

Is America listening to its East Asian Allies?

Hugh White's *The China Choice*

by David C. Kang

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For all the recent attention on increasing tensions between the US, China, and East Asian countries, regional balance of power dynamics remain muted. The past few years have seen increased Chinese assertiveness, which has led many to expect that East Asian states will flock to the side of the US. This has not proven to be the case, however, and Hugh White's thoughtful and bold new book, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*, provides some clues as to why not. White argues that neither China nor America "can hope to win a competition for primacy outright, so both would be best served by playing for a compromise." He concludes that the best policy would be an explicit "Concert of Asia" in which the US and China agree to treat each other as equals and create two clear spheres of influence. White is probably right that a US balancing strategy in East Asia is unlikely to succeed – yet a concert of Asia with two clearly defined spheres of influence would appear fairly similar in the eyes of East Asian states. East Asian countries are seeking a pathway that avoids taking sides, and the best approach for the US is a strategy that helps them achieve that goal.

The heart of White's argument is that a US attempt to create a balancing coalition in East Asia is unlikely to succeed. White writes that "Asia's strategic alignments over the next few decades are going to be much more complicated than a simple 'with us or against us.'.... [East Asian countries] will not sacrifice their interests in peace and stability, and good relations with China, to support US primacy unless that is the only way to avoid Chinese domination." If a balancing coalition against China's rising power is both incipient and inevitable, then it is quite possible that the US can retain primacy in East Asia with general support from most countries in the region other than China. But, if few countries consider containment an option, then a US attempt to lead or create such a coalition may backfire.

The debate over whether states will balance against China began almost two decades ago and continues today. All states in the region have ample evidence of China's rising power and ambition, and could easily have already begun a vigorous counterbalancing strategy. China's wealth,

military, and diplomatic influence has grown dramatically since the introduction of reforms in 1978. While the extent of China's power may have been unclear in the 1980s or 1990s, today China is unquestionably the second most powerful country in the world. It seems reasonable to argue that if states were going to balance, they would have begun by now.

Maritime disputes are becoming increasingly acute, and China is behaving far more aggressively than it has in the past. Some observers see this as China masking its intentions when it was weak, and revealing hegemonic ambitions as it grows stronger. Yet if China's true intentions will only become clear when the already large gap between its neighbors becomes even larger than it is today, "just wait" for balancing is more a guess than any considered analysis of China itself, and provides little insight into the decisions states are making today. If China's neighbors believed China would inevitably be more dangerous in the future, they would probably be preparing for that possibility now.

Yet as White points out, "For [America's allies] American primacy has no intrinsic value. They have welcomed and supported it for the last forty years only because it has been the foundation of peace and stability in Asia. They will continue to support it as long as that remains true, but not otherwise." This is, in fact, what many of East Asia's most serious and thoughtful leaders have been telling the United States. Singapore's Foreign Minister K Shanmugam explained in February 2012 that domestic pressures in the US and the demands of elections have resulted in some anti-China rhetoric in domestic debates...Americans should not underestimate the extent to which such rhetoric can spark a reaction which can create a new and unintended reality for the region. Such rhetoric is a mistake on many levels...The world and Asia are big enough to accommodate a rising China and a reinvigorated US.'

Similarly, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa questioned the US agreement to base troops on Australian island of Darwin by saying, "What I would hate to see is if such developments were to provoke a reaction and counterreaction precisely to create that vicious circle of tensions and mistrust." These leaders are not fringe elements with a pro-China view – they are respected and sober leaders of countries with deep ties to both the US and China.

Australia – often considered one of America's closest allies in the region -- is deeply engaged in a debate over how closely to cleave to the United States during the pivot. Peter Leahy, former Australian Chief of the Army from 2002 to 2008, recently argued that, "By substantially increasing its close relationship with the US, Australia may unduly complicate its relationship with China...As a sovereign nation Australia should maintain the ability to say no to the

US and separate itself from its actions.” Former Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd has called for a Pax Pacifica that acknowledges China’s legitimate aspirations, while former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating wrote that, “The future of Asian stability cannot be cast by a non-Asian power – especially by the application of US military force....The key to Asian stability lies in the promotion of strategic cooperation.”

Even Japan, long the linchpin of America’s Asian strategy, is providing mixed signals. While some see renewed territorial disputes with Russia, Korea, China (and Taiwan) as a sign of Japan’s renewed vigor in international relations, just as many observers see drift, domestic obstacles, and accommodation.

The conventional wisdom in the United States expects East Asian states to fear Chinese power and welcome US power. The reluctance of East Asian states to clearly do so is frustrating to American observers; that explains the readiness to call Japanese and Korean disputes over history and territory “indulgent squabbles,” proclaiming “enough is enough,” and pushing our Asian allies to focus on priorities that Americans think are more important. An influential US think tank implored Japanese and Korean leaders to “reexamine their bilateral ties through a realpolitik lens,” because it remains baffling to many Americans that these countries have more important priorities than dealing with an ostensible Chinese threat. Privately, US leaders acknowledge this tension but one of the dominant themes in public discussion about the pivot is an emphasis on U.S. military moves and a tendency to view the region in zero-sum terms.

While renewed U.S. attention to the region is welcome, it is important that the American “rebalance toward Asia” not be framed or perceived as an either/or proposition, with regional states being forced to choose between the US and China. The US should devote as much attention to business and diplomatic issues as to military issues, and avoid viewing American interests in Asia in purely strategic terms. East Asian leaders and peoples are clearly telling us that while they share some US concerns about China, they also have other serious concerns – such as continued economic growth; border control over migration, piracy, and trafficking; regional institution building and integration; and unresolved territorial and historical disputes.

Given the almost unquestioned imperative that America “lead from the front” and America’s unique role in the world, White’s argument is bound to be unpopular in the United States. But, as White points out, the real question is not primacy or leadership as an end in itself, but what goals does primacy serve? America will remain a rich and powerful country with a clear set of values that remain widely admired around the world – that will not change. Whether the United States must inevitably lead a balancing coalition against China is another question.

It may be that soon most East Asian countries make a clear choice and openly ask for US primacy, and begin outright balancing against China. China and the US may also divide up the region into two blocs. But neither has yet happened, and until it does, American observers and

policymakers might be wise to consider how best to implement a strategy that retains US influence in East Asia by addressing key issues and avoiding making regional countries take sides. The region still seems to see a pathway that avoids either the White choice or the balancing choice as optimal – and apparently as achievable. So in some senses, both are warning bells, but how decisions are made from here forward are important – nothing is inevitable.

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