech. Although Zoellick alluded to this faction and distinguished himself from it when he said, “you hear the voices that perceive China solely through the lens of fear,” he also conceded that “the recent report by the U.S. Department of Defense on China’s military posture was not confrontational, although China’s reaction to it was.” He was seemingly engaging in a bureaucratic minuet, distancing himself from some of
his colleagues while simultaneously approving of them. Because the admin-
istration remains divided on the topic, his concept does not indicate a precise
trajectory for Sino-American relations, but instead provides a destination at
which to aim. By extending the time horizon and focusing on policy orien-
tation, Zoellick hoped to build a viable consensus in the administration. His
oblique reference to Sinophobia could also include the growing voices on the
left that fear that China’s economy undercuts labor rights and the American
middle class—a phenomenon recently noted by the *The Economist.*

**Reception**

In the universe of Chinese thinkers and institutions, Zoellick’s term, “like
a stone tossed into water, caused a major stir.” Liu Ming of the Shanghai
Academy of Social Sciences, noting that “stakeholder” has no precise Chi-
nese equivalent, believed that Zoellick chose the term so as to generate an
interpretive debate within China about the concept’s meaning. Though it
is unlikely that he chose the term for that reason, its meaning, viability, and
implications have all provided sources of debate within the Chinese foreign
policy establishment, thereby fulfilling Zoellick’s desire to see the Chinese
think more deeply about their role in the world.

However, Chinese scholars do agree about the strategic genesis of Zoellick’s
concept. Quite correctly, they maintain that the attacks of September 11 cau-
sed the United States to make counterterrorism and nontraditional threats
its top priorities—priorities that require some Chinese cooperation, though
Chinese analysts may tend to exaggerate China’s role. In their storyline,
the United States has become bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and
in pursuing the War on Terror has damaged its relations with the European
Union. This perceived deterioration in the U.S. position makes good relati-
ons with China even more important. Professor Shi Yinhong, Director of the
Center for American Studies at Renmin University, goes so far as to argue
that because of its consumptive foreign policy in the Middle East, the United
States has become impotent in dealing with the hot issues in East Asia such
as North Korea. This narrative suggests that the United States needs China’s
help to maintain the U.S.-led international system, a system that U.S. foreign
policy has damaged. By contrast, these experts point out that China’s “New
Diplomacy” has led to better relations with its Asian neighbors, except Japan,
and has even led to a closer relationship with its old rival Russia.

By the end of 2005, approximately a dozen Chinese foreign policy experts had
commented in print on Zoellick’s new term. During that time, two threads
of thinking about U.S. intentions in putting forth this concept emerged: cau-
Cautious optimists initiated Chinese discussion about the speech. In the first written commentary that followed the speech, Wang Wenfeng of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) cautiously averred that Zoellick’s remarks could be interpreted very optimistically, since Zoellick did not view the Sino-American relationship through the “fatalistic” realist lens that anticipates inevitable conflict between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. Tao Wenzhao, a noted expert on American affairs at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), embraces this possible source of optimism, writing in October that he believed that the idea was “a favorable development for China.” Zoellick’s disavowal of the analogy between China and the Soviet Union and of comparisons with imperial Germany and Japan provided good grounds for such optimism.

Yet skeptics seem to regard the responsible stakeholder concept as a derivative of what they call the China Threat Theory, a distinct line of thinking that they see in the U.S. foreign policy community. Pessimistic Chinese strategic thinkers, particularly those affiliated with the military, have resurrected Bismarck’s cauchemar des coalitions: they worry that the United States seeks strategic encirclement of China and plans to achieve this aim through its system of alliances. In his speech, Zoellick forthrightly addressed such concerns, stating that “the distant balance-of-power politics of the 19th Century” do not apply to contemporary China. Nonetheless, Professor Wang Yiwei of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University alleged that the United States intended to “pass on the costs of hegemony and globalization” in order “to slow down the pace of China’s rise” with this new concept. Although Zoellick was warning against free-riding, his emphasis on business and economics renders this conclusion improbable.

These thinkers also worry about what “responsibility” might entail in Zoellick’s formulation, and whether the United States alone will define the criteria. Liu Ming pointed out that when Zoellick delivered his speech, he spent about half of the time lecturing China on its responsibilities rather than discussing the stakes it holds. By all accounts, his speech met with a tepid response from the pro-China business community listening to the speech in New York, to which it seemed like a laundry list of complaints. To the Chinese audience,
Zoellick’s hectoring tone and insistence on Chinese democratization proved most objectionable. As a result, Wang Jianwei, senior research associate at the Shanghai Center for RimPac Strategic and International Studies (CPSIS), perceives the term “responsible stakeholder” as shorthand for a series of U.S. demands on China and contends that the concept itself implies that China is not yet “responsible.” Even cautious optimists such as Jin Canrong, Deputy Dean of the International Relations Institute at Renmin University and a leading foreign affairs commentator, said, “China’s policy cannot be responsible toward the...U.S.-led western camp, but must be responsible toward the all-round interests of the whole world.”

Optimists, unlike the skeptics, see Zoellick’s concept as divergent from previous policies. Yuan Peng, Deputy Director of the Institute of American Studies at CICIR and a cautious optimist, states that the old status quo consisted of “containment plus engagement,” a policy predicated on the China Threat Theory. Such a view contradicts the similarly hopeful claim of Niu Xinchun, a researcher at CICIR who believes that a weakened United States has resurrected Clinton’s policy of engagement. Yuan Peng considers Zoellick’s concept to be distinct in that it is an important evolution in American thinking about China. Although he thinks that the China Threat Theory will retain currency as China rises, the new “Theory of Conditional Acceptance” represented by Zoellick’s term has, in his estimation, overtaken the mainstream thinking on China.

Looking at U.S. Diplomacy

Several months after Zoellick’s speech, this positive assessment became the predominant view in Chinese thinking on Zoellick. In January 2006, Jin Canrong declared that Chinese scholars were by and large reacting positively to Zoellick’s phrase. If optimistic about the concept, many scholars remained vexed about its viability within the administration. The split in the U.S. foreign policy apparatus’ thinking on China bred caution among many analysts inclined to favor Zoellick’s formulation. Analytically, these commentators emphasized bureaucratic politics to the exclusion of U.S. public opinion. Shen Dingli, Deputy Director of American Studies at Fudan University, thought Zoellick had put forth a controversial view that seemed at odds with the tougher line advocated by then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. He also cited a Washington Post article that
noted that the scholarly Zoellick was not a member of Bush’s inner clan, implying that Zoellick’s thoughts may not have much currency within the administration.31

That Bush did not use the term during his November trip to China perpetuated this debate over whether the phrase had gained traction within the U.S. government.32 In January 2006, Chu Shulong of Qinhua University noted that only Zoellick, and neither Rice nor Bush, had used this formulation.33 However, during Bush’s November visit to China, Da Wei and Sun Ru of the Division of American Studies at CICIR depicted Zoellick’s speech as representative of “the opinion of the Bush-Rice-Zoellick ‘principal axis’ of U.S. policy toward China.”34 They hedged their assessment, however, stating that “‘stakeholder’ is just a neutral idea that may be used by factions espousing different policies toward China.”35 These scholars were hesitant to say that the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy had cohered around the concept.

Their assessment reflected the belief of some Chinese analysts that Zoellick’s speech would constitute a positive development for China. Zoellick, unlike his predecessor Richard Armitage, had expressed willingness, and even a desire, to engage in a strategic dialogue with China—a process that the United States had previously undertaken only with allies such as Japan. Zoellick’s speech eventually provided the foundation for two rounds of such talks in the following months; the administration, however, insisted on calling the talks “senior” dialogues rather than “strategic” dialogues in order to distinguish these discussions from similar talks with U.S. allies. Since Bush did not at the time indicate that Zoellick’s term would guide future U.S. policy, other experts looked to previous developments in Sino-American relations to provide a foundation for their hopeful outlook. Several analysts pointed out that, in general, Sino-American relations tend to improve in the second term of a presidency: Reagan came into office having harshly criticized Nixon’s overture to the PRC, and Clinton had criticized his predecessor for coddling a regime that abused human rights.36 Meanwhile, Professor Liu Hongyu of China Foreign Affairs University looked for positive signs in Bush’s personnel decisions. He claimed that Bush pursued a more cogent policy toward China in his second term by replacing Secretary of State Colin Powell with Condoleezza Rice, moving Paul Wolfowitz to the World Bank, and getting even Rumsfeld on board with the new China policy.37 Although of these officials only Rumsfeld had advocated a notably hard line toward China, the removal of Wolfowitz in particular comforted Chinese commentators who were disconcerted by the neoconservative desire to democratize authoritarian states.
Bush’s use of the term “responsible stakeholder” during his comments on the South Lawn of the White House in April 2006 ended this debate over the viability of Zoellick’s concept. Early in his statement, President Bush said that “as stakeholders in the international system, our two nations share many strategic interests.” Notably, Bush referred to China as a “stakeholder,” while not addressing whether China was responsible or what would constitute “responsible” behavior, though he did mention support for international institutions and “cooperat[ing] responsibly with other nations.” Perhaps Bush’s truncation of the term reflected internal splits over how to define responsibility; alternatively, U.S. officials could have simply wanted to avoid a pedantic and public presidential lecture on China’s responsibilities during the visit.

Later that day, Chinese president Hu Jintao also used the term, stating that “China and the United States are not only stakeholders, but they should also be constructive partners.” Hu’s comments reflected both the caution and the optimism of the Chinese foreign policy community. Although most Chinese analysts had concluded by then that Zoellick’s concept marked an advance in Sino-U.S. relations, he took the term as a baseline, and in addition emphasized the equality of partnership over the unknown power relationship between two “stakeholders.” Like Bush, he also omitted the word “responsible.” However, in mentioning partnership, he implied an equality of any responsibilities entailed in being a stakeholder. This emphasis on partnership resonates with Wang Jianwei’s notion that Zoellick’s term should provide a basis for “self-discipline and mutual examination” in Sino-American relations.

**Moving Ahead: The Chinese Perspective**

As a result of the currency the term has gained in China, the inclusion of Zoellick’s “responsible stakeholder” concept in the Pentagon’s *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) and *Report on China’s Military Power* has facilitated a relatively sanguine response from most of the Chinese foreign policy community. Although Chinese academics see the critical official and popular Chinese response to the Pentagon’s QDR and *Report on China’s Military Power* as warranted and necessary, they do not regard the reaction as reflective of a real deterioration of Sino-American relations. Professor Shi Yinhong of Renmin University views the Chinese official response as routine rather than riled. Likewise, Teng Jianqun, director of the Research Center of China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, points out that the report mentions the concept. Preempting the criticism that the report alludes to the concept rather than incorporating it, he claimed that Zoellick’s idea on China has become part of mainstream government thinking about China.
Nonetheless, a pessimistic minority still asserted that the administration intends to pursue a hard-line China policy. Wu Miaofa of the CIIS asserts that the responsible stakeholder idea diverges from a harder line apparent in the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review. Chinese commentators who remained skeptical about U.S. intentions, such as Li Xuejiang of People’s Daily, characterized the Pentagon as a culturally ossified institution trapped in Cold War thinking. He noted that U.S. military expenditures declined after the end of the Cold War, and he therefore believed that bureaucratic exigencies lead the Pentagon to generate a more anxious threat perception of China. Likewise, Fu Mengzi, Director of the Institute of American Studies at CICIR, believes that terrorism alone does not pose a sufficiently substantial threat to the United States to sustain the role the Defense Department played during the Cold War. In light of the fiscal demands made by the Bush administration’s geographically expansive conception of the War on Terror, this analysis seems dubious. Nonetheless, Liu Kin-ming, former chairman of the Hong Kong Journalists Association and a Washington-based columnist, avers that the Pentagon is winning the bureaucratic battle over China policy and points to the QDR and National Security Strategy as evidence that the hedging strategy is already supplanting the responsible stakeholder concept.

Optimists do not perceive such a dichotomy between hedging and the responsible stakeholder concept. Jin Canrong suggests that hedging and advocacy of the “responsible stakeholder” are not mutually exclusive. In fact, he views the responsible stakeholder as the soft side of U.S. hedging strategy. Similarly, Yuan Peng alleges that Zoellick is responsible for the hedging strategy, as well as the responsible stakeholder idea. Counterintuitively, these analysts think in terms of American bureaucratic politics has in some instances rendered them more sympathetic to the Pentagon’s view. Instead of demonizing the Pentagon and characterizing it as an ignoble force pushing the United States towards a more confrontational China policy, Teng Jianqun goes so far as to say that the military should think in terms of worst-case scenarios. Even an article in Renmin Wang asserts that the Pentagon has a responsibility to envision possible doomsday futures. To appropriate Herman Kahn’s phraseology, they see the Pentagon as “thinking about the unthinkable,” that is, zero-sum Sino-American strategic competition, rather than “thinking the unthinkable,” that such a situation would advance U.S. interests. Moreover, since the military thinks in terms of worst-case scenarios,
it does not deal with probable outcomes. As Yuan Peng notes, although the China Threat Theory has become more comprehensive, it has become less relevant. Moderates like Zoellick have increasingly shaped the debate on China in an administration that began its tenure very wary of China.\textsuperscript{52}

Zoellick’s phrase has taken such a hold on China’s foreign policy thinking that some Chinese foreign policy experts have begun to appropriate the phrase “responsible stakeholder” when critiquing other states. Most disturbingly, Yuan Peng asks in a commentary in \textit{People’s Daily} whether Japan acts as a “responsible stakeholder.”\textsuperscript{53} In a more benign extrapolation of Zoellick’s concept, Zheng Bijian contends that all states in the international community should act as “responsible stakeholders.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In thinking about China, Zoellick rejected the Cold War and late nineteenth century paradigms. Although analogizing U.S.-China relations to the Cold War damaged Sino-American relations, the Cold War itself had buttressed China’s role in U.S. foreign policy from Kissinger through Reagan. The end of the Cold War removed the strategic rationale that had underpinned Sino-American relations since Nixon’s 1972 trip to China. Indeed, Zoellick stated in his speech that “in 1972, our relationship was defined by what we were both against. Now we have the opportunity to define our relationship by what we are both for.”\textsuperscript{55} Even though the “Long War” on terrorism has supplanted the “Long Peace” of the Cold War, the cessation of the latter conflict leaves China’s international role undefined in a world that is still delineated in the terms of that epic confrontation.

Zoellick attempted to move U.S. thinking beyond the wholly inadequate dichotomous roles of friend and enemy to define the grey conceptual space that China occupies. To say that China is neither a friend nor an enemy of the United States is not only a truism; it has also become a cliché. Neither China nor the United States wants to see China become part of a “hub and spokes” alliance system in East Asia. Yet the claim put forth by strategic thinkers such as John Mearsheimer that the changing material balance of power will inexorably and inevitably lead to Sino-American conflict is over-deterministic and threatens to engender a self-fulfilling prophecy. Moreover, it runs counter to the premise of U.S. China policy since Kissinger. Strategically, Zoellick’s “Third Way” offers the most reasonable and palatable option.

By offering a destination rather than a clear trajectory for U.S. China policy, Zoellick sought to present an objective that would create a broad consensus
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in the U.S. foreign policy community. So far, the concept has largely remained intact. Whichever party wins the White House in 2008, the potential for a more hostile China policy remains: while the American right dislikes the potential of a more assertive Chinese foreign policy, the left loathes China’s labor and human rights practices, not to mention the current balance of trade. Moreover, new administrations traditionally pursue a more aggressive China policy, much as the current administration claimed it would prior to coming to office. Yet a radical and lasting shift in China policy would require an unlikely coalition of the Sinophobes on both the left and right. Zoellick’s concept could be useful in this regard since it has, at the very least, the advantage of bureaucratic inertia. In fact, it constitutes the next logical step of the United States’ thirty-year integrationist China policy.

With his concept, Zoellick intended to bring to fruition the policy begun by Henry Kissinger. To understand both men’s thinking about China’s role, one must in fact reach even farther back in the nineteenth century than the “balance of power” wars Zoellick cites for the appropriate historical comparison. Indeed, Kissinger saw Nixon’s 1972 trip to China as reminiscent of the Concert of Europe’s handling of post-Napoleonic France: in both instances, a post-revolutionary state was reincorporated into the international system. This historical analogy seems particularly apt in the post-Cold War world, which has seen a stable great power condominium similar to the Concert of Europe. For China to join the club of great powers requires not only an aggregation of material power but also a process of socialization. Although China will continue to argue about what constitutes “responsible” behavior, much as other great powers do, it will do so as part of a process through which it can, if it so chooses, legitimately sit at the table of great powers after suffering two hundred years of political turmoil.

NOTES

3 “‘The ‘responsible stakeholder’ language has...become part of all official U.S. pronouncements on China, and the theory behind it has guided several initiatives.” Daniel Drezner, “The New New World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 86:2 (March/April 2007): 41.
In Washington it is common to refer, rather cheekily, to those who advocate a hard line on China as “dragon-slayers”; conversely, those who advocate closer relations with China are facetiously dubbed “panda-huggers.”


Robert B. Zoellick, “Whither China?”


Zoellick, “Whither China?”

“Portman’s Complaint,” The Economist, 18 February 2006.

Cheng Luo and Yao Dasheng, “China the United States: Repositioning through Mutual Adjustment,” PLA Daily, 18 December 2005. Please note that all Chinese publications referred to in this piece were translated by the Open Source Center.


Ibid.


Tao Wenzhao, “Interpretation of Zoellick’s Strategy Towards China,” Hong Kong Ta Kung Pao, 3 October 2005. However, his view represents a particularly optimistic assessment: although CASS is home to some of China’s most prominent United States watchers, these analysts are regarded as “eagle huggers” who fail to take a hard enough line with the United States See Glaser and Saunders, “Chinese Civilian Foreign Policy Research Institutes,” 609.


Ibid.

Ibid. See also, Liu Hongyu, “From ‘Strategic Rival’ to ‘Stakeholder,’” Beijing Xundai Guoji Guanxi, 20 January 2006.

Ibid. From ‘Strategic Rival’ to ‘Stakeholder,’” Beijing Xundai Guoji Guanxi, 20 January 2006.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Teng Jianqun, “Beijing Scholar Urges China to deal with U.S. QDR Objectively,” Hong Kong Ta Kung Pao, 14 February 2006.


50 Teng Jianqun, “Beijing Scholar Urges China to Deal with U.S. QDR Objectively.”
55 Zoellick, “Whither China?”
57 In addition, President Clinton criticized George H.W. Bush’s administration for being “soft” on China after the Tiananmen Massacre, and President Reagan similarly criticized the Carter administration, which normalized relations with China, during the 1980 campaign.