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ARTICLES AND TESTIMONIES

Towards a Pacific Community? The United States and Regional Leadership in East Asia

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Abstract This essay addresses questions that are related to two recently proposed concepts: Hugh White's Concert of Asia and Henry Kissinger's Pacific Community. First, what basis is there for the US as a non-Asian country to pursue a lasting leadership role in East Asia? Second, what would it mean for the US to treat China as a security partner in East Asia on an equal basis, and is there any prospect that it might do so in the future? And third, if the US were to accept China as a partner and an equal power in the region, how would it then redefine its relations with its many military allies and strategic partners in a way that reflects this? As China becomes stronger, the United States eventually is likely to face a choice between an increasingly dangerous strategy of confrontation and various degrees of accommodation. With regard to East Asia, the form of accommodation that would be the most beneficial one for the US would be the sharing of regional leadership with China on an equal and stable basis. As a non-Asian country, the United States can only hope to achieve this by betting strongly on regional multilateralism.

Keywords Pacific community · United States · China · Asia Pacific · Security · Concert of Asia

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Introduction[1]

In 1946 the French historian Pierre Renouvin published a book called *La question d'extrême-orient, 1840–1940* ('The Question of the Far East, 1840–1940') (Renouvin 1946). The 'question' that the title refers to is the unstable nature of security relations in East Asia. In Renouvin's analysis, this unstable situation came into being when Britain defeated China in the Opium War. Prior to this, China had been the dominant country in the region. Although Britain was strong enough to defeat China, it was unable to manage regional stability. By 1900, Britain was merely one among a group of competing great powers in East Asia that included also Russia, Japan, the United States, France, and Germany. Much has changed since then: the European colonial powers have withdrawn, China has re-emerged, Japan has been defeated by the US, and Russia has lost its Soviet empire. However, to this day rivalry among great powers has continued to undermine regional stability in East Asia. Currently it is the US and China who are contending for influence in the region, while various other countries and regional groupings also play important roles.

The Australian security expert Hugh White sees a dangerous potential for war, unless the great powers can establish what he calls a Concert of Asia (White 2011b).[2] This model is inspired by the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, and based on the principle that the great powers work together to maintain stability in the region: 'America and China would both have to abandon their dreams of leading Asia in the Asian century, and treat one another as equals. They would also have to find a place for Asia's other great powers, India and Japan' (White 2011a, 2012a, b). While already difficult to achieve, a Concert of Asia would yet not amount to a fundamentally stable system. As highlighted by Amitav Acharya (2012), one of the weaknesses of such a system is that the weaker states are marginalized.[3] Still, as White argues, it would decrease the risk of a Sino-US war, and involving a large number of countries would make it unlikely that any kind of arrangement could be achieved among the key players (White 2012a). Indeed, it is hard to see how regional integration might turn into an inclusive multilateral system to manage stability in East Asia, unless the great powers first agree that regional stability is more important than competition among each other. This applies in particular to the role of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the prospects for ASEAN-related security forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) (Egberink and Van der Putten 2011).

[1] This article is based on a paper presented at the conference on East Asia regional integration and the role of the US, Beijing, UIBE, 4–5 Aug. 2012, Session VI: The Way Forward.

[2] The concept of a 'concert of powers in the Asia Pacific' had previously been discussed by Amitav Acharya (1999).

[3] Another potential problem, as suggested by the European experience, could be that, should great power rivalry continue to exist under the surface of regional peace, the absence of minor clashes among the great powers would remove their ability to assess their own strength in relation to the other's and thus build up the potential for a much larger war.

A Concert of Asia, then, is a necessary step towards a more substantial form of regional stability. In order to finally get Renouvin's Far Eastern question off the table, the great powers would need to engage with smaller countries and succeed in developing a multilateral regional system. The result might be more or less similar to what Henry Kissinger, who like White is concerned about the possibility of 'conflicts and catastrophes' (Kissinger 2011, p. 530), calls a Pacific Community:[4] 'a region to which the United States, China, and the other states all belong and in whose peaceful development all participate […] It would make the United States and China part of a common enterprise. Shared purposes, and the elaboration of them, would replace strategic uneasiness top some extent. It would enable the other major countries such as Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, India, and Australia to participate in the construction of a system perceived as joint rather than polarized between "Chinese" and "American" blocs. […] It would reflect the reality that the United States is an Asian power, and that many Asian powers demand it. And it responds to China's aspiration to a global role. […] In a Pacific Community effort, both China and the United States would have constructive relations with each other and all other participants, not as part of confronting blocs' (Kissinger 2011, pp. 528–529).

It seems worthwhile to further explore the ideas put forward by White and Kissinger. There are important differences between these ideas. Hugh White's Concert consists of cooperation only between the four largest powers in Asia, while Henry Kissinger's Community appears to involve at least all East and Southeast Asian countries plus the US, India, and Australia. But both point at the need for the US and China to come to an agreement among each other with regard to shared leadership as a fundamental precondition for further regional cooperation. Additional steps would involve the other major powers, and subsequently, in order to go beyond a great power concert, also the other countries in and around Southeast and East Asia. In order to assess the feasibility of such a top-down approach, we may start by focusing on the country that is currently at the top of the security hierarchy in East Asia and in the world: the United States. Thinking through the implications of Kissinger's and White's proposals is necessary in order to understand whether such ideas are feasible in the first place, and to see where, with regard to the US, the main obstacles and opportunities may lie. Of course China's role, too, is crucial and it is necessary to take into account not only the major powers but all, or at least the great majority, of the smaller countries in the region. But a US that is able and willing to work towards a Concert of Asia and/or a Pacific Community would seem the most elementary precondition.

To look into the position of the United States with regard to such a concert or community, this article will address three issues related to the proposals put forward by White and Kissinger. First, there is the role of the United States as a non-Asian country. Given the geographical context, what basis is there for the US to pursue a lasting leadership role in East Asia? Second, a co-leadership arrangement between

[4] Not to be confused with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (formerly the South Pacific Commission) or the idea of an Asia–Pacific Community proposed in 2010 by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

China and the US requires the acceptance of each other as equal powers in East and Southeast Asia (hereafter shortened to East Asia). What would it mean for the US to treat China as a security partner in East Asia on an equal basis, and is there any prospect that it might do so in the future? And third, in the event that Washington and Beijing would succeed in making their relationship more 'constructive', they would need to decide how they would involve the other major powers and the smaller Asia–Pacific countries. Because the US is a non-Asian country it is very likely that it would favour important roles for powers such as Japan and India, as well as continued regional integration that involves all of China's neighbours plus long-standing US allies such as Australia. Here the question is how the US might redefine its relations with its many military allies and strategic partners in a way that reflects its acceptance of China as a partner and an equal power in the region.

The US as a Resident Power in Asia

The status of the United States as a great power in East Asia dates back to the 1840s when it became a so-called treaty power in China.[5] Subsequently, the US established itself as a military power in East Asia, which it remains until this day. The US military position in the region comprises a central security alliance with Japan plus multiple complementary alliances and partnerships, a network of bases, and a permanent naval presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Moreover, the US became a Pacific Rim country when California became part of the United States in 1850. Hawaii, which became a state of the US in 1959, is located in the central Pacific Ocean. And in the west Pacific Ocean, the island of Guam is administered by, although not a part of, the United States. Furthermore, as a global power, the US is an influential actor in all regions of the world, including East Asia. It derives this influence from its prominent position in global governance institutions and from its strong economic involvement throughout the world.

The US presents itself to the outside world as a lasting great power in East Asia. Former secretary of State Clinton (2011) has made it clear that the US sees itself as playing a regional leadership role in the Asia–Pacific. The US government is eager to convey the message that it intends to retain this position indefinitely, while referring to the United States as a 'resident power' in Asia (WJLA 2012; Clinton 2012). In the words of the previous secretary of Defense, Leon Pannetta, 'The United States has long been deeply been involved in the Asia–Pacific. Through times of war, times of peace, under Democratic and Republican leaders and administrations, through rancor and through comity in Washington, through surplus and through debt. We were there then, we are here now, and we will be here for the future' (Panetta 2012). Or as President Obama put it: 'The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay' (Sydney Morning Herald 2011).

[5] The treaty powers included Britain, the US, France, Russia, Germany, and Japan, all of which, for varying periods of time, enjoyed treaty-based privileges in China that infringed on that country's sovereignty.

Is all of this enough to guarantee a lasting American role in East Asia? Britain, a previous non-Asian global power, once also had bases, an alliance with Japan, a naval presence, and significant economic activities in the region. The British even had extensive colonial territories throughout Asia. And yet the United Kingdom long age ceased to be a major security actor in East Asia. Of course there are important differences between the former British empire and the contemporary US. The latter is in a firmer position with regard to East Asia in two respects. First, because the United States is a Pacific Rim country, it is more directly connected to Asia than Britain was. This applies also to the security domain: it is natural for the US to have a permanent naval presence in the Pacific, and thus to be seen by Asians as a lasting maritime power in or at least close to their region. Second, the US may well be able to retain its position as one of the global powers. The international influence of Britain, as a relatively small country, was overshadowed by the economic and military clout of larger states. But the United States is one of the world's most populous and territorially extensive countries. Even if it will not remain the world's sole superpower forever, the US is still likely to be able to operate in the same league as other global powers. As long as this is the case, it is likely that the US will remain influential in such a strategically important region as East Asia.

Still, with the emergence of China, these factors do not assure a lasting US *leadership* role in East Asia. Its prominent role in contemporary East Asia is based not just on its maritime power and its global standing. Ultimately this position is based on the fact that the United States performs a role that is seen as useful by many Asian governments: for them the US acts as a counterweight, in some cases as a protector, against China. In this way, the United States is welcomed to stay in the region and to further deepen its involvement. Thus for the time being, the rise of China actually strengthens the American role in East Asia, as this increases the need for a counterweight against China. However, this does not mean that this will always remain so. Should the US ability or commitment to perform this balancing and protecting role erode, then it would no longer be regarded as useful by China's neighbouring countries (Van der Putten 2011, pp. 67–78). Also, if the American balancing effort would come at the expense of regional stability then many Asians might consider the cost too high. As China grows stronger, it will become increasingly difficult, and ultimately impossible, for the United States to retain the current basis for its role as one of the region's leaders.

There is also another reason why the current US approach is not likely to be sustainable indefinitely. It is a classic approach by an outside power, based on the fact that the Asian countries are divided among themselves. In other words, the US has an interest in the perpetuation of the status quo with regard to the issues that divide China and its neighbours. In the aftermath of the Second World War, as Kimie Hara has argued, the US government sowed the seeds for some, though certainly not all, of the disputes that contribute to present tensions between countries in the region. These include the territorial and maritime disputes between China, Taiwan, and various other countries in the South China Sea and the East China Sea (Hara 2007, pp. 187–188 and 193). What China and all of its neighbours have in common is that their interest in regional stability runs deeper than that of the US.

For the United States to truly become a resident power in East Asia it would need to align its interest in regional stability more closely with those of the Asian countries. Given the geographical context, this is possible only up a certain point. A conflict in Asia affects Asians more directly than it does Americans. Furthermore, a future leadership role for the US in East Asia will always rest at least partially on the need of Asian countries to counterbalance China. But the US would eventually need to find ways to do so that do not involve strategies that potentially endanger regional stability, and that contribute to the resolution of intra-Asian disputes. Unlikely as it may be that this will happen in the near future, it would increase the likelihood that China will accept a lasting co-leadership role for the United States in the region.

Accepting China as a Co-Leader

Accepting China as an equal partner to manage stability in East Asia would mean for the US to abandon any ambitions it may have to be the region's sole leader. It would likewise mean that the US would accept China's political system as it is. As pointed out by Hugh White, the US cannot be accepted by China as a co-leader in the region as long as it is seen by the Chinese Communist Party as an existential threat (White 2012a). Furthermore, given the centrality of Asia in global affairs and the reach of China's influence, American acceptance of China as an equal power in the East Asia would eventually amount to acceptance of China as a global equal. The close link between East Asian and global leadership was highlighted to by Hillary Clinton when, while referring to the on-going American strategic rebalance to Asia, she stated that 'a strategic turn to the (Asia–Pacific) region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership' (Clinton 2011).

The United States is not inclined to accept China as an equal power anytime soon. A major reason for this disinclination is that so far US leadership is not directly challenged by China. The Chinese economy is still smaller than the American one, US military power is still unmatched, and the Chinese government remains reluctant to become involved in global politics. Also regionally, within East Asia, the US can still retain its prominent position for now. There seems to be considerable scepticism in the United States about China's ability to achieve global power at a level similar to that of the US. Therefore, for many Americans it would seem premature to think about accepting China as an equal power.

A further reason for the US not be inclined to accept China as an equal power is that it does not want China to be one. Several factors appear to be relevant in this regard. First, the United States is accustomed to being a leader and wishes to retain this position. In the words of Hillary Clinton (2011), 'there should be no doubt that America has the capacity to secure and sustain (its) global leadership in this century as [it] did in the last.' This seems to imply a preference for a situation in which no other power can match the global standing of the US, although the possibility of joint leadership is not explicitly ruled out. And of course sharing power would involve compromising, which would mean that the US would have to give up on some (or even many) of its interests. Second, China's growth in power is seen as

undesirable from an American point of view, because this undermines the position of liberal values at the international level. American foreign policy is driven in part by the aim of strengthening liberal values abroad, and therefore the US would welcome a China that is increasingly liberal, politically as well as economically. However, such a process is currently not taking place and there is increasing concern in the US that, on the contrary, China's rise is weakening the appeal of liberalism in other countries, in particular in the developing world (Van der Putten 2013). And third, the US government regards China as unfit for global leadership until it takes on the degree of responsibility that corresponds with its international influence. Even though China is increasingly taking on greater international responsibility, the rate with which this progresses is seen as too low. This applies to a wide range of issues, ranging from nuclear proliferation to exchange rate policy, intellectual property rights, and climate change.

But if China continues to rise, what would then be the main considerations relevant for an American acceptance of China as an equal partner? A first major consideration would likely exist in the ideological sphere. The promotion of liberal values is a core element in US foreign policy. However, when it comes to addressing China's political system, the United States has long been pragmatic. Since the 1970s, the nature of China's political system has not led to direct interventions from the US, nor has it prevented the normalising of diplomatic relations or cooperation between the two powers on many issues. Yet at the same time, the American government has continued to state that it hopes that interaction with China contributes to political change in the long term. This leaves open the possibility of the US government giving some kind of support to pro-democracy forces inside China should these gain in prominence. Openly abandoning this stance, while in practice perhaps not a major change, would not only undermine American democratizing efforts elsewhere, but it would draw strong opposition from within the United States. Of course these ideological considerations would become irrelevant if China were to adopt a liberal democratic system similar to the American one, but this seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.

On the practical side, a second main consideration could relate to whether Chinese economic and foreign policies can coexist with core US interests, and whether or not they would show a China prepared to play the role of a responsible global leader. In the future, China may or may not behave ways that are perceived by the United States as friendly and internationally responsible. But if it does, and even though this would still involve substantial compromising for the United States, it would take away a major part of the pragmatic obstacles for a US strategy of power sharing. There is much debate on whether the ideological differences between the US and China can be overcome.[6] However, it seems likely that the level of Chinese power and China's actual international behaviour are the main determinants, since in the end they affect US interests far more deeply than matters related to ideology.

[6] For instance according to Amitav Acharya (2012), a great powers concert in Asia is unrealistic because it would require ideological convergence between the powers.

Redefining the Approach to Alliances and Multilateral Institutions

Currently the US has a dual approach towards East and Southeast Asia apart from China. On the one hand it continues to invest in its long-standing security cooperation on a bilateral basis with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand complemented by alliances and cooperative partnerships in and surrounding the region (Australia–New Zealand–India–Singapore). On the other hand, in recent years the United States has been making a strong effort to contribute to various multilateral forums and initiatives, including the ARF, EAS, ADMM+, Shangri-La Dialogue, the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and a potential Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement. As outlined by former Secretary of State Clinton, the US 'will continue to embed (its) relationship with China in a broader regional framework of security alliances, economic networks, and social connections' (Clinton 2011).

If the US were to work in a Concert of Asia setting, there would be important implications for this approach. The main consequence would be that a new forum would emerge for four-way security consultations between the Japan, the US, China, and India.[7] This would be more advantageous for the US than a regional G-2 with only China, because the concert would bring in two powers that are generally distrustful of China. Although it remains to be seen when and how India develops into a major actor in East Asia, the main difficulty in this set-up relates to Japan. For Japan to be accepted by the Chinese as a participant in this arrangement, it would need to be able to act independently from the US. It is unlikely that this is possible as long as the US-Japan security alliance exists in its present form, since this has turned Japan into a security client of the United States. Apart from the major changes that Japan itself would need to go through, the US would have to accept the severance or at least the downscaling of this close security relationship. This could have major consequences for the effectiveness of the military presence of the United States in Asia, which depends to an important extent on its bases in Japan (Van der Putten 2011, p. 73). Still, a Concert of Asia without Japanese participation would probably be even less appealing to the US.

In order to move from a Concert of Asia to an inclusive Pacific Community, there would be further important implications for the US. Probably the most obvious candidate to act as a basis from where to develop a multilateral framework for a Pacific Community is the East Asia Summit, supported by the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. The EAS and ADMM+ have the same 18 members, which include the US, China, India, Japan, plus the Southeast Asian countries, as well as South Korea, Australia, Russia, and New Zealand. The ARF has a wider membership, which includes also the same 18 countries who are in EAS/ADMM+. Apart from the question of how to deal with the additional ARF members, the three forums are already complementary. While the EAS revolves around an annual summit of government leaders, the ARF and

[7] Although not mentioned as such by White, a possible fifth partner might be Indonesia as the dominant power in Southeast Asia and with a significant demographic potential to become a major power.

ADMM+ bring together foreign ministers and defence ministers respectively. The Shangri-La Dialogue and APEC are important additional forums.

The US is contributing energetically to the build-up of this complex of multilateral mechanisms, and positioning itself in a central role in each of them. At the same time, America's bilateral security alliances throughout the region remain the primary pillar of its regional leadership role. However, if the US were to recognize China as an equal partner in East Asia then its interest in a multilateral approach would exceed the importance of its bilateral alliances. In the long run, the best chance for the US to retain a co-leadership role in the region lies in the firm integration of both itself and China in regional multilateral institutions that act as the primary platform for the management of security and economic affairs. As with a concert set-up, here too the US would need to make certain sacrifices in order to draw in China. It would need to downplay the role of its security alliances and refrain from attempting to position multilateral forums as institutionalized tools the main aim of which is to pressurize or isolate China.

Conclusion

The previous analysis focused only on the implications of some of the main elements of a Concert of Asia or a Pacific Community for the interests and strategy of the United States. Obviously a similar analysis should also be made with regard to China, Japan, India, and other countries before conclusions may be drawn about the feasibility of these ideas for a more stable region. This article constitutes primarily an attempt to benefit from ideas positioned by Hugh White and Henry Kissinger to stimulate the debate about the future of regional security in East and Southeast Asia. Although in the foreseeable future it is very unlikely that the US will decide to work with China towards a Concert of Asia as proposed by White, or a Pacific Community along the lines set out by Kissinger, in the longer run such a major shift in the US strategy cannot be ruled out. Assuming that China will continue its rise, this shift would probably serve America's long-term interests better than continuing the current US approach.

As China becomes stronger, the United States eventually is likely to face a choice between an increasingly dangerous strategy of confrontation and various degrees of accommodation. With regard to East Asia, the form of accommodation that would be the most beneficial one for the US would be the sharing of regional leadership with China on an equal and stable basis. As a non-Asian country, the United States can only hope to achieve this by betting strongly on regional multilateralism. Moreover, a Pacific Community is feasible only if this based on a concert of great powers that is tightly integrated into an inclusive multilateral system that involves also the smaller countries. Inevitably, all those involved would need to make difficult sacrifices. For the United States, the main subject of this paper, these would include ending or at least substantially downgrading its security alliances with Japan and other countries, and abandoning any ambition to change China's political system. Possibly it would even include accepting China as an equal power at the global level. All of this seems unthinkable for now, and it cannot be ruled out that

China's rise slows down or that the US will prefer confrontation over accommodation. Also, a crucial yet unknown element is whether in the long run a powerful China would accept a shared leadership position with the United States in East Asia rather than an exclusive one. And yet, a Pacific Community may be the best available opportunity for a stable and peaceful East Asia, and if this is the case then there is a shared interested in achieving this and in addressing the obstacles and uncertainties such as outlined in this paper.

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