**Ambiguity, Patience and Reluctance – Disentangling the Contemporary Great Power Discourse between China and the US**

This paper examines contemporary attempts by China and the US to reach conceptual clarity in their relationship destabilized by the challenges of great power rivalry. Recently, Chinese scholars and public thinkers have constructed new concepts to frame what China’s rise to great power status means for the US and the world. Such attempts testify to Beijing’s intention not just to refute the commonly held assumption in Western discourse that China is a threatening other, but to step up as a global knowledge producer which is deemed an inherent part in the process of becoming a great power. In its reaction to China’s conceptual overtures, the US discourse has recently seen a similar rise in novel categories to embed and stabilize the two countries’ relationship.

However, this new US-China dialogue has not been particularly successful in finding the much desired common vocabulary. Chinese concepts, such as the new type of great power relations proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, were promptly rejected by US interlocutors. Conventional explanations claim that this is so because Washington is wary of being constrained by a Chinese narrative with potentially ulterior motives. At the same time, similar US attempts, like former US President Barack Obama’s G2 initiative, were no more successful than their Chinese counterparts to inform the burgeoning great power interaction. In such cases, existing arguments point to the lack of domestic consensus about China’s great power, which explains Beijing’s unwillingness to engage the US via a conceptual language that puts the two countries on an equal footing.

Without discarding such claims entirely, the paper argues that the puzzling refusal to embrace the other side’s conceptual innovations has less to do with fears of misunderstanding and losing initiative. Rather, it is the practical political advantages that ambiguity confers upon the relationship, such as more flexibility and room for diplomatic maneuvering, that explain the rejection of attempts to stabilize the great power relationship in a fixed conceptual language. Empirically, it is through the Taiwan question, an admittedly omnipresent and neuralgic point in US-China relations, that the practical advantages of an ambiguous great power relationship will be teased out and discussed.

Keywords: China, US, great powers, discourse, Taiwan