White’s Not Right: The US Cannot Share Power in Asia

Letter from Mark J. Valencia


Dear Editors,

This book has raised a hullabaloo in international relations circles — and deservedly so. It is a bold book with controversial generalities, caveats and conclusions, and deserves equally bold responses.

I agree with Kang that White’s proposal of a “Concert of Asia” — in which the US and China agree to treat each other as equals — is a non-starter, but not because East Asian states will not accept it. They will have very little influence on the matter. The US simply has neither the experience nor the inclination to share power in this manner. And it is not likely to start now. That would be disastrous for whichever domestic political party is in power at the time.

Kang states that East Asian states have not “flocked” to the US side. Well, perhaps they haven’t flocked, but many Southeast Asian states are sure leaning that way. Indeed, over the last century the West dominated parts of Southeast Asia, both physically and with its “soft power” — including its languages, values, pop culture and economic system. Japan and South Korea are already American military allies, and Taiwan is too, unofficially.

Such supposed neutrals as Indonesia and Malaysia are now, reluctantly or not, leaning toward the US. Of course Singapore, as a “strategic partner,” and the Philippines, as a US ally, are already “there.” In some of these countries, Western colonial legacies and dominant soft power have assured that. Thailand is a holdover US military ally from another era and often goes its own way regarding foreign policy. But if its behavior during the Second World War is any guide, it will bend toward the most powerful. Vietnam has been very public in its attempts to draw the US in as a balancer to China. And the US has even made political inroads in Myanmar — heretofore a staunch China supporter — while former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made an unusual but in this context understandable visit to Brunei in September 2012.

But as White would probably argue, this Western “invasion” has not completely erased the ancient influence of Chinese culture — and the fear of, and respect for, China. Many Southeast Asian countries are fundamentally realistic and take the long view. China will always be there. Their valid concern is that this upstart — the US — and its power, both soft and hard, may eventually recede like the outgoing tide only to be replaced by a Chinese storm surge.

Indeed, one of White’s general conclusions emphasized by Kang is that the US should not try to compete with China for the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians because it might lose — or at least not win a clear-cut victory. Many Asian elites may wish this to be so, not for base reasons but perhaps because deep down they want some nation to serve as a check and balance on the lone superpower and to preserve alternatives regarding human political, philosophical and social values and organization, both regionally and globally. Indeed, some observers say that deep in their guts many Asian intellectuals resent US cultural arrogance and would vicariously enjoy seeing the US get some come-uppance from China.

According to White, Asian states will continue to support America as long as America is the foundation of peace and stability in the region. “But with its ‘rebalancing toward Asia,’ the US has become a source of instability in the region. And the Southeast Asian countries know well that everywhere the US goes militarily, culture clash, and often political chaos and venal dictators soon, follow. Memories of the Korean and Vietnam tragedies are also fresher in Asia than in the US.” For all these good reasons, White argues that a US attempt to create a balancing coalition in Asia is unlikely to succeed.

But I am afraid that is wrong. Fear conquers all. Southeast Asian states and their people fear Chinese political and military domination more. There are complex reasons why this is so, not the least because of their uneasiness regarding the Chinese minorities within their own populations. Many Asian states have proven to be very flexible when it comes to survival. And they will lean toward the harder of the hard powers, not out of admiration or respect but out of fear, and the US well knows this. Indeed, the US will push and pull the recalcitrant states off the fence, probably with some help from China’s inexplicable “own-goal” style of relations with Asia.

This is not a situation of hope racing fear, but rather one of fear racing fear. Of whom are they most afraid? The answer is the unknown and the unpredictable — in this case China. That is why the US will continue to have primacy in Asia for some time to come. It is the “devil” that they know.

Unlike Kang, I believe that the die is cast and that there will likely be a long-term US-China struggle for the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians. The struggle may even summon forth the four horses of the apocalypse. Indeed, the region is likely eventually to be rent asunder by this Sino-US competition, both between and even within states. But in the near term, the US will retain primacy.

Sincerely yours,

Mark J. Valencia