



CSCAP REGIONAL SECURITY OUTLOOK 2018: INTENSIFYING COMPETITION OR COLLECTIVE MANAGEMENT?

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In this year's Outlook (available at www.cscap.org) experts from 12 CSCAP countries offer their impressions of the regional security outlook. In addition, five articles look into China's Belt Road Initiative and expose a number of considerations that are likely to shape the future trajectory of this grand concept.

The Outlook contends that, during 2017, the international system appeared to slip more conspicuously into a gap between the established but besieged order and the still empty space of what might replace it. That we are witnessing the end of an era – an era of widespread acceptance of and confidence in American willingness to uphold the 'rules-based order' that it played such a large part in creating – seems beyond dispute. What is far less clear is what sort of 'order' might emerge in its place, how such a transition might unfold – including who the role players would be – and over what timeframe? When the US stepped into this role in the mid-1940s it accounted for half the world's GDP, had played a decisive role in winning WW2, both in Europe and Asia, and had a monopoly on nuclear weapons. There are no such circumstances in place today, making it rather likely that the transition will be prolonged as well as contested. If there are any grounds for optimism, it may be a gathering sensation in the two leading powers that accommodating to a new distribution of economic power could involve dangerous ambiguities for an extended period and

that studying past transitions offered fewer reassuring insights than was once thought. What adds to the potential force of these two considerations is that they could be mutually reinforcing.

This has been by no means a sudden or surprising development. The arrival of President Trump, especially because he has denounced America's past propensity to see compelling synergies between its vital interests and the responsibilities of international leadership as thoroughly misguided and essentially responsible for America's diminished weight in the world, has created the sensation (and possibly the substance) of sudden or accelerated American disengagement. The reality, however, has been that America's economic dominance as eroded steadily since the 1940s.

Can America regain its former pre-eminence? Hardly, but it is equally clear that no other state can hope to achieve the quantitative and qualitative heights that the US attained over the decades following WW2. It is most unlikely that the US will shrink so it will remain as a huge state with immensely powerful armed forces, an array of allies and close friends, and a uniquely appealing set of governance and cultural attributes. This simply underlines a more fundamental reality. A major change in the distribution of hard power is well underway but for the indefinite future this 'new order' seems destined to have a collective leadership. No single state will have both the margin of hard power and the aura of legitimacy to either seize or to accept the mantle of sole leadership.

If this is the probable reality, it has yet to be accepted by the certain and probable members of that leadership collective. As the established order is perceived to be eroding, expectations of serious penalties for breakout behavior have weakened, leading to a gathering sense of disorder, chaos and danger. Greater East Asia is already distinguished by a reluctance to address and resolve old grievances and disputes. On the Korean Peninsula, decades of tolerance of disturbing internal practices and external belligerence in the North plus superficial endorsement of the NPT and MTCR have resulted in the DPRK's young dictator chasing the fantasy of riding nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles to respect, acceptance and economic relief, generating an alarmingly credible atmosphere of imminent war. The crisis over competing claims to sovereignty over features in the South China Sea remains in a parlous state of suspended animation following the shock and awe of China's island-building blitz in 2014-15 to buttress its historical claim and the subsequent development of their military potential, the emphatic judgement of the arbitration tribunal in 2016 that contemporary international law outweighed historical claims, and the ongoing conduct of FONOP passages.

The region that has for some years basked in the glow of becoming the world's economic center of gravity does not appear to have a skill set that extends beyond markets, manufacturing and supply chains to political cooperation, conflict resolution, and collective management. The currency of regional diplomacy is dominated by bluster, threats, coercion, and targeted economic retaliation. The region has the forums – especially those involving leaders like the East Asia Summit and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – in which more collegiate approaches could be discussed and developed but the regional players, especially the larger powers, have allowed the opportunities to pass by.

ASEAN has painstakingly led the way in constructing an array of multilateral processes in the security arena – ARF, ADMM, EAS – that are often collectively characterized as an indispensable component of the architecture of security in the Asia Pacific. At the same time, ASEAN has also encountered mounting criticism for not developing an agenda for these processes that matched the interests and authority of the participants, let alone what the region needed or, indeed, addressed the preferences that ASEAN has itself articulated on how the major powers should relate to the grouping. In view of the escalating stress on the political and security order in greater East Asia, and the inescapable risks this poses to the region's economic dynamism, it seems imperative that ASEAN leaders consider using their central role more proactively to point the region back toward a more constructive path.

Specifically, there are two closely related issues that the region needs to address – firstly, the shared qualities or principles that others in the region want to see underpinning the US-China relationship as it accommodates the greater diffusion of power and influence and, secondly, to rebuild and revitalize a shared vision of a 'rules based order' for the greater Asia Pacific. Given the reluctance of the major powers to be pro-active, ASEAN should put these issues on the agenda of the East Asia Summit. In each case, there may be merit in supplementing each agenda item with some initial ideas to 'seed' the discussions. The subsequent modalities of each project would be for all the leaders to decide.

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