

Five Principles for a New Security Order in the Asia Pacific by Jochen Prantl

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The creation and fate of a new regional security order in the Asia Pacific need to be understood within the wider context of the shifting global balance of power.

Maintaining Asia's peace and stability will be a challenge over the next few decades, as key adjustments are needed to manage the transition from an order based on US primacy to an order that accommodates the rise of Chinese power. China is no longer satisfied with its perceived political and strategic subordination to the US. The patterns and understandings of the global order that evolved in the post-Cold War period are now deeply contested, resulting in global and regional arrangements that are often overlapping and – at times – competing.

The end of the Cold War forced a major re-evaluation of the principles and institutions of the US-led Western liberal project, which aimed to transform society in accordance with liberal values and practices. A decade later, the shift in global power has led not only to a diffusion of power but also to a diffusion of principles, preferences, ideas and values that have implications for global and regional reordering. Hence, the liberal order is in a state of flux and great uncertainty, and an order based on US primacy no longer appears to be the exclusive framework it once was. There are claims that continued unipolarity will facilitate a transformation of the current order solely on US terms. Yet those views are far too cozy and ignore the deeply contested nature of the liberal project.

At the same time, US primacy is deeply entrenched in the Asia Pacific and will not easily fade, despite the global restructuring of power. The US is realigning its defense strategy to meet these new realities by recalibrating and concentrating American resources in the Asia Pacific. But US rebalancing creates a number of challenges that need to be addressed. First, rebalancing has reassured US followers in the region that they can still depend on American preponderance and the security umbrella that comes with it. Second, Asian countries do not seem to be satisfied with the prospect of a regional order based on Chinese primacy. And third, US rebalancing and Chinese assertiveness create an extremely volatile situation in the Asia Pacific that is neither an architecture nor an order. Instead, the region is still searching for both a vision and a design to manage relations among major powers on the one hand, and relations between major powers and weaker countries on the other.

Five principles may serve as signposts for creating a new regional security order in the Asia Pacific.

First, great-power management trumps institutional design. An effective security order requires political bargaining among key stakeholders on “the rules of the game.” Those rules precede international and regional institutional frameworks and help foster some degree of compliance with certain principles of conduct. A regional order in the Asia Pacific must be based on a grand bargain — centred around a Sino-US condominium — with the (tacit) approval of other major powers such as India, Japan, and Australia.

Second, institutional form follows function. The form of regional institutions in the Asia Pacific must follow the function of the grand bargain among great powers. Otherwise, the institutions will not have the capacity to shape the relationships among Asia's key stakeholders. Those who promote an ASEAN-centric regional ordering need to work out how to manage great-power relations in an era of deeply contested US primacy.

Third, multilateral pluralism trumps monism. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for effective security reordering. Collective-action problem solving needs to take advantage of both formal and informal approaches to multilateralism. And those approaches are not mutually exclusive. There is a strong demand to create synergies between unilateral groups and formal international organisations.

Fourth, contestation is part and parcel of collective action. Effective security governance requires a strategy on how to promote a discourse that champions one path of collective action over another. This strategy needs to generate *enough* authority to enforce a particular collective-action outcome and to make the outcome acceptable to a wider audience.

Finally, power needs to be matched by accountability. In light of the contested and fluid nature of global and regional security re-ordering, accountability of those who wield power and military force is of paramount importance. Accountability is inextricably linked to justice and legitimacy, which constitutes the flipside of the great-power bargain.

While US primacy is deeply entrenched in the Asia Pacific, the shift in global power — and the rise of Chinese power — is transforming the regional order. A common understanding on the principles underlying the new security order for the region will assist in maintaining Asia's peace and stability as these global shifts take place.

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