The Next Battle for Hearts and Minds

The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power
By Hugh White

Reviewed by David C. Kang

FOR ALL THE RECENT ATTENTION on rising tensions between the United States, 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.” White 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. 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. On the other hand, 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. There is no doubt that maritime disputes are becoming increasingly acute, and that China is behaving far more aggressively now 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 China and its neighbors becomes even larger than it is today, then to “just wait” for balancing is more a guess than any considered analysis of China itself, and provides little insight into the decisions that 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 40 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 US. Singapore’s Foreign Minister, K Shanmugam, gave a speech in Washington in February 2012 in which he said:

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.

Meanwhile, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa commented on the US agreement to base troops in the Australian port city 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 two officials are not fringe elements with a pro-China view, they are respected and sober leaders from countries with deep ties to both the US and China. Similarly, George J. Gilboy and Eric Heginbotham recently cautioned against viewing India as a natural partner of the US, noting that “China has moved further in negotiating territorial disputes with India,” and that “Indian and Chinese voting records in the UN General Assembly show that on issues related to Iran, Sudan, Burma, Middle East security and nuclear proliferation, China and India more often align with one another than either aligns with the US.”

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“enough is enough,” pushing our Asian allies to focus on priorities that Americans think are more important. An influential US think tank released a report impinging Japanese and Korean leaders to “re-examine 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 ominous Chinese threat. Indeed, Michael Mazarr recently criticized the pivot as a strategy for a “Soviet-style deterrence challenge … [emphasiz- ing] military forces, ‘enhanced credibility,’ ‘strategic partnerships’ — to deal with challenges that are essentially unstrategic.” Leaders in Washington may be aware of this
tension and may not view East Asia in such stark military terms. However, it is also probably safe to say that some of the dominant themes in public discussion about the American pivot are an emphasis on US military moves and a tendency to view the region in zero-sum terms. Indeed, some US officials have privately admitted that in 2011 the administration put perhaps too much emphasis on the military aspect of the pivot, and not enough on a clear economic and diplomatic agenda for the region.

In fact, White in his book points out the very real dangers that could occur from an American return to Asia that mainly emphasizes a vigorous military presence: entrapment or abandonment. East Asian countries must worry about abandonment: the question of whether the US would actually intervene militarily on behalf of Asian countries against China. For example, while Vietnamese leaders may enjoy having an occasional US warship dock at Cam Ranh Bay, they are probably not so naïve as to think this is a guarantee of US military support in the unlikely event of a Vietnam-China war.

In contrast, the US must be wary of the risks of entrapment, or being dragged into a conflict in which it has no direct interests. If America too openly voices support for Southeast Asian countries in their maritime disputes with China, for example, it will raise expectations in those countries that America will offer concrete support. “If it doesn’t, the credibility of its claims to the lead role in Asian security is seriously threatened. If it does, relations with China will plummet. It is far from clear that America’s interests in the Spratly Islands are worth a war with China,” White argues.

While renewed US 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, present a clear economic agenda for the region and avoid viewing American interests in Asia in purely strategic terms. East Asian leaders and peoples are clearly telling the US that while they share some of its 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 US. 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 US must inevitably lead a balancing coalition against China is another question.

It may be that soon most East Asian countries will 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, as White suggests. 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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