

Leadership at home and abroad by Rorry Daniels

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The diffusion of global power was a major theme at this year's Xiangshan Forum, a track 1.5 defense dialogue on Asia-Pacific security organized by the China Association of Military Sciences and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS). A multipolar world in which the United States is in relative decline against a backdrop of many rising powers is less stable than the bipolar Cold War system or the US-led international order that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fortunately, there is a strong will among states to avoid the conflict that has historically characterized a period of transition between rising and established powers – the so-called “Thucydides Trap.” China has proposed a “New Type of Major Power Relations” to support peace and stability and promote strategic trust. Do current strategies promote stability? And what if mutual trust takes decades to grow between historic opponents?

The prevalent strategy of major powers in the Asia Pacific has been to compartmentalize relations. The call to manage differences and promote cooperation assumes it is easy to separate complex foreign policy issues, and often results in muddling through instability. Moving beyond managing differences and capitalizing on common interests requires a strategic vision of a new equilibrium for the region, and bold leadership to push that vision forward.

The Xiangshan Forum held from Oct. 16 – 18 in Beijing, provided opportunities to explore short- and medium-term paradigms that challenge assumptions about the world. Ambassador Shivshankar Menon, former national security advisor to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, spoke of peace without stability. A sensible goal, he argued, is to seek to manage change by developing habits and institutions to do so. Major powers cannot seek to impose stability on regions in flux such as the Asia Pacific, where many countries are developing at different speeds and under different political systems. Small powers consider such imposition to be promoting inequality.

Similarly, Professor Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University spoke of putting cooperation before mutual trust. It is unrealistic to expect that major powers with long and complicated histories can quickly put aside differences to face common challenges. Instead, he called for concrete cooperation that would stimulate the development of mutual trust. The key challenge, in his view, is whether the major powers can commit to cooperation and then implement it. Since the absence of stability complicates policy options, how do states build the will to cooperate?

Managing differences and promoting cooperation don't occur in a vacuum. Cooperation has to be supported by the governing interests of the country, whether Party, coalition, or body politic. A strategic vision is a baseline on which the governing interests can parse foreign policy issues; it is a context that permits the characterization of cooperation as win-win rather than traditional zero-sum situations. A bold strategic vision supports bold policy choices that can fundamentally change political paradigms, such as Nixon's opening to China or Deng Xiaoping's shelving of territorial issues.

Many speakers at the Xiangshan Forum emphasized dialogue as a bridge to realize concrete cooperation. They are right: communication is a prerequisite for improved relations as well as a way to mitigate miscalculations and avoid conflict. Nothing can be achieved without dialogue.

Dialogue alone is not enough, however. It must be underpinned by leadership, and it is especially vital in an atmosphere that lacks mutual trust. Ambassador J. Stapleton Roy argued that leadership includes fostering a public opinion that channels public interest into support for international policy goals. In other words, leaders should be wary of using nationalism to rally domestic support at the expense of peace and stability. Nationalism is an ideology that constrains policy options. It is, as author Haruki Murakami so eloquently stated, a “cheap liquor” that promises short-term highs – or domestic political support – for long-term consequences, including the potential for mistrust or misunderstanding of strategic intentions. Ambassador Menon warned that rigid nationalism will prevent the movement toward a global order that is open, inclusive, comprehensive, and flexible.

All the major powers of the Asia-Pacific could and must do a better job of explaining to their publics the value of dialogue and cooperation. Otherwise, even the most careful management of isolated incidents won't prevent escalation into conflict. In exercising what Ambassador Roy characterizes as bold or unconventional leadership, we could not only manage new paradigms but also hasten the reemergence of a predictable and peaceful international order.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.