

Kishore Mahbubani
Varigonda Kesava Chandra
Kristen Tang *Editors*

Can Asians Think of Peace?

Essays on Managing Conflict
in the Asian Century

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Introduction



Kishore Mahbubani

Europe is lost. Asia is not.

This one insight shows how the world has turned upside down in the last 100 years. In 1925, Europe could almost effortlessly rule the world. All corners of the world were colonized by European powers. Indeed, the sun never set on the British empire. As I document in my memoirs, *Living the Asian Century*, when I was a child growing up in the British colony of Singapore in the 1950s, I believed that Asians were inherently inferior to Europeans.

Today, many Asian societies are outperforming European societies in many areas. One area is geopolitics. The following claim should be made into an eternal geopolitical truism: wars reflect geopolitical incompetence; peace reflects geopolitical competence. While the European Union (EU) remains an oasis of peace and prosperity, with no prospects of war among its member states, many EU members now live in fear of the outcome of the Ukraine war. Tragically, the Ukraine war, as Henry Kissinger suggested to me in my last one-on-one conversation with him, was clearly avoidable. All that the EU member states had to do was to recognise and respect the security concerns of Ukraine's eternal neighbour, Russia. One of America's best-known diplomats, Ambassador Bill Burns (who was America's Ambassador to Russia from 2005 to 2008) warned that "Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just Putin)." The legendary American strategic thinker George Kennan had warned earlier about NATO expansion more explicitly. Yet, despite all these warnings, the leading EU member states agreed (under pressure from the Neo-cons in the Bush Administration) to include in the 2008 NATO Summit declaration that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's

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Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations.” The effect of all this was to create a scary strategic nightmare for Russia. None of this justifies Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. But it does make clear that some degree of geopolitical competence by the Europeans could have prevented the war in Ukraine.

This volume of essays demonstrates the importance of geopolitical competence for managing conflict and generating peace. It features 61 policy essays that the Asian Peace Programme (APP) has published monthly from July 2020 to December 2024. The APP was set up as a peace programme to produce policy essays that could help to manage conflict and contribute to peace in Asia. It is housed in the Asia Research Institute (ARI) of the National University of Singapore (NUS).

This is a volume about Asia, not Europe. Yet, the simple contrast with Europe above indicates how remarkable it is that Asia has now enjoyed a long peace for over 45 years now. There have been no major wars in East, Southeast and South Asia since the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979. While there have been skirmishes, tensions, rivalries and occasional minor clashes (as between India and Pakistan), there have been no major wars. No major geopolitical expert predicted this long peace in Asia. Instead, they predicted the opposite. Aaron Friedberg wrote in 1993, “While civil wars and ethnic strife will continue for some time to smoulder along Europe’s peripheries, in the long run it is Asia that seems far more likely to be the cockpit of great power conflict. The half millennium during which Europe was the world’s primary generator of war (as well as of wealth and knowledge) is coming to a close. But, for better and for worse, Europe’s past could be Asia’s future.” At the end of the Cold War, the conventional wisdom was that Europe would march towards peace and Asia, especially East Asia, would march towards war. Instead, as we now know, the opposite happened. Why?

One clear difference between the Asian mind and the European mind is that Asians tend to be pragmatic, while the Europeans tend to be ideological. Given the enormous diversity within Asia, the Asian societies understand that human societies are inherently different. And they must learn to cooperate even while they are different. Hence, while the EU insists that all of its member states must have the same political system, ASEAN accepts a diversity of political systems among its members.

One result of this pragmatic streak is that Asians are prepared to compromise and meet each other halfway. The one relationship in East Asia that may bear the closest resemblance to the Ukraine-Russia relationship is the Vietnam-China relationship. Just as Ukraine is much smaller than Russia, so too is Vietnam much smaller than China. Just as Ukraine and Russia share common cultural roots, so too do Vietnam and China. Vietnam is the only state in Southeast Asia that has a Sinic, rather than Indic, cultural phase. Just as Ukraine has at various points in its history been absorbed into the Russian empire (including as a member of the Soviet Union), Vietnam was also occupied by China for a thousand years, roughly from 111 BC to 938 AD. And, just as there has been hostility recently between Ukraine and Russia, there has also been recent hostility between Vietnam and China, leading up to a major war between the two in 1979. For over a decade, the Sino-Vietnam border

was a dangerous border with hundreds of thousands of troops poised to confront one another. Chinese and Vietnamese troops were engaged in frequent violent skirmishes (short of full-scale war) along their border, leading to thousands of casualties. Barbed wire, fences and other border fortifications stretched along this border.

Today, the barbed wire is gone. Instead of hundreds of thousands of soldiers confronting one another, there is flourishing trade. In 1991, the year when the border conflict ended and the two countries normalised their relationship, China-Vietnam trade amounted to only US\$32 million. In 2023, the trade volume between the two countries had reached US\$172 billion, an increase of 5375 times. China has invested heavily in Vietnam. Even more amazingly, in December 2024, Vietnam has reached an agreement with China to increase rail connectivity from Hanoi and Haiphong to Lao Cai along the Vietnam-China border. This will further boost trade links between China and Vietnam. Both countries continue to explore eventual high speed rail connectivity between Hanoi and Kunming, the capital of the neighbouring Chinese province of Yunnan. In my policy essay for the APP (published 27 September 2021), I explain how, by applying the three principles of peace, “Freeze, talk and trade”, Vietnam and China have successfully managed their relationship, despite a two-thousand-year history of tensions.

None of these substantive ties between China and Vietnam mean that the suspicions and historical animosities have disappeared. Indeed, Vietnam and China continue to have difficulties resolving their overlapping claims in the South China Sea. Quite remarkably, there have been tensions in the South China Sea between the two countries as recently as 2024. The continuing tensions between Vietnam and China shows the wisdom of the old Vietnamese saying that every leader of Vietnam must be able to stand up to China—and must also be able to get along with China. Someone who can’t do both can’t lead Vietnam. Europe could benefit by learning some geopolitical wisdom from Vietnam.

Just imagine how different recent history would have been if the EU leaders had encouraged Ukraine to both stand up to Russia and also get along with Russia. If they had adopted this pragmatic Asian approach, war could have been avoided between Ukraine and Russia. Instead of encouraging Ukraine to be pragmatic, the EU leaders insisted on the right of Ukraine to join NATO. One wonders if European leaders like Jens Stoltenberg and Ursula von der Leyen, who insisted on Ukraine’s right to join NATO, even considered a simple cost-benefit analysis of taking this ideological stand. Technically, they were right. Ukraine had the sovereign right to do so. However, if the cost of doing so was a war, was it truly worth it to assert this right? At the end of the day, geopolitics is a cruel business. It always requires cunning, not political naivete, to succeed in geopolitics. And the EU leaders who insisted on Ukraine’s right to join NATO showed a great degree of political naivete because they didn’t even consider the possibility that the US would subsequently elect a Donald Trump who didn’t see the value of the US spending blood or treasure on this distant war. The Europeans now live in fear of being abandoned. All this could have been avoided if the Europeans had shown some geopolitical cunning, instead of naivete.

Pragmatism is a wiser path in geopolitics. The biggest geopolitical challenge that most Asian states face is the accelerating geopolitical contest between US and China in the coming decades. Most observers are pessimistic and predict that relations will steadily deteriorate and, possibly, lead to war. In his APP essay (published 17 August 2023), Graham Allison, the distinguished Harvard University professor, has suggested that both sides could learn a lesson from China's history and strive to achieve a "rivalry partnership" similar to that between the rival Song and Liao dynasties of ancient China. As Allison writes, "US and China are locked in conditions defined by two contradictory imperatives: to compete in the greatest rivalry of all time, and to cooperate for each to ensure its own survival... clues from the "rivalry partnership" that gave the Song and Liao 120 years without war can be instructive." By resurrecting this ancient concept of "rivalry-partnership", Professor Allison has demonstrated how deep the roots of Asian pragmatism are.

This deep Asian tendency towards pragmatism also explains why most Asian states are resisting pressure from the US and China to take sides in this US-China contest. This is also brought out in several essays in this volume. Essays by Professors Hugh White (25 September 2020) and Brendan Taylor (25 October 2023), the former Indonesian diplomat Dino Djalal (1 June 2021), the Vietnamese scholars Nguyen Cong Tung (29 August 2023) and Huong Le Thu (25 September 2024), have emphasized that Asian middle powers and smaller states must reiterate to both China and the US that they will not 'take sides' in the context between them but will instead develop good relations with both. This message that Asian countries would not 'take sides' in a US-China conflict has been consistently reiterated by Asian middle powers. For instance, in May 2024, Prabowo, the President-elect of Indonesia, said, "We invite the U.S, the Japanese, the Koreans, the European. The fact that we are friends with you doesn't mean we can't be friends with China, India, Russia." This consistent messaging from governments and scholars alike has been crucial in preventing the emergence of Cold War-style blocs in Asia. We hope that APP has contributed in a small way to this messaging.

Just as European leaders may have made a mistake by being ideological, rather than pragmatic, on the Ukraine issue, there's an equal danger that Washington DC could end up being ideological, rather than pragmatic, on the US-China geopolitical contest. As a result of massive groupthink, there has been a major demonization of China in the discussions on China in Washington DC. In 2023, when the House of Representatives set up a committee on the US-China contest, they decided to name it the "Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party." When these US Congressmen describe this contest as one between a country, the US, and a political party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), they don't understand that the rest of the world sees this as a contest between a country, the US, and a four-thousand-year-old civilization. In theory, the US is an open society. Yet, in practice, it often behaves like an open society with a closed mind.

This is why we believe that a volume of essays like this one can provide a valuable resource to policymakers in capitals like Washington DC and Beijing as it will make them aware of how Asian peace and security issues are seen by credible and

reputed scholars from around the world. The most dangerous issue in the US-China relationship is the Taiwan issue, as it is the most likely issue to trigger a military confrontation between the US and China. Here, too, a little pragmatism can be helpful, as suggested by two essays in this volume. Ryan Hass of Brookings Institution writes how America should manage the Taiwan Strait issue (22 September 2022): “it is unwise for Washington to steal problems from the future by predetermining cross-Strait outcomes... America’s interests are better served by... support for preservation of cross-Strait peace and stability and opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo.” In a complementary essay on the Taiwan conflict, Richard Hu of Macau University also writes (4 November 2022): “Instead of sleepwalking into a spiral of crisis and even war over Taiwan or other thorny issues, it would be better for Washington and Beijing to clearly communicate their concerns and red lines.” American pragmatism on the Taiwan issue can help to preserve peace across the Taiwan Strait.

The US-China contest isn’t the only geopolitical challenge faced in the region. There are other challenges, like the Sino-Indian contest. Fortunately, the Sino-Indian relationship has taken a positive turn. After not having had any bilateral meetings after the June 2020 Galwan incident, the leaders of China, Xi Jinping, and India, Narendra Modi, had a bilateral meeting on the fringes of the BRICS Summit held in Kazan, Russia, on October 23, 2024. Fortunately for us, Professor Kanti Bajpai agreed to write another essay for APP (22 November 2024) explaining this positive turn. Professor Bajpai argues that the prospect of a military stalemate, growing economic interdependence, and an increasingly cautious approach to relations with the United States, propelled China and India towards a *détente*.

At the end of the day, this positive turn in Sino-Indian relations also confirms that the spirit of pragmatism is alive and well in Beijing and New Delhi. Another troubled relationship in Asia is the one between India and Pakistan. Here, sadly, there have been no comparable U-turns. There have been no direct meetings between the leaders of India and Pakistan since 2015. Yet, while relations between the two countries have remained frozen, there has also been some silent cooperation. In his essay for APP (8 November 2024), Dr Farhan Siddiqi points out that the successful, long-term implementation of military ceasefire along a restive India-Pakistan border in Kashmir since 2021, and the continuation of indirect trade between the people of the two countries (to the tune of nearly US\$ 1.5 billion in 2023), demonstrates the ability of the governments, military and peoples of the two countries to cooperate successfully with each other, notwithstanding the continuing downturn in the bilateral relationship.

In the course of our long history, humanity has also accumulated some wisdom for managing relations between bitter adversaries. Indeed, diplomacy was invented over two thousand years ago to enable diplomats to visit enemy courts without fearing that their heads would be chopped off. In short, diplomacy was invented to enable enemies, not friends, to talk to each other. This ancient wisdom remains valid today.

Curiously, the United States, the most powerful country in the world, has inverted this ancient wisdom by insisting that it will only establish diplomatic relations with

friendly states, not with adversaries like North Korea or Iran, two Asian states. If Washington DC could be persuaded to follow ancient wisdom and establish diplomatic relations with both North Korea and Iran, precisely because they are enemies, we would have taken one or two small steps towards peace.

The good news in Asia is that all Asian great powers have followed ancient wisdom and established diplomatic relations with all their fellow Asian states, even if they are adversaries. This practice also confirms that the culture of pragmatism is a deeply embedded trait in Asian cultures. This pragmatism may also explain why much of Asia has remained at peace.

Here, I should add that Asian pragmatism is also demonstrated by our willingness to learn best practices from the rest of the world, especially the West. Japan was the first Asian economy to successfully develop and modernise itself because of its willingness to learn best practices from both the US and Europe. Japan's example was then followed by the four Asian tigers after World War II, namely by South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The ASEAN countries followed next. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, China and India followed suit.

Since then, there has been a remarkable economic resurgence in Asia. All this has led to a tremendous shift of economic power to Asia. A few dramatic examples will drive home this point. In 1980, the combined EU economy was ten times larger than that of China. Today, both are about the same size. By 2050, the EU's economy will be half that of China. But it's not just China that is growing. In 2000, the German economy was three times bigger than ASEAN's combined economy. Now, the German economy is only 1.18 times larger. By 2030, ASEAN will be bigger than Germany.

In 1950, Henry Luce could confidently proclaim that the twentieth century would be the American century, as the US alone had a larger economy than the combined GDP of all 54 Asian countries. Amazingly, in the year 2000, when the twenty-first century arrived, the US economy was still larger than Asia's. However, by 2020, Asia's economy had become 1.3 times larger. By 2050, Asia's economy will be at least 2.5 times larger. By then, or earlier, it would be evident to all of us that we will be swimming in the middle of the Asian century.

I have come to learn inadvertently that many in our world are psychologically preparing themselves for this forthcoming Asian century. When Springer Nature published my book, *The Asian 21st Century*, in January 2022, as an open-access volume, they hoped to achieve 20,000 downloads. Instead, there have been over 3.86 million downloads in over 160 countries. This massive number of downloads in all corners of the world provides a small but concrete indication that many thoughtful people around the world are preparing themselves psychologically for the emergence of an Asian twenty-first century to replace the American century we experienced in the twentieth century.

What is uncertain is whether it will be a peaceful Asian century. Here the jury is still out. Unfortunately, history teaches us that when great shifts in power take place, they are accompanied by great power contestations, as demonstrated by the US-China contest, which has been discussed above. Yet, this is not the only geopolitical faultline in Asia. There are many more, including those between India and

Pakistan, North and South Korea, the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, to name a few.

Despite the urgency and importance of preserving peace in Asia, there are no major initiatives to generate and preserve peace in Asia. In a small attempt to help fill this vacuum, we decided to launch the Asian Peace Programme (APP) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) on July 1, 2020. From the very beginning, we conceived of the APP as a small operation. Yet, we hoped that this small programme could have a positive impact. The metaphor we use constantly is to compare the APP to a small acupuncture needle. When an acupuncture needle is inserted in the right place with the right amount of pressure, it can do wonders in alleviating pain and even initiating healing processes.

As discussed above, we hope that these APP essays have contributed positively to the larger discourse on peace and conflict management. We also know that in some cases, our essays have reached the eyes of key policymakers. Very few jobs are as critical as that of the Secretary of State of the USA. Most of the officeholders, including Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, have impossible daily schedules. Yet, despite this, we have been told by reliable sources that he read the argument of Dr Van Jackson (11 January 2022) and acknowledged that the State Department should “do right by Asia”, by developing an “economic peace strategy”, rather than a securitised relationship, with Asia.

This is why we are delighted that Springer Nature has decided to publish this volume of essays. A lot of wisdom is contained in many of them. It would be sad to lose it. By republishing them in this open access volume, we hope that they will reach a larger audience. It would be wonderful if this volume were to be downloaded as much as *The Asian 21st Century* has been. This would send a clear signal that the minds of the world are focused equally on the promise and perils of the Asian century. If this volume helps, even in a small way, to stave off the geopolitical perils of our century, it would have made a noble contribution to humanity’s eternal quest for peace.

Kishore Mahbubani, a Distinguished Fellow of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) of the National University of Singapore (NUS), is the Head and Coordinator of the Asian Peace Programme.

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Asian Ideas for Peace and Conflict Amelioration

Can Asians Speak Truth to Power?



Hugh White

In Asia, an old threat to peace is returning. For many decades, it has seemed almost unthinkable that the region's major powers could again engage in a full-scale war, as they did 75 years ago.

Today, the United States and China confront each other as bitter rivals. Each seeks strategic dominance in East Asia in the "Asian century": the US wants to retain the primacy it has exercised for over 100 years, and China wants to take its place.

The stakes are high. Neither side seeks war—in fact, both are keen to avoid it—but each seems to assume it can get what it wants without a conflict. Both are increasingly engaging in military posturing in a bid to convince each other to withdraw from the contest.

The dangers of this situation are acute. A minor clash in somewhere like the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait could happen at any time, and escalate into a full-scale regional war, and even a nuclear war.

And once the fighting starts, neither side is likely to show restraint.

The consequences for the nations and peoples of Asia would be horrific. It is therefore vital and urgent to defuse this risk. This can best be achieved by easing the strategic rivalry driving the tensions.

To further that goal, states in the Asia-Pacific have to look to both Beijing and Washington, as the two rivals share responsibility for the escalating rivalry. But where to start? I think Washington offers the more promising policy opportunities—because they look to the region for support against China.

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From Washington's end, the contest is driven by unrealistic assumptions about its future role in Asia.

Many Americans still expect that the US can remain the dominant strategic power in Asia for decades to come, despite China's rise. They assume the massive shift in wealth to China makes no fundamental difference to the region's strategic order. These naive hopes are driven in part by unrealistic assessments of Asian attitudes to China and the US.

A surprising number of key figures in Washington still assume—wrongly—that countries across East Asia and the Western Pacific are eager to line up on America's side in a new Cold War against China. Americans think they can rely on the unwavering support of Beijing's neighbours to offset China's growing power, help contain Chinese ambitions and ensure that the US remains dominant.

This is plainly false. Of course, everyone in the region is anxious about China's power, and how it will be used. And there is an acceptance that a strong US role in Asia is the best way to balance and limit Chinese influence, so we all want Washington to remain actively engaged in the region.

But everyone also values its relations with China, and none wants to be drawn into a new Cold War against it.

So Washington and Beijing have to find a way to accommodate each other—and that means the US has to make some space for China, because the Chinese government cannot and will not accept US primacy the way it has in the past. So Asia has to support the US in balancing China, but not in containing it.

Why doesn't Washington understand this? It is partly our fault. Countries in Asia have not generally been blunt enough with Americans about how we see developments in Asia and the region's strategic future.

And that is partly because we have not been clear ourselves about what has been going on as old-style power politics returns to Asia. The region has been too ready to believe that power politics is a thing of the past, and that the "Asean Way", which has worked so well among the middle-size countries of Southeast Asia, will work just as well to soothe relations among competing major powers.

Alas, that is not proving to be the case.

So states in East Asia and the Western Pacific have a clear task. We have to develop a much clearer and more realistic shared understanding of the risks the region faces from the rising strategic rivalry between America and China, of how they can best be managed in the interests of the region, and convey that to both rivals, but especially to Washington.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech to the Shangri La Dialogue in 2019 was an excellent start to this process. "Small states like Singapore can do little to influence the big powers but we are not entirely without agency," Lee said.

But much more needs to be done. Leading Asian countries should get together and have a frank and realistic exchange on the dangerous trends in Asia, and try to develop a shared view about how they can be addressed.

This must include especially a view on the role we believe the US can and should play in the region in the decades ahead. And it should include clear messages about what Asian states are willing or not willing to do to support America against China.

And then they should, separately and together, convey those ideas to Washington in the plainest possible terms.

Because until US policymakers understand how the Asia-Pacific region thinks about these issues, they will not understand that their future in Asia must be based on some kind of accommodation with China.

And until they understand that, there will be no constructive engagement between Beijing and Washington about their future strategic relationship, no easing of their rivalry, and the risk of major war will keep growing.

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Nuclear Deterrence 3.0



Rakesh Sood

When Trump leaves office and Biden takes over, humanity should breathe a huge sigh of relief. Trump is the only recent President to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. In August 2017, Trump warned North Korea, “They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen...” Even as President-elect, Trump had already put the nuclear option on the table. Responding to a question on whether he would rule out using nuclear weapons, in April 2016, he said, “Would there be a time when it could be used? Possibly. Possibly.” This is one reason why the Doomsday Clock, established in 1947 by a group of scientists who developed the first nuclear weapons but now wanted to convey the risk it posed to humanity, was calibrated in 2020 to 100 s to midnight, the closest to a global catastrophe that it has ever been.

Despite this stark warning from the Doomsday Clock, many nuclear strategic experts tell us that we should feel more secure. After all, the nuclear taboo has held since 1945 despite the Cold War. US-USSR/Russia arms control agreements have helped reduce nuclear weapons stockpiles from nearly 65,000 in late-1970s to less than 15,000. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that entered into force in 1970 for 25 years with about 50 states was extended indefinitely in 1995 and is the most widely accepted treaty, with 190 adherents.

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) may well be the most universal treaty but it has reached the limits of its success. The five nuclear-weapon-states party to it (USA, Russia, UK, France and China) blithely ignore their responsibility for nuclear disarmament, convinced that NPT legitimises their possession of nuclear weapons and the four non-NPT countries (Israel, Pakistan, India and North Korea) have built weapons for their own security reasons. Indeed, in a direct violation of the spirit of the NPT, Trump said blithely to Bob Woodward, “I

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have built a nuclear – a weapons system that nobody’s ever had in this country before. We have stuff that you haven’t seen or heard about.” William Lambers, a nuclear weapons specialist, has observed that “while for over 60 years presidents in both parties worked to reduce nuclear weapons and the likelihood of their use, Trump has begun unravelling these efforts.”

Deterrence 1.0, which governed the US-Soviet Union nuclear rivalry during the Cold War, was characterised by arms control agreements and efforts to curb global proliferation. Deterrence 2.0 characterised the post-Cold War era of unipolarity, when the US largely determined the global nuclear agenda. The US strengthened its Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) system, which was intended to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons. However, this had an unintended consequence as China and Russia embarking on their own nuclear modernisation programmes. During this period, new nuclear-weapons states emerged: India and Pakistan (that were not signatories to the NPT); and North Korea (which withdrew from the NPT).

In the current changed political reality, old instruments of US-Soviet arms control and non-proliferation no longer work. Secondly, new developments in cyber and space technologies as well as hypersonic missiles and missile defence systems are challenging old deterrence equations. In Covid terminology, the challenge has mutated and old prescriptions do not help. Today’s politics is marked by growing major power rivalry, sharpening nuclear multipolarity. More usable weapons and blurring of the nuclear-conventional line creates a permissive scenario, raising the likelihood of the non-use taboo being breached. Old arms control agreements are under strain and some (such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the Treaty on Open Skies) have collapsed. The stage is set for Deterrence 3.0 except that this time, it is not a ‘known-unknown’ but an ‘unknown-unknown’.

Indications are that US President-elect Joe Biden is inclined towards the Russian proposal to extend New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty). This treaty lapses on 5 February 2021. This will provide some breathing room. But, will this be enough to restore nuclear sanity? Traditional arms control and non-proliferation believers believe ‘Yes’ but the Doomsday Clock indicates otherwise. Bridging this gap is necessary and while it does not mean discarding old instruments or treaties, it does mean realising their limitations in today’s nuclear world.

This is why the world needs Deterrence 3.0.

Deterrence 3.0 has to create a new consensus for a multipolar nuclear world, a world not of nuclear parity but asymmetry in terms of both sizes and nature of arsenals. This asymmetry in turn exacerbates mistrust, where some countries believe that ambiguity and unpredictability strengthen their deterrence. Such need to preserve ambiguity makes cooperative verification difficult, especially when cyber and AI developments are heightening risks of an accidental nuclear collision.

The Biden administration therefore provides an opportunity to step back from the Trump Administration’s hyperbole of ‘fire and fury’. We should use this opportunity to create a platform where the nine nuclear-weapon-states can at least meet, have intensive discussion and agree that preventing the use of nuclear weapons is a shared responsibility. They should also exchange views on how to step back from

escalatory postures; and share experiences on fail-safe, critical and secure communication channels to be employed in times of crisis. Deterrence 3.0 recognises that nuclear weapons cannot be wished away. What is critical is to reduce their salience in security doctrines and ensure that they are never used.

There are two complementary approaches, one doctrinal and the other technical. The first is the policy of no-first-use. In other words, nuclear weapons would be used only for retaliatory purposes. This diminishes the role of nuclear weapons.

The second is de-alerting or increasing the lead-time between the decision to use a nuclear weapon and the time that it takes to implement the nuclear strike. The issues of hair-trigger-alert (which enables nuclear weapons to be launched in minutes) and highly centralised control has been the subject of debate and discussion in the US in recent years.

In Asia, where several nuclear weapons states are locked in decades-long conflicts, Deterrence 3.0 is crucial in ensuring that conflicts do not escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. This includes China and India, as well as nuclear flashpoint regions such as South Asia and the Korean Peninsula. In the India-China context, the nuclear dimension has never surfaced because both countries maintain a no-first-use policy. However, in South Asia, both India and Pakistan have experienced many close shaves: Kargil in 1999, the terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament (2001) and in Mumbai (2008), and the latest incident in Pulwama, Kashmir, in 2019, leading to the crash of an Indian jet in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Given these close shaves, the world must once again focus on the dangers of an accidental nuclear exchange.

The goal of Deterrence 3.0 is to ensure that once again, the Doomsday Clock is recalibrated far away from midnight. We will all sleep better when that happens.

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Asia, Say No to NATO: The Pacific Has No Need of the Destructive Militaristic Culture of the Atlantic Alliance



Kishore Mahbubani

“America is back,” U.S. President Joe Biden has announced to the world—but in Southeast Asia, the United States is playing catch-up again. And it has much to recover. The last 4 years witnessed Washington’s dwindling diplomatic and political capital in the region.

The United States has no regional initiative of significance. It has excluded itself from two economic groupings: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans Pacific Partnership. In 2017, then-President Donald Trump did attend the ASEAN–U.S. summit in the Philippines, but missed out on all four East Asia summits during his term. U.S. embassies in four ASEAN countries (Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, and the Philippines) have been operating without ambassadors, and the United States is the only major country that does not have a permanent representative to the ASEAN Secretariat. In the Philippines and Indonesia, getting too close to Trump was seen as a political liability—which explains why Indonesian President Joko Widodo, the leader of Southeast Asia’s biggest economy, never visited Trump at the White House. U.S. support for the region during the COVID-19 crisis has been modest at best.

The Biden administration is now undertaking steps to reverse course, repair the damage, and restore U.S. credibility. His first step in foreign policy, Biden has said, is to win back allies and partners while pushing back adversaries. Policies are being recalibrated across the board.

ASEAN countries would certainly welcome a robust U.S. engagement in the region—but in the right way.

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First, they do not want to see a heightened U.S.-Chinese rivalry in Southeast Asia, a region that has been a cockpit of conflict between major powers in the past and could well become that again. ASEAN countries do not want to be polarized, pulled in different directions by different powers, and see the cohesion of the ASEAN community undermined. ASEAN countries are hoping that the Biden administration will lower the temperature, tone, and tension of U.S.-Chinese relations and keep the rivalry manageable.

Second, it is in the national interest of ASEAN countries to maintain good relations with both the United States and China. They all want to extract benefits from both powers. They believe that Southeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, have ample space for engagement for both superpowers. As such, ASEAN countries would not like to see a repeat of the aggressive anti-China rants that former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo uttered in his final months in office.

Indeed, Southeast Asia's perspective on China is different from that of the United States. While ASEAN members remain rightly anxious about China's moves in the South China Sea, they have also recognized that China will be a big part of their future—bilaterally and regionally. Of course, they have no illusions about their relationships with China, which will be complex and challenging. Still, while the bipartisan view in Washington sees China as a threat to the United States' long-standing supremacy, Southeast Asians generally accept China as an important partner for their development plans.

Southeast Asians hear the alarm sounded by the Biden administration on the danger democracy is facing from autocracy, explicitly referring to China. Yet the reality on the ground is that no Southeast Asian country particularly minds China's political system, mainly due to the principle of non-interference, but also because they simply have no interest in China's domestic politics.

Not a single ASEAN country has echoed the U.S. State Department's claim that China is committing "genocide" against Muslims in Xinjiang. Not one Southeast Asian country—not even Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country—considers China an ideological foe.

In fact, ASEAN's leaders would sympathize with Chinese President Xi Jinping's statement that every country has a right to choose its own path of development, because this is being practiced in ASEAN itself.

Third, Southeast Asian countries do not want to see the erosion of ASEAN centrality—the principle that ASEAN, which unites an increasingly cohesive group of nations, should take charge of affairs in the region. ASEAN centrality presumes that the major powers have a strategic trust in ASEAN and are willing to let the organization lead on some aspects of regional affairs. ASEAN's credibility depends on its ability to maintain good relations with all the major powers: the United States, China, Russia, Japan, the European Union, and India. This is why ASEAN does not want to choose sides and does not want to be pressured to do so. Choosing one side will automatically mean alienating the other. Doing so will reposition ASEAN away from the center of complex relationships.

The ASEAN countries noticed with curiosity that Biden's first foreign policy move in Asia was to convene the Quadrilateral meeting of the United States,

Australia, Japan, and India—and elevate it to a leader-level summit. While the Quad leaders strongly endorsed ASEAN centrality, questions are being asked within ASEAN regarding the Quad’s strategic objective and whether it will undertake measures that may be incompatible with ASEAN’s goals. To date, the relationship between ASEAN and the Quad remains fluid, unclear, and uncertain.

The Quad also inevitably invites questions whether Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy will be any different from Trump’s. Beijing was not entirely wrong to suspect that the Trump administration’s version of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific contained an anti-China bias.

The Biden administration should convincingly demonstrate that its Indo-Pacific vision—indeed its strategy for Asia—is not intended to marginalize, let alone contain, any resident power. It is a good sign that U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has increasingly used the phrase “free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific”—“inclusive” is a code word in the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific for keeping the door open for China to come in.

Finally, Southeast Asians want to see the United States and China cooperate in their region. A few years ago, Xi called for a “new type of great power relationship” with the United States based on “win-win solutions.” Biden has confirmed that his administration wants “competition, not conflict” with China and “is ready to work with Beijing when it is in America’s interest to do so.” Blinken also said that the U.S. “relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be.”

Given these encouraging words, can either side overcome its strategic ego and start exploring avenues for cooperation? Can Southeast Asia be the place where some form of concrete U.S.-China cooperation takes place? This is, after all, a region that has seen a long list of seemingly intractable conflicts turn into lasting cooperation: between Indonesia and Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, Malaysia and Singapore, Indonesia and Timor Leste, Malaysia and the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia—the list goes on. Countries in this region have demonstrated that enmity can be turned to amity.

There is no shortage of issues for Washington and Beijing to explore cooperation on: industry, infrastructure, maritime security, piracy, climate, environment, green energy, natural disasters, COVID-19, youth exchanges, and so on. While this will not change their rivalry on a global scale, it might just change the texture of U.S.-Chinese relations in Southeast Asia. That would be good enough for ASEAN. It really comes down to whether there is political will and diplomatic guile to do so.

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Freeze, Talk and Trade: The Three Principles of Peace



Kishore Mahbubani

Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping finally had a ninety-minute conversation on the ninth day of the ninth month of the year. The whole world should breathe a huge sigh of relief. Such direct talks can prevent wars. Indeed, in this case, we may have prevented a nuclear war.

This is not an exaggeration. There is only one issue that can trigger a nuclear war in the world today: Taiwan. This is where the red lines of China and the United States cross.

China has made it abundantly clear that it will go to war if Taiwan declares independence. The US is committed, through the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, to defend Taiwan if it's attacked.

For the record, the TRA states that “the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability” and that it would “maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”

Few in the world are aware that the Trump administration was flirting with nuclear war in the last 9 months of 2020.

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Nuclear Calamity Averted

After President Donald Trump declared in March 2020 that China was responsible for unleashing Covid-19 on the US (and thereby, in his view, seriously hurt his prospects for re-election), the anti-China hawks in the Trump administration also unleashed themselves from previous restraints. Very dangerously, they came close to abandoning the “One-China Policy” (whereby the US recognised that China and Taiwan were one country, not two).

A new book, *Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics and the End of the Old International Order* by Thomas Wright of the Brookings Institute and Colin Kahl, Under Secretary of Defence for Policy in the Biden administration, documents how the anti-China hawks felt unleashed.

As they say in the book, “Two Trump administration officials who favored continued engagement with China and pushed back against the hardliners told us that before Covid-19, Trump was something of a moderating force on China policy but he was so upset at how it had jeopardized his reelection prospects that he was willing to endorse everything the hard-liners wanted.”

In direct violation of the clear understanding that Washington would maintain “official” ties with Beijing and “unofficial” ties with Taipei, the Trump administration—led recklessly by then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—tried to send serving officials to Taipei. As a result, there were demands from nationalists on Chinese social media that China should enforce its red lines and shoot down or block American planes carrying the “serving officials” to Taipei.

Amazingly, when Mr Pompeo and other anti-China hawks in the Trump Administration were clearly trying to abandon the critical “One-China Policy”, they were either unaware of or disregarded evidence that they could have started a nuclear war.

Fortunately, some thoughtful American observers spotted this danger. Political commentator Peter Beinart posed the following question in a New York Times article: “Ask them how many American lives they’re willing to risk so the US can have official diplomatic relations with Taiwan.”

Mr. Beinart further added: “... some of America’s most experienced China experts — including former ambassador to Beijing J. Stapleton Roy and Chas Freeman, who served as Richard Nixon’s interpreter on his 1972 trip to China — believe such a conflict (between the US and China over Taiwan) would risk nuclear war.”

The sense that the world teetered on the brink is reinforced by revelations in another book *Peril*—by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. In their account, the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Mark Milley was so fearful that Mr Trump would ‘go rogue’ after losing the presidential election last year that he took secret measures to limit the president’s ability to launch a nuclear strike and even made a phone call to China to assuage its worries of being a target.

Three Principles of Peace

That we have reached this precarious juncture in US-China ties and the specific danger that the Taiwan issue poses vividly illustrates the importance of three principles of peace that I put across when I delivered the tenth Singapore Mediation Lecture on Sept 6; namely, Freeze, Talk and Trade.

Each of these three principles can help to prevent wars, especially wars in Asia.

Few in Asia are aware that while inter-state wars are unlikely in North or South America, Europe or Africa, they remain dangerous threats all across Asia (which is why we established the Asian Peace Programme (APP) in NUS in 2020).

Why Freeze? The Taiwan issue explains this principle well. The “One-China Policy” has kept peace across the Taiwan Straits since the US and China established diplomatic relations on Jan 1, 1979 when the US recognised that the legitimate government of China resided in Beijing, not Taipei.

Despite all the ups and downs in the US-China relationship, there was no danger of a direct war, as long as the “One-China Policy” was respected. Mr. Pompeo could have unleashed a nuclear war by “unfreezing” the “One-China Policy”.

Why Talk? History teaches us that the best way to improve understanding (and subsequently trust) and reduce the prospects of war is through direct conversations among leaders, especially leaders of major powers.

Indeed, Mr. Biden should be considered for the Nobel Peace Prize of 2021, for he may have single-handedly reduced the danger of a nuclear war by reiterating that the US remained committed to a one-China policy in his conversation with Mr. Xi last week.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ press release states that Mr. Biden reiterated adherence to the one-China policy: “Biden noted that the world is changing fast... The US side has no intention to change the one-China policy.” This echoes what Kurt Campbell, the most senior official on Asian matters in the Biden Administration, said in July 2021. He reaffirmed that the US stands by the “One China” policy and does not recognise Taiwan as an independent country.

Why Trade? Trade has always prevented wars. One of the greatest Western philosophers of all time, Immanuel Kant, explains why in his famous essay on Perpetual Peace in 1795: “The state of peace among men living side by side is not the natural state; the natural state is one of war. This does not always mean open hostilities, but at least an unceasing threat of war... The spirit of commerce, which is incompatible with war, sooner or later takes hold of every nation. As the power of money is perhaps the most dependable of all the powers included under the state power, states see themselves forced, without any moral urge, to promote honorable peace and by mediation to prevent war wherever it threatens to break out.”

Empirical evidence from Asia backs this up. Two of the most difficult bilateral relationships in the world are those between India and Pakistan and between China and Vietnam. Major wars have been fought on both borders.

Yet, overall, there have been fewer border incidents and clashes at the China-Vietnam border. Why? Here’s the data. Between 1991 and 2021, trade between

India and Pakistan went from US\$97 million to US\$285 million, a nearly three-fold increase.

By contrast, in the same period, trade between China and Vietnam went up from US\$32 million to US\$133 billion, an increase of over 4000 times. Just note the difference: three times versus 4000 times. It's not surprising that the China-Vietnam border is more peaceful as a result.

This is the great paradox about living in Asia today. On the one hand, in terms of economic and social development, the past 30 years have been the best 30 years in 3000 years of Asian history. On the other hand, the greatest dangers of major inter-state wars are also to be found in Asia.

How Asia manages this paradox will determine its future. The bottom line here is that peace in Asia can never be taken for granted. Let's work hard together to promote Freeze, Talk and Trade.

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Technocratic Deliberation and Asian Peace



Parag Khanna

After 30 years of post-Cold War great power stability, Asia's peace is threatening to unravel. Tensions are rising over Taiwan, the Senkaku islands, and North Korea—all amidst talk of a “new Cold War” between the US and China.

Furthermore, 5 years have passed since the World Court ruling against China's claims to a handful of islands in the South China Sea, though to little effect. Beijing rejected the judgment, while the Philippines chose not to take further action for fear of threatening its relationship with its biggest trading partner. Even in the absence of decisive action, military forces are on hair-trigger alert, with numerous close encounters between military warships and aircraft. China has reclaimed and militarised various rocks and reefs, Vietnam is now doing the same, the US and European navies are conducting freedom of navigation operations, and the US, Japan, and India are supporting the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia to build their maritime capacity. The outlook is grave, and some predict that this dispute will spark a Third World War.

Dynamics in the South China Sea are a reminder that Asians have not yet developed sufficiently robust dispute resolution mechanisms to keep conflicts from boiling over. Past success in staving off war does not guarantee future stability: Asia's evolution into a mature system is far from assured. From the Caucasus to the Himalayas to the South China Sea, there is ample evidence that “frozen” conflicts are nothing of the sort. Until they are settled, they are a latent *casus belli*. To move beyond today's dangerous escalations, Asia must do more than tactically suppress historical tensions. Intractable territorial disputes should not stop Asian nations from pursuing pragmatic, mutually-beneficial cooperation in the short term.

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Pursuing greater cooperation between nation states could eventually push them towards an amicable resolution of territorial disputes.

Asia requires its own version of the prevalent Western paradigm known as “Democratic Peace Theory”. An approach more suited to Asia might be what I call “Technocratic Peace Theory.” Less a predictive hypothesis than a vision for how Asia could handle its ongoing disputes, it suggests that expert arbitration is the approach to permanent dispute resolution best suited to the region’s heterogeneous landscape.

An important virtue of a technocratic approach is that it is not biased towards legal conventions or frameworks not all parties view as legitimate. In the South China Sea, maritime demarcations have their origins in late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial-era conventions, whereas records show that Chinese and Southeast Asian sailors have travelled, fished, and traded in the region for over 3000 years. These conflicts, then, are effectively pre-legal with respect to contemporary international law. Until sovereignty is settled, the law of nations cannot apply. Western diplomats often speak of the need for a rules-based international order, but in many of these conflict formations, the rules have yet to be agreed in the first place.

Technocratic deliberations over outstanding boundary disputes must involve credible senior representatives from disputant parties authorized to make binding decisions. Their autonomy— even their anonymity— is essential to ensuring the consensus nature of outcomes. Neutral international mediators can also play important roles in building consensus and certifying that agreements are considered formal on all parties. The confidentiality of the proceedings is equally important. Deliberations should be held away from public scrutiny, even though the public may be aware they are occurring. This is essential so that representatives can pursue bold compromises rather than defaulting to political expediency.

This is not to say there is no role for politicians or the public. To the contrary, as parties come close to settlement, parliamentarians and other national political figures can be briefed on the contours of the agreement to prepare to sell it at home. The same applies to leaders themselves, who will be able to claim certain victories and point to others’ concessions.

As exclusive control over the waters of the South China Sea becomes ever less likely, China has shown itself to be open to compromise. In 2019, Xi Jinping offered Philippines president Duterte the possibility of joint oil and gas exploration in the disputed waters, with 60 percent of the profits going to the Philippines in exchange for the latter giving up on its claims to islands China has already seized. While no doubt unfair from a legal standpoint, such a deal would have been a recognition of reality while opening up a new and mutually beneficial chapter in Sino-Philippines commercial relations and a marked contribution to calming the waters.

Ultimately, the deal was not politically viable as a result of having been unilaterally proposed. However, a deal to this effect could be negotiated by the relevant parties through a robust diplomatic mechanism, dividing the profits of oil and gas exploration, limiting overfishing, and agreeing to share exclusive economic zones. This would resolve the issues in a way which would enable leaders to claim certain

victories and point to others' concessions, thus providing the legitimacy required for the treaties to be ratified domestically. Furthermore, such a structure could apply to multiple claimant states, not just bilaterally.

Realistically, technocratic deliberation is the key to deescalation within the region. Settlement now, facilitated by the technocratic governance of the parties involved, is preferable to uncontrolled escalation later. Asian nations have been pragmatic about their disputes for several decades, and all have benefited enormously from regional stability. Today, they face a choice between resolving the South China Sea dispute in a mutually profitable manner versus potentially sparking a war that draws in major military powers. If Asia wants to demonstrate its capacity for global leadership, it must start by calming its own waters.

Parag Khanna, is the founder and managing partner of FutureMap, and author of numerous books including *Connectography* and *The Future Is Asian*.

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America Needs an Economic Peace Strategy for Asia



Van Jackson

In December, the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific coordinator, Kurt Campbell, detailed the shape of U.S. thinking about China and Asia. He hit all the familiar notes: the importance of alliances, weapons sales to counter China, the centrality of ASEAN, and the optimistic view that Sino-U.S. relations could be at once competitive and stable.

In any other era, such talk might have been comfort food for regional experts and policymakers. But absent from Campbell's remarks, made at a virtual conference on Indo-Pacific security organized by Australia's Lowy Institute, was any meaningful statement about political economy—the single aspect of statecraft most crucial to the region's stability. It is in this arena of policy where China has done more to displace the United States than in any other, and it remains the glaring hole in Washington's attempts to craft an Indo-Pacific policy. When pressed on this by his host, Campbell acknowledged that defense initiatives were not enough. But he could mention no concept, policy, or action to suggest economics was anything more than a throwaway gesture in a speech. References to a forthcoming "economic framework" that promised to be "cutting-edge" both lacked specifics and was entirely unmoored from any stated purpose beyond wanting America to "design" the region's standards.

To the extent Campbell's remarks reflect Washington's view of Asia, it is at once modestly reassuring and highly troubling. Reassuring because his bland rhetorical restraint is a refreshing departure from the volatility and pugnaciousness of the Trump administration. Troubling, however, because the ideas powering U.S. President Joe Biden's Asia policy are as bland as the rhetoric itself. U.S. policy

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toward the world's most important region is no more than a mashup of the residual inertia from Trump's military-first Asia policy with a revival of Obama's well-intentioned but ill-fated pivot to Asia, which also had a heavily militarized agenda.

Consequently, the United States is misallocating its attention and influence relative to what would actually benefit the region most. Economic policy, not defense policy, is the only way to address the interrelated problems of development, pandemic recovery, and adaptation to climate change—issues that plague policymakers throughout Asia and threaten to derail the region's peace and prosperity.

But this is precisely the trouble with U.S. engagement in Asia to date. The United States has no economic strategy for the region—at least not since former U.S. President Barack Obama's ill-fated attempt to negotiate a new U.S.-Asia trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Nor is it realistic to expect any U.S. economic strategy beyond the free-trade pablum so sharply at odds with U.S. domestic political constraints.

So what is the United States to do?

First, Washington must obviously prioritize economic statecraft and stop thinking with its missiles. Economic equality outside U.S. borders does not even appear to register as a problem needing attention. And it is clear from the way U.S. leaders talk about their country's role in Asia that trade, aid, finance, and development are not as privileged in their minds as the Pentagon is. If that does not change, the United States will continue to place itself on the wrong side of defense spending, naval expansion, nuclear modernization, and missile proliferation trends that make the region into a powder keg, which serves no one except the defense industry.

Second, Washington needs an economic policy for Asia—but one that tries to do actual good for the region instead of furthering only abstract U.S. interests. And there is much the United States can do to do right by Asia.

For instance, U.S. officials could use the United States' privileged position in the global economy to negotiate various forms of debt relief on behalf of low and middle-income countries in the region that have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, such as the Philippines and Malaysia (The United States did this for Iraq after the 2003 invasion.) Washington could also grant them preferential trade access, which would be a boon to Asia's export-dependent economies.

The right kind of economic engagement would also focus on engaging U.S. partners in the region on labor rights, fair treatment of workers, floor wages for companies that export to the United States, and anti-kleptocracy initiatives. Washington could also offer massive aid for the transition to green energy in developing Asian nations.

All this and more is in the realm of the possible and the good. But it requires recognizing that economic statecraft is the foundation for regional stability, durable peace, and more equitable development in low-income countries. Above all, Washington must stop conflating economic strategy with stale tropes on free trade and coercive sanctions.

The third thing the United States should do is recognize its own limits. The United States is not Asia's economic hegemon, even though recently declassified documents suggest that U.S. officials still think it is. Since the 1997–1998 Asian

financial crisis, the region's dense financial and trade architecture has largely moved on without the United States. And that's okay. There's nothing threatening about regional institutions that are exclusively Asian, especially if they help the region manage balance-of-payments issues and encourage capital controls to avoid future fiscal crises. Not every problem can be solved by U.S. power—especially when it no longer enjoys the position of primacy it did at the end of the Cold War. Insisting otherwise is a path to ruin.

If the United States can prioritize economic statecraft oriented toward stability and peace, help Asian economies reduce inequality and adapt to climate change, and give up the effort to sustain a hegemony it no longer has, it will help Asia create not just greater stability, but a better and more just form of stability. It might even offset the loss of Washington's once cooperative relationship with Beijing, which did more to keep Asia peaceful than many U.S. officials appreciate. In a world colored by Sino-U.S. rivalry, Asia needs a new source of stability. Fresh thinking about political economy may be just that.

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Where Are the Peacemakers?



Kishore Mahbubani

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is illegal and has to be condemned by the international community. And it has been condemned. As a former Ambassador to the United Nations, I fully understand and support the need to protect the principles of the UN Charter. Yet, in geopolitics we must always do two things simultaneously. We must moralise. And we must analyse. Since geopolitics is a cruel game and follows the cold and ruthless logic of power, we must be cold, dispassionate and hard-headed in our analysis. The only iron law of geopolitics is that it punishes those who are naïve and ignore its cold logic.

So could we have predicted this war in Ukraine? And could we have prevented it? The simple answer to both these questions is yes. Indeed, many leading statesmen in the West correctly predicted this disaster in Ukraine.

Probably the greatest strategic thinker that the US produced in the twentieth century was George Kennan. He fashioned the famous containment strategy which ultimately succeeded in defeating the Soviet Union. He passed away on 17 March 2005.

On 21 February 2022, the famous New York Times correspondent, Tom Friedman, reguoted at great length what George Kennan told him in 1998. When asked about the impact of the expansion of NATO into former areas of the Soviet Union, he said, very presciently, “I think it is the beginning of a new cold war. I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the founding fathers of this country turn over in their graves.”

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So why did NATO continue expanding despite the clear warnings of George Kennan? In some ways, the correct answer was also endorsed by George Kennan. On 1 December 1997, the famous and legendary editor of the magazine *The National Interest* Owen Harries wrote an article explaining why NATO expansion was unwise and then gave the reasons why it was happening. He cited several reasons, but let me just quote the first two: “the strength of the Polish-American vote, as well as that of other Americans of Central and East European origin” and “the enormous vested interests—careers, contracts, consultancies, accumulated expertise—represented by the NATO establishment, which now needed a new reason and purpose to justify the organization’s continued existence”.

In short, short-term domestic political interests of gaining voters and narrow economic interests trumped geopolitical wisdom. Immediately, after Owen Harries published this article, George Kennan immediately wrote a letter endorsing all the points made by Owen Harries. He said “It was in some respects a surprise because certain of your major arguments were ones I myself had made, or had wanted to make, but had not expected to see them so well expressed by the pen of anyone else.”

What is striking about the project to expand NATO is that many leading American thinkers, both liberal and conservative, opposed it, including Paul Nitze, James Schlesinger, Fred Ikle, John Mearsheimer, Jack Matlock, William Perry, Stephen Cohen, Bill Burns, Vladimir Pozner, Bob Gates, Robert McNamara, Bill Bradley, Gary Hart, Pat Buchanan, Jeffrey Sachs, and Fiona Hill among others.

The greatest living strategic thinker in the US today is Henry Kissinger. He didn’t oppose the expansion of NATO to the former Warsaw Pact states of Eastern Europe. But he strongly counselled against admitting Ukraine into NATO. As a good student of history, Kissinger pointed out why Ukraine was viewed differently by Russians. In a 2014 article published in the *Washington Post*, this is what Kissinger said, “The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country. Russian history began in what was called Keivan-Rus. The Russian religion spread from there. Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries, and their histories were intertwined before then. Some of the most important battles for Russian freedom, starting with the Battle of Poltava in 1709, were fought on Ukrainian soil.”

As a wise statesman, Kissinger proposed a sensible compromise solution. On the one hand, he said, “Ukraine should have the right to choose freely its economic and political associations, including with Europe.” On the other hand, he said (in 2014), “Ukraine should not join NATO, a position I took seven years ago, when it came up.”

The real tragedy about Ukraine is that if the then American President, Barack Obama (a Nobel Peace Prize winner) had heeded the advice of Henry Kissinger, the war in Ukraine could have been avoided. Kissinger’s formula emphasised that the Ukrainians would be free to choose their own political system and regional associations. Indeed, the strong Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion was not anticipated. This strong resistance confirms their strong desire to join the European Union. And they should be allowed to do so. And, as advised by Kissinger, Ukraine can stay out of NATO and remain “neutral”. In the past ‘neutral’ states were allowed to join the European Union. Ukraine could follow that precedent. Such a win-win solution could have prevented a war. Indeed, 2 days after the Russian invasion of

Ukraine, President Zelensky (who has emerged as a real hero after the invasion) said, “We are not afraid of Russia, we are not afraid of engaging in talks with Russia, we are not afraid of discussing anything, such as security guarantees for our state, we are not afraid of talking about neutral status.” If neutral status had been agreed to, the war could have been avoided.

When future historians write about this Ukraine episode, one big question they will surely ask is why the clear and explicit warnings of leading Western statesmen, like Kennan and Kissinger, were ignored? They will also ask why our world doesn’t have distinguished peacemakers today who could have prevented the conflict.

This may well be the most important lesson that the world should learn from the Ukraine episode. Wars are tragic, as they always have been. Peace must be preserved. And the world needs to develop a class of globally respected statesmen who could emerge as global peace-makers.

Curiously, we used to have such globally respected statesmen, including people like Nelson Mandela, Kofi Annan and Desmond Tutu. Many of them were members of a council of “The Elders” which has tried to provide calm and sensible advice from time to time. Clearly, we seem to lack such distinguished statesmen today.

And the risks continue to grow. Recently, the former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said in Taiwan that the US should “immediately take necessary, and long-overdue, steps to do the right and obvious thing, that is to offer the Republic of China (Taiwan) America’s diplomatic recognition as a free and sovereign country.” One doesn’t have to be a geopolitical genius to figure out that his prescription would lead to a war over Taiwan.

Since his provocative suggestion could lead to a war, a war that could be even more destructive than the war in Ukraine, one would expect a global chorus of voices to emerge and condemn the reckless statement of Mike Pompeo which could lead to a war.

So far I have not heard any leading voice on our planet condemn his statement. And that’s the nub of our global problem. Where are the global peacemakers when we need them more than ever?

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Investing in Peace for Asia



Wu Ye-Min

The war in Ukraine is a wakeup call for us not to take any peace that we enjoy for granted. Certainly we, in Asia, cannot take peace for granted. The fallout from Afghanistan, the coup in Myanmar, tensions in the South China Sea, border conflicts between China and India, missile tests on the Korean peninsula, local skirmishes involving non-state armed groups from South Asia to Southeast Asia, are just some of the potential sources of conflicts we have been living with in Asia. Given this background, it is timely for Asians to explore what tools we are investing in to prevent, mitigate and resolve current and future conflicts in Asia.

So far, many Asian governments' response to such potential conflicts in Asia has been to increase military spending. Defence spending in the region grew 52.7% between 2010 and 2020, based on data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The Ukraine war is likely to fuel further increases in military spending in Asia. In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also suggested that Tokyo should consider hosting US nuclear weapons.

An arms race, however, does not help in promoting harmony and resolving conflict. Instead, it increases the risk of miscalculations and misunderstandings, deepens the mistrust between countries, and magnifies the costs of confrontation. History is full of examples of military buildups aggravating tensions, rather than providing solutions to conflicts. Realistically though, countries in Asia are unlikely to decrease their military spending and use of hard power tactics in the short-term.

Asians should therefore review the balance in their investments for peace. In particular, more investments in conflict management are needed to complement the

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hard deterrents that could have potentially devastating impacts. By addressing tensions at their source, fewer resources might also need to be spent on defence and, more importantly, on the costly economic, social and humanitarian fallout from violent escalations and armed conflict.

Investing in Peace

First, Asia can invest more in diplomatic tools, such as the use of “Good Offices” and mediation as well as confidence building, to address potential conflicts. This is in line with the United Nations (UN) Charter, which states that “The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice.”

Such diplomatic tools are not new in Asia. Historically in local communities in this region, parties went to a respected and trusted clan elder, who would in a neutral and impartial manner, help them to find common ground and solutions to address their conflicts. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Cambodia have all used the International Court of Justice as a trusted third party to resolve disputes. There have also been recent calls for China to mediate the war in Ukraine.

There have been moves in Singapore and elsewhere in Asia to encourage the use of mediation to manage civil and commercial disputes. A similar push for mediation should be made in the diplomatic context. This can be done by building up more Asian mediators and institutions that work on conflict management in this area. In this context, Indonesia’s efforts to create a Southeast Asian Network of Women Peace Negotiators and Mediators is to be applauded. Countries should also put aside their differences to strengthen the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation as well as the ASEAN Secretary-General’s mandate to provide “Good Offices” where needed.

Second, Asia can invest in managing tensions at all stages of the conflict curve. For example, in the early stages, a neutral institution can engage the disputants in confidential trust building activities, work with them to forge positive agendas to balance the overall dynamics in their relationship, and bridge gaps to prevent the conflict from escalating.

Where there is a mutually hurting stalemate, a third person can facilitate dialogue between the disputants to anticipate and manage crisis and unintended mis-encounters, and put creative ideas on the table to enable the disputants a face-saving way out. Discreet back channeling to strengthen communication channels between the disputants and to avoid megaphone diplomacy, bringing parties to the negotiating table, and acting directly as a mediator are options an impartial party can use when tensions are high.

Conflict management activities are critical even after a ceasefire agreement is in place. A neutral party can work at the political-level and community-level to

encourage buy-in and holistic implementation of the agreement, identify gaps and solutions with the parties to ensure new gains are not eroded by misunderstandings and the lack of resources, and rebuild trust between the disputants as they shift to a new normal.

In short, a third country or impartial player can support disputants in restoring diplomacy, rebuilding trust, and updating the architecture to increase the disputants' sense of security at various stages of the conflict.

Third, Asia can invest in a culture of peace—in our community, nation, region and globally. Currently, some Asians shy away from peacemaking work due to fears of political complications. There is also an inclination to fund downstream development and rehabilitation activities, and avoid upstream projects that manage conflict at its source. This funding model needs to change—by financing more conflict management initiatives, less work may be needed in managing the consequent costs of conflict.

We also need to continue raising awareness so that all who enjoy peace in this region become active stewards in promoting harmony for others. In this context, countries in Asia can learn more from each other's experiences in peace processes. For example, the former Lead Negotiator for the Philippine Government, Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, worked hard to find common ground with representatives of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. In addition, we can learn from other seasoned mediators in the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation like Noeleen Heyzer of Singapore, Marty Natalegawa of Indonesia, and Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka.

ASEAN—as an organization—is clearly creating a regional culture of trust, which enables its ten member states to manage inter-state tensions at various stages of the conflict curve, while generating a culture of peace through the ASEAN Community. ASEAN's investments in diplomatic tools (e.g. use of the ASEAN Special Envoy) should also be encouraged. That said, much more needs to be done beyond ASEAN to manage inter-state and intra-state tensions that continues to trouble Asia.

Hence, Asia should work harder to prevent, mitigate and resolve current and future conflict. Yet, how should we distribute our main investments in peace? Where should the priorities be? With so much money being spent on military in Asia, it would also be wise for countries in this region to invest more in conflict management tools that could prevent devastating conflicts, like in Ukraine. Ukraine has taught us that there is much to lose for everyone when violent escalation and armed conflict erupts.

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Muslim Asia and the Quest for Peace



Chandra Muzaffar

Islam's deep affinity to peace is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the word "Islam" itself implies peace through engaged surrender to God, to the Divine Will. There are a number of passages in the Quran that demonstrate its commitment to peace, especially the peaceful resolution of disputes. The Prophet Muhammad's life and struggle also offer numerous instances of his inclination towards peace. It is well-known that he even delayed the conquest of Mecca, much to the chagrin of his followers, in order to minimise violence and bloodshed.

However, the Quran and the Sunnah (the Prophet's example)—great as their influence may be upon the lives of Muslims—do not tell us how Muslims have tried to uphold Islam's teachings on peace in real-life situations. To gain some insights into this, one has to analyse conflicts and wars and how Muslims have responded to these with the aim of achieving peace. The conflict that has had the most profound impact upon Muslims in contemporary times is of course the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land since 1948.

The peace that the Palestinians enjoyed under Ottoman rule was shattered when small groups of Zionist Jews from Europe acquired Palestinian land, protected by the mandate given to Britain to administer Palestine following the First World War. Colonial Britain went beyond the mandate and, through the Balfour Declaration of 1917, promised Jewish groups in Europe that it would help them establish a "Jewish home" in Palestine. This accelerated Jewish migration. Right from the beginning, Palestinians—both Muslim and Christian—protested against this demographic intrusion from Europe. It is significant that at this stage of the Palestinian struggle their resistance was largely peaceful, taking the form of rallies and mass meetings.

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It was only after the Second World War, on the heels of the Nazi holocaust against the Jews in Europe which had dramatically increased Jewish migration to Palestine, that Palestinian resistance became more militant. This was largely in response to the forced eviction of hundreds of Palestinians from their homes and villages. In some instances, massacres accompanied the expulsions.

After the state of Israel was established in 1948 by the UN, and as more and more Palestinian land was lost to Israel, some members of the Palestinian resistance movement became even more desperate and resorted to senseless acts of violence such as hijacking planes, killing schoolchildren, and targeting shoppers. Israel in the meantime annexed much of the remaining 22% of Palestinian land comprising mostly the West Bank and Gaza in the June 1967 War. The Palestinian struggle was now at its nadir.

The post-67 scenario has given rise to at least two trends within the Palestinian movement. The first is a realisation that it may not be possible to regain all lost Palestinian land. This is not only because of the strength of the Israeli armed forces but because of overwhelming US support for Israel. Negotiating with Israel and working towards a two-state solution may be a more pragmatic approach. The second is a growing sense that the over-reliance on weapons and force is the real problem. Instead, a whole array of peaceful methods of confronting Israel must be developed. In a sense, the first Intifada—December 1987—evolved from this awareness. At the forefront of the Intifada were stone-throwing youths. They had no other weapon. Despite this, confrontations between Palestinian youths and the heavily armed Israeli forces often descended into violence, leading to significant loss of (disproportionately Palestinian) lives. Since then, new forms of protest, that are more peaceful and simultaneously more effective, have emerged.

One of the most significant is the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Proclaimed in July 2005 by Palestinians themselves, it seeks to persuade businesses or other entities that have any links with the West Bank to review their position to ensure they are not contributing towards the oppression of the Palestinian people in any way. It has had some success in getting several Europe-based enterprises to withdraw their investments from the West Bank. A few European academic bodies and civil society organisations have also heeded the BDS call.

In similar vein, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) has been able to put across the Palestinian case through agencies of the UN. A special committee on Palestinian rights within the UN has been active in articulating its interests. Most importantly, Palestine since 29 November 2012 has a legal status within the UN framework as a non-member observer. It gives the Palestinians representation of sorts, albeit without the ability to vote.

By carving a tiny niche for itself within the UN and by mobilising businesses and other entities in civil society, the advocates of Palestinian rights have advanced their cause much further than its “suicide-bombers” and missile operators have. This shows that the struggle for justice is enhanced considerably when the means it employs are non-violent. That means cannot be separated from ends is a fundamental moral principle embodied in Islam and in all religious philosophies. The cause of peace is best served through peaceful methods.

Though this principle has some adherents in the Palestinian struggle today, it does not have much traction in other conflict zones in West Asia and North Africa—in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iran, Somalia and Libya. This is not surprising, because the victim's conception of how a struggle should be carried out is more often than not shaped by the oppressor's practice and performance. Besides, in many historical records of wars and conflicts, Muslim historians themselves have exaggerated the role of battles and heroes without taking into account the larger context. It has been forgotten that the sum total of the battles that the Prophet was involved in did not amount to more than 3 days of his entire mission of 23 years! And yet a great deal of emphasis is given to his battles while ignoring his bigger, largely peaceful struggle for justice and compassion.

It is this mindset among Muslims, perpetuated by the mainstream religious teachers, that has to change if peace spawned by justice and compassion is to emerge as the defining essence of the life and character of the Muslim today.

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Doubts About AUKUS



Hugh White

Eighteen months ago, when Australians first learned of the AUKUS proposal for their country to build nuclear-powered submarines, it came as a stunning shock. So great was the shock, in fact, that for a time it eclipsed any serious debate about this revolutionary and quite unprecedented idea. An initiative of such scale and audacity seemed almost to defy critique and analysis.

But that began to change last month when the leaders of America, Britain and Australia gathered in San Diego to announce the broad outline of how this massive project would actually work. They revealed a plan of immense complexity and staggering cost, beset by a host of technological, economic, political, strategic and diplomatic risks. Suddenly, in response, searching questions are being asked.

Some of the most searching questions come from within Australia's governing Labor Party itself, led by its most revered elder statesman, Paul Keating. He has excoriated the present Labor leadership for its swift and eager embrace of the AUKUS project, first when they were in Opposition at the time it was first announced, and now in government since it won office in May 2022.

There are two reasons for Labor's rather surprising embrace of the AUKUS initiative. One of them is pure politics. Like many centre-left parties around the world, Labor fears it will lose votes if it seems soft on national security, and it has fervently backed AUKUS to avoid such criticisms from their conservative opponents.

But it is not just politics. Like most Australians, many Labor figures are deeply committed to Australia's alliance with America, and they understand that this is what AUKUS is really all about. The present generation of party leadership came of age politically in the optimistic, 'End of History' 1990s, when preponderant US

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power seemed to guarantee a long era of peace. They still retain that era's faith in the idea of a US-led global order, despite the obvious challenges it now faces, especially from China. The stronger and more ambitious China has become, the more fervently they cling to the idea that only US power can protect Australia from Beijing, and the more eagerly they look for ways to draw the alliance with America even closer. To them, this is what AUKUS seemed to promise.

But now the doubts are setting in. First, there are questions about whether the program to replace Australia's existing Collins-class conventional subs with nuclear powered boats will actually work. There are lots of ways it could fail. The upgrade of the Collins subs, required to maintain Australia's submarine capabilities and skills until the nuclear boats arrive, could falter and fail. The plan for Australia to buy between three and five second-hand American Virginia-class subs from the US Navy from the early 2030s might fall through either because Washington decides it cannot spare them, or because Australia's Navy is not ready to take delivery and operate them safely.

Learning to operate and maintain nuclear-powered submarines safely and reliably is a huge task, made all the harder because Australia is starting from a very low base of nuclear technology and engineering expertise. It will be especially demanding for the Australian Navy, which has a poor record in managing the acquisition of new capabilities and maintaining and operating its existing fleet of much simpler ships and submarines.

These Virginia-class subs, if they can be brought into service on time, are only supposed to be a stopgap while Australia and Britain work together to design and build a brand new submarine—called the AUKUS class—for their two navies. It is supposed to start coming into service with the Australian navy in the early 2040s, but that too is very uncertain. Work on the design has only just begun in Britain, and the delivery schedule is unrealistically ambitious.

Britain's limited design and construction capabilities are already tied up with building a new class of ballistic-missile submarines. This and other UK submarine projects have been plagued with major problems for many years, and further big delays and cost overruns in the AUKUS program virtually certain. Even if all goes according to plan, Australia will not have a minimum viable fleet of six AUKUS submarines in service till the late 2050s, and realistically it will be much later. Meanwhile the costs look eyewatering, even if the Government's initial estimates of up to A\$368 Billion do not prove grossly optimistic, as they almost certainly will.

But that is not all. There are serious concerns about the wider implications of Australia acquiring nuclear propulsion technologies. The most serious of these relates to the implications for the global regime which has done so much to help prevent the spread of nuclear weapons for 50 years.

Australia clearly has no intention to acquire nuclear weapons, but the AUKUS plans nonetheless raise serious proliferation questions because the reactors that will power its new submarines contain highly-enriched uranium that could be used in a nuclear warhead. Moreover this uranium will not be subject to the normal international safeguards used to enforce the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, because a special provision, never used before, allows them to be waived for non

weapons-related military applications like nuclear propulsion. Some experts fear this will create dangerous precedent allowing other countries to evade stringent safeguards, thus weakening the fragile credibility of the non-proliferation regime at a time when it is already under great stress.

All this raises questions about why Australia needs nuclear-powered submarines at all. No serious analysis supports Canberra's assertion that conventionally-powered subs will not be effective in the decades ahead. Indeed there is good reason to think that a larger fleet of cheaper conventional boats, delivered sooner and easier to operate and maintain, would be more cost-effective in meeting Australia's strategic priorities than a the nuclear-powered force proposed under AUKUS. The suggestion that the AUKUS program poses an effective deterrent to China's strategic ambitions in the decades ahead looks absurd against the reality that it will deliver no substantial new capability until the 2050s.

But perhaps the biggest questions about AUKUS now being raised in Australia's governing Labor Party and more broadly among Australians are about what it means for the country's alliance with America. That is because AUKUS really does draw Australia closer to its US ally in ways and under circumstances that are only now perhaps becoming clear. The real possibility that the strategic contest between America and China will lead to war can no longer be ignored, and AUKUS marks a big shift in what that means for Australia.

The enhanced strategic commitment embodied in AUKUS makes it now 'inconceivable'—in the words of former Defence Minister and now leader of the Opposition Peter Dutton—that Australia would not go to war alongside America against China. Of course Australia has often gone to war alongside America before, most recently in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. But war with China would be very different—incomparably bigger, more intense and more destructive than any war since 1945, and quite possibly a nuclear war, and it would be a war that America has no clear way of winning. Not surprisingly, many are starting to wonder whether this is a war that Australia should fight, or should be encouraging America to fight. The reality is that going to war with China could not save the US strategic leadership in Asia on which Australia has for so long depended.

That being so, Australia must think deeply not just about whether the AUKUS plan is the best way to build its new submarines, but whether continued dependence on its old Anglo-Saxon guardians is really the best way to secure its future in Asia. Those are questions that the Labor Government must now consider.

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Cyclone Mocha in Conflict-Ridden Myanmar Is Another Warning to Take Climate Change Seriously



Sarang Shidore

Coming on the heels of a brutal heatwave in Southeast Asia is Cyclone Mocha, among the biggest in the region's history. The storm has left a trail of destruction across Myanmar's coastal Rakhine state. But even as we mourn the humanitarian tragedy, we must come to grips with the fact that climate change is a security issue, with profound implications for war and peace. And there is a wrong way and a right way to address climate security. The right way to deal with grave challenges such as climate security is to have an all-hands-on-deck approach.

The Bay of Bengal region straddles South and Southeast Asia and is enormously vulnerable to climate change-fueled natural hazards, particularly cyclones, floods, and sea level rise. But the pre-existing political fragility of the region means that these hazards could potentially worsen social fault lines and enhance conflict. Such conflict can be induced through various pathways—hostile responses to migrants and refugees, widening of existing faultlines over scarcer resources in communities, or states of emergency that may lead to harsh crackdowns and alienate citizens from their government to name a few.

A recent study on the climate-conflict nexus in the Bay of Bengal region published by the Center for Preventive Action at the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) in Washington DC (and authored by me) identifies a zone of high climate-conflict risk spanning northeastern India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Here, the greatest climate vulnerability coincides with the highest risks of conflict. The CFR report lays out four climate-conflict scenarios in the Bay of Bengal region, the most dangerous of which is a climate shock or a more gradual impact that further accelerates Myanmar's fragmentation.

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But even if climate change did not exist, Myanmar would be in trouble. Topping the list of its woes is a horrific civil war, with perhaps as much as half of its territory currently not under the control of its government. The country's wide diversity, which could otherwise be a source of strength, is a major weakness as social fault lines have deepened. Rakhine province saw a major campaign of expulsion of its Rohingya minority in 2017, about a million of whom now are perched precariously in rickety refugee camps in southeastern Bangladesh, close to the Myanmar border. (Mercifully, the cyclone appears to have mostly spared these camps.) Rakhine's insurgent Arakan army, demanding deep autonomy, is in episodic battles with the military. And Myanmar is among Southeast Asia's poorest states, officially classified as a "Least Developed Country" by the United Nations.

Rakhine province is also a site of a geopolitical contest underway between India and China. Both are involved in major infrastructure projects there. The United States is also present in the overall region as a major power with deep ties to India, Bangladesh, and most ASEAN states. Myanmar is an ASEAN member. The military takeover and the civil war have presented the otherwise highly successful regional organization with its biggest challenge in decades.

But there's a right way and a wrong way to deal with a climate security challenges such as Myanmar. The wrong way is coercive interventionism. This is what some international actors, led by France, threatened to do under the questionable "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine during a previous such disaster, the 2008 Cyclone Nargis which killed about 140,000 Myanmarers. Other voices refrained from invoking R2P but demanded coercive diplomacy and other forms of pressure. Undoubtedly, Yangon was falling well short in taking the needed action to save lives and was resisting many foreign aid agencies from operating in the country. However, circumventing the Junta to deliver aid directly to the affected population using military airdrops—which was among the suggested actions under R2P—would only have made the situation worse by triggering nationalist resistance, opposition from major regional states, and worsening Myanmar's fragility in the longer run.

R2P is not currently in vogue in the great power competition-focused discourse in Washington. But as climate impacts worsen, it could return as a part of such a competition—with intervention advocated in Global South states deemed to be moving too close to Russia or China.

Using humanitarian crises to solidify bloc-building against geopolitical adversaries is also not helpful. This was a byproduct of the otherwise highly commendable relief effort in the wake of the Asian tsunami of 2004, which Washington used as an opportunity to greatly increase military interoperability with some regional states.

Overcoming grave challenges such as climate insecurity needs an all-hands-on-deck approach. Asia is a vast and increasingly integrated space in which all its states along with a key external power, the United States, have a stake. If they cannot work together on combating an existential threat to humanity, what else could they cooperate on? Hostile US-China relations are clearly an obstacle for the two great powers to work together. But if they are looking for some areas of cooperation, surely the best place to start is humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

As the CFR report stresses, institutions at national, regional, and pan-Asian levels need strengthening. At the national level, Bangladesh's remarkable success in disaster preparedness can be a model. At the regional level, ASEAN's AHA Center has lessons for other up and coming organizations such as the Bay of Bengal's BIMSTEC, which India has done much of late to energize. At the pan-Asian level, the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Center (RHCC) includes the participation of both the United States and China. But hostile U.S.-China relations mean that the two great powers cannot be seen to work too closely together.

A key hallmark of the ASEAN way is placing state sovereignty at the core of its work. This has its critics. But, during the Nargis episode, Myanmar was much more open to working with ASEAN rather than western states, as the generals did not fear a trojan horse aimed to subvert the regime. If we are to achieve practical solutions in a world of diverse political systems and increasing multipolarity, sovereignty cannot be callously discarded.

All ASEAN states—not just Myanmar—believe that sovereignty must be protected. However, sovereignty does not mean noncooperation in humanitarian areas. A culture and habit of cooperation should be created among the ASEAN countries, which goes hand-in-hand with respecting state sovereignty.

Institutions that develop deep habits of voluntary cooperation, transmitting best practices, and learning from bottom-up solutions can aim to bridge some of the drawbacks of centering sovereignty. The worsening climate security challenge demands nothing less.

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Crisis Management in Asia: A Middle Power Imperative



Brendan Taylor

As strategic competition intensifies across Asia, the dangers of military misperception, miscommunication, and mishap are mounting. Yet the crisis management and avoidance mechanisms designed to reduce such risks seem under increasing strain and in urgent need of reinvigoration. The stakes are too significant for this task to be left to the great powers; Asia's middle powers must also step up to ensure that the region remains at peace.

A recent study published by the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network reported that at least 79 air and maritime incidents involving military ships and aircraft, coast guard vessels, and fishing boats have occurred in Asia since 2010. Some of these had the potential to escalate into full-blown conflict. For instance, there have been at least six close encounters between Chinese fighter jets and U.S. surveillance aircraft. Moreover, in June, Washington accused a Chinese destroyer of provocative maneuvers near a U.S. destroyer sailing through the Taiwan Strait.

China continues to resist U.S. efforts to establish guardrails aimed at preventing Sino-U.S. competition from spiraling into conflict. Following then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, Beijing severed all communications with the U.S. military. Beijing has been reluctant to engage with Washington since U.S. President Joe Biden ordered the downing of a Chinese surveillance balloon operating over the continental United States. When asked if a call with Chinese President Xi Jinping requested by Biden was going to be set up, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin responded, "Communication should not be carried out for the sake of communication. The U.S. side should show sincerity, work with China to take concrete actions to help bring China-U.S.

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relations back to the right track.” Beijing has also made clear to Washington that Taiwan remains a red line in U.S.-China relations. Biden and Xi may finally meet in November at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in San Francisco.

Elsewhere in Asia, Pyongyang unilaterally ceased using communication channels with Seoul in April while escalating its criticism of the South Korean government. And in August, the Philippine Coast Guard suspended a hotline with China amid renewed tensions over the disputed Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea.

Given the apparent trend, one might question whether it is worth persisting with crisis management and avoidance mechanisms in Asia. Two common arguments suggest that these efforts are futile, but both warrant closer examination.

The first argument posits that Beijing has shown no inclination to utilize these mechanisms during crises. For instance, in April 2001, when a Chinese fighter jet collided with a U.S. EP-3 surveillance aircraft over the South China Sea, U.S. officials struggled to reach their Chinese counterparts, despite the existence of a direct presidential hotline established in 1998.

Beijing remains suspicious of risk reduction mechanisms, claiming that these only facilitate U.S. military activities close to Chinese shores. However, it is important to recognize that the theory and practice of crisis management remains a relatively new endeavor for China, while the West has decades of experience to draw on.

During the early stages of the Cold War, the Soviet Union displayed similar reticence. After inadequate crisis communication channels nearly led to nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Moscow and Washington established a hotline known formally as the Direct Communications Link. A decade later, they signed the Incidents at Sea Agreement, which substantially reduced the number of dangerous encounters between Soviet and U.S. naval vessels.

Beijing has, in fact, embraced risk reduction measures more than commonly acknowledged. In July 2022, China pledged to expedite the implementation of a hotline to manage fishing incidents with Vietnam. This June, it agreed to establish a new high-level defense communications hotline with Singapore. Moreover, a hotline with Tokyo, agreed on half a decade earlier, commenced operation in May. A similar mechanism connecting China with the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also been proposed.

The second argument often made is that formal mechanisms are unnecessary in Asia, where informal approaches to crisis management are seen as optimal. This argument is frequently invoked in the context of cross-strait tensions, where senior Taiwanese officials—including President Tsai Ing-wen—express confidence that people-to-people contacts could be mobilized to defuse a major crisis.

However, history shows that informal approaches can falter when crises escalate. One reason for the expansion of the Korean War in the early 1950s was Washington’s failure to pay enough attention to Chinese concerns, which had been informally conveyed through Indian intermediaries.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong has observed that smaller and middle-sized Asian powers have an “existential interest in pressing for the management of

great-power competition.” She has urged her Chinese counterpart to reciprocate U.S. overtures to establish guardrails.

Like all middle and small powers, however, Australia lacks the diplomatic heft to undertake the task of establishing an effective regional crisis management system alone. A collective effort is called for. A middle-power coalition comprising states with everything to lose from a full-blown Asian conflict—such as Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam—should advocate for a serious reinvigoration, and possibly even some reimagining, of crisis management and avoidance mechanisms in this part of the world.

They can do so collectively through established multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus. These nations should encourage the use of existing risk reduction measures, including stalled inter-Korean channels and the now-dormant cross-strait hotline agreed to by the leaders of China and Taiwan at their historic November 2015 meeting in Singapore.

Additionally, they could collectively champion the development of new risk reduction mechanisms, particularly in the cyber domain, where such measures are sorely lacking. For instance, they could propose new guidelines for how cybertechnologies should and shouldn’t be used for military purposes.

While crisis management and avoidance mechanisms are not a panacea for Asia’s intensifying strategic rivalries, history teaches us that it is better to have them than not. Asia’s middle powers must therefore seize this moment, harnessing their collective influence to reduce the risks of catastrophic conflict.

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Rabindranath Tagore: A Man for a New Asian Future



Archishman Raju

Relations between India and China are deeply troubled today. Many analysts predict that these relations will become worse in the coming years and see no future where these two Asian powers will come together in cooperation. Nevertheless, most Asians and much of the world would prefer to see a harmonious relationship between these two powers. One way of turning things around is to reflect on the times when these two countries were engaged in the struggle to establish modern states and to take seriously a major thinker of that period, Rabindranath Tagore, who envisioned such a harmony. April 2024 provides an opportunity to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China and study his vision. Tagore visited during a period when India was under colonial rule and China was in the midst of its 'century of humiliation'. At a time of great suffering, his visit was a symbol of the commonality of their situation and their attempt to establish new bonds.

Indeed, Tagore's visit to China marked a historic turn in India-China relations. He visited China at a time when Chinese society was in intense flux and debating the place of Western thought. Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of the Communist Party of China (who later turned against the party), had welcomed "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" and attacked old customs and traditions including Confucianism. In his lectures in China, Tagore argued against associating modernity with an uncritical acceptance of the West and said, "The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern: I am on its side, for I am modern" [1].

His point of view was appreciated and he was effusively welcomed by several Chinese intellectuals, including Liang Qichao, who compared his visit with those of ancient travellers between India and China. In his introduction to Tagore, Liang spoke of how India and China had extensive contact in the past—most prominently through Buddhism—which was interrupted by colonial expansion. Western colonialism had not just interrupted positive civilizational exchange; it had created the conditions for mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. Liang saw Tagore's visit as reigniting the contact between two ancient civilizations in modern times.

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Tagore influenced the relations between the two countries in many ways. Modern Chinese literature was deeply influenced by Tagore. The poet Bing Xin wrote in her moving tribute to Tagore that when she first discovered him, “I was so elated as if I had found a hidden orchid while strolling along a mountain path” [2]. There were several Indian visitors to China and Chinese visitors to India after his visit. Indeed, India-China relations could be said to have reached a crescendo in 1954 with the signing of the Panchsheel agreement, which created a new paradigm for international relations. The subsequent sad break in relations needs no repetition.

It should be noted, however, that the popularity of Tagore in China has only increased. He is widely known and is taught in Chinese school texts. In some ways, his ideas have more relevance at this time when both India and China are re-examining the importance of their ancient heritage. I would like to highlight three aspects of Rabindranath Tagore’s thought that deserve the attention of the world today.

The first is his critique of Western modernity. Tagore believed that in Western modernity, moral progress had not kept pace with scientific progress. He was a critic of Western nationalism, which he considered an abstract and limiting ideal driven by profit-making that had led to unnatural growth. He also critiqued the excessive materialism of the West. He believed that society should benefit from the gains of applied science, but that these must not overwhelm human relations. Today, as China and India have both made immense material progress, much debate and discussion is being carried out regarding the shape that Chinese and Indian modernity is going to take. Both countries are seeking clarity on how their modern social organization differs from that of the West, and on its relationship to their ancient civilizational heritage. Scholars of China, for example, have noted the distinct state organization in China, referring to it as a civilizational state. Tagore emphasized that one must search for civilizational heritage in folk forms, in the ways and beings of ordinary people rather than in the culture of the elite.

The second is the doctrine of Universal Man [3]. Tagore was immensely concerned with the place of the human being in society and directly confronted the complex problem of human experience in modern society. He believed that individuals would only find their self-expression in seeking to spiritually expand and unite with all of humanity. He thus sought an *organic unity* of humanity. This unity would be driven, in his view, by love. Individuals should strive to be “world-workers” [4] who reject both rootless cosmopolitanism and narrow provincialism. Tagore further argued that Western nationalism was producing a limited sort of human being, and instead, there was a need to create what he called the complete moral man [5]. He particularly emphasized the importance of education in developing human personality.

The third aspect is Pan-Asia and Asian Unity. Tagore argued that it would be Asia that would show a new dawn to the world. Pan-Asia as an idea is often associated with Japanese thinkers, but Tagore was a critic of Japanese imperialism. He did not view Asia as a racial or geographical category but rather as a historical and political one. A synthesis of different cultures in Asia would develop in her “a confident sense of mental freedom, her own view of truth” [6]. Otherwise, Tagore said

Asia “will allow her priceless inheritance to crumble into dust, and, trying to replace it clumsily with feeble imitations of the West, make herself superfluous, cheap and ludicrous” [7].

What possibly could unite such a large landmass with such a huge variety of peoples and cultures? As the American scholar W.E.B Du Bois wrote “colored people vary vastly in physique, history and cultural experience. The one thing that unites them today in the world’s thought is their poverty, ignorance and disease, which renders them all, in different degrees, unresisting victims of modern capitalistic exploitation” [8]. Pan-Asia was an idea shaped by the resistance to Western domination over the world. Du Bois, who was a founder of the Pan-African movement and an admirer of both the Indian Freedom Struggle and the Chinese revolution, expanded the Pan-Asia concept further to Pan Africa-Pan Asia.

Tagore argued that the time has come to “prepare the grand field for coordination of all the cultures of the world, where each will give to and take from the other; where each will have to be studied through the growth of its stages in history. This adjustment of knowledge through comparative study, this progress of intellectual cooperation, is to be the keynote of the coming age” [9]. He felt that Asia must first seek to synthesize and understand its own heritage so it could properly assimilate the contribution from the rest of the world.

As is evident to anyone who is paying attention, we are reaching the end of the era dominated by the West. China and India will likely be the two largest economies in the world by 2050. The relationship between them and their cooperation will shape not only their own population but the future of humanity itself. Unfortunately, there is currently a pitiful amount of contact between the two nations. Both China and India have far more contact with the West than they have with each other.

This is why it is important not only to commemorate 100 years of Rabindranath Tagore’s visit to China but also to take up his unfinished project of seeking a synthesis of Asian thought. This requires, first of all, that Asian countries know and understand each other. The image of China in India and vice versa is mostly shaped by Western narratives. Discussions tend to focus on realpolitik and narrow concerns. A small group of scholars certainly do have contact, but many of them are based in the West and their works have limited reach in broader society. Far wider contact is needed. It would be apt to set up Tagore centres for cultural understanding and civilizational dialogue. Tagore’s own vision of the importance of his visit was summarized in his statement: “I shall consider myself fortunate if, through this visit, China comes nearer to India and India to China,—for no political or commercial purpose, but for disinterested human love and for nothing else” [10].

Given the growing misunderstanding between China and India today, the two societies must consider commemorating the 100th year of Tagore’s visit to China. It would remind both societies that for most of human history, India and China have lived in peace with each other. A study of his thought will provide us with a modern vision for how they can continue this longstanding tradition.

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Asia Should Take the Lead on Global Health



Srinath Reddy and Priya Balasubramaniam

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the world now recognizes the importance of addressing global health challenges. But Asian perspectives are still often ignored by the powerful actors that have played a role in making global health a diplomatic priority, such as Western governments and multilateral organizations, despite the region's growing influence in political and economic spheres. Understanding how Asian countries conceptualize and contribute to global health governance is crucial in the years ahead.

Asia has significant differences both among and within its countries. Political, economic, and cultural diversity has not only contributed to varying health indicators in the region, but also led to differently configured national health systems. Rapid yet uneven socioeconomic development has exacerbated health disparities, and epidemiological transitions are underway in the region. Asian countries are tackling these challenges through innovations in financing, low-cost delivery models, and digital tools and platforms.

Despite divergent circumstances, many Asian countries are leveraging shared health challenges to cultivate regional solidarity. They are cooperating in various domains, including disaster preparedness, pathogen surveillance, and health promotion and disease prevention strategies. The pandemic only intensified collaboration in advancing health care access and equity in the region, and the leadership of Asian countries in this realm deserves recognition.

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Western political agendas have long shaped the global health landscape. In the colonial era, economic interests drove an emphasis on controlling so-called tropical diseases. Occupying powers sought to protect native populations from diseases that might impede productivity—but they also wanted to shield colonial administrators and employees from illness. The focus on maintaining health for the benefit of the ruling class rather than addressing local needs perpetuated inequalities. Inadequate understanding of local ecosystems and practices led to misguided interventions, leaving lasting negative impacts on colonized populations.

This paternalistic approach persisted into the postcolonial era through a system that directed aid to recipient countries according to the priorities of wealthy donor countries. From the 1980s to the 2000s, aid predominantly flowed into low- and middle-income countries grappling with the challenges of infectious diseases, maternal mortality, and child mortality. That focus served the commercial interests of the pharmaceutical industry in donor countries, which supplied vaccines, antimicrobial drugs, and nutritional supplements. With the global spread of HIV/AIDS, virulent avian and swine flus, and concerns about bioterrorism, biosecurity became the rallying flag for global health led by Western aid programs.

The West is still fashioning the global health agenda in the twenty-first century, often according to commercial priorities. In a world economy dependent on interconnected labor and markets, rising rates of death and disability from noncommunicable diseases (such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes) threaten to affect the workforce and consumer spending. Manufacturers in high-income countries have identified lucrative markets for drugs, medical equipment, and diagnostic technology in emerging economies in Asia. However, these affluent nations are reluctant to constrain the global trade of tobacco, alcohol, and ultra-processed and sugary foods—the key drivers of noncommunicable disease epidemics in low- and middle-income countries.

During the pandemic, the interests of Western pharmaceutical companies often took precedence over survival in the global south. Australia, Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, among others, fiercely defended patent protection for COVID-19 vaccines at the World Trade Organization when India and South Africa sought temporary patent waivers for drugs, vaccines, and equipment related to the pandemic. While hasty travel bans failed to stop the virus and its variants, supply chain disruptions created major challenges for low- and middle-income countries and affected manufacturing, distribution, and access to essential goods, health products, and services.

The pandemic showed that trade alone cannot be the basis for advancing global health. Suppliers and buyers are transactional by nature, trying to maximize advantages for themselves while often disregarding health and social costs. Although the impetus for a more effective global health care system initially came from a sense of shared vulnerability, the momentum must now come from a sense of shared values: promoting the health and well-being of all populations.

Asia is well positioned to provide the leadership for this transition. The region is home to nearly 60% of the global population, including nearly three billion people in China and India alone. Although disparities exist within the continent, the

prevailing sense of community and robust social solidarity have enhanced societal resilience in the region. In 2019, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore ranked among the top five countries in the world in terms of life expectancy, as shown by World Health Organization data. And between 2000 and 2019, many other Asian countries made large strides in improving their life expectancies, including Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Both social and systemic determinants of health are rapidly improving across Asia. Alongside economic development, there has been a boom in health technology innovations and their applications in health care provision and access. The increasing number of medical tourists traveling from the United States and Europe to Asian countries attests to the region's reputation for high-quality clinical and wellness care. Furthermore, the Asian pharmaceutical sector is scaling up production of quality generics and new drug development.

Both China and India developed COVID-19 vaccines domestically that were approved by the World Health Organization, and India became a manufacturing hub for internationally developed vaccines. COVID-19 vaccines manufactured by China accounted for nearly half of the vaccine doses administered globally in 2021. Meanwhile, despite its own massive wave of infection, India eventually managed to meet the demands of its substantial population as well as supply vaccines to 96 other countries. Although the scale of supplies may have been smaller than that of China, this gesture demonstrated a sense of global solidarity.

In Asian countries, health care markets are increasingly organized based on solidarity, and the COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the need to collaborate around universal health coverage. Commitment to universal health care in the region extends beyond reliance on private insurance. In many Asian countries, tax funding and social insurance ensure access to affordable health services. Primary care is prioritized, and the value of health promotion is well recognized. There is political willingness to regulate harmful products such as cigarettes or high-processed foods promoted in low- and middle-income markets, as well as commercial practices that affect health indicators, such as environmental degradation.

Key Asian countries and entities, including China, India, Japan, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have advocated for joint research collaboration, resource-sharing, and resilient health systems. The region exemplifies how diverse countries can collaborate in addressing transboundary health challenges and foster dialogue on other issues. Active participation in regional partnerships and international organizations will amplify the region's role in shaping the collective global response to emerging threats.

Nonetheless, some challenges persist in collaboration among Asian countries. One major obstacle is the historical prioritization of economic, political, and security agendas over health initiatives within regional frameworks such as ASEAN. Diverse political economies and health care models across Asia also present hurdles to cooperation when it comes to data collection, surveillance systems, and scaling innovative solutions.

Among Asian countries, China is most rapidly advancing institutional innovation and expanding its global health engagement through its Belt and Road Initiative and

other assistance to sub-Saharan Africa. The two regions are natural partners: Both are home to growing economies that can collectively raise their voice in global forums and demand more equitable policies for the global south. Furthermore, the young populations of many Asian and African countries will make up the global health workforce of the future, serving not only their own populations but also those in other parts of the world.

How China navigates its own engagement holds significant implications for the region's other countries, and success requires a collective willingness for mutual learning and a commitment to developing governance structures conducive to future collaboration without defensive posturing. As new pandemic threats emerge, especially from within Asia, data on potential pathogens must cross national boundaries before viruses and their variants do. Although recent tensions over the COVID-19 pandemic may indicate China's tendency to isolate itself, it's worth noting that the 2003 SARS pandemic contributed to opening Beijing up to health collaborations with other countries.

To make this Pax Asiana for global health a reality, Asian countries must assert themselves within multilateral organizations and stride confidently onto global platforms. But Asia's collective strength will shine only when harmonious relationships exist among its countries; collaboration in global health can catalyze those relationships. Fostering purposeful and productive partnerships is crucial when it comes to medical education, health worker training, and the research and development of health technologies.

Cooperating on global health presents Asia with an opportunity to reshape the dynamics of regional politics and to influence the trajectory of global health governance. Greater Asian leadership in this realm will lead to greater health and well-being for low- and middle-income countries, ensuring more equitable benefits. That in turn, could help shape a world that is both more unified and more prepared to tackle the next pandemic.

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Reconceptualizing Asia's Security Challenges



Jean Dong

As the world's economic center of gravity and strategic focus continue to shift toward Asia, the region has become a focal point for strategic competition among major powers. The Asian region also harbors many flashpoints such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and the China-India border. The critical challenge ahead is how Asia can maintain peace and prosperity in this era of significant geopolitical frangibility and complexity.

The conventional wisdom suggests that economic development driven by a hegemonic power leads to economic prosperity and peace in the Asia-Pacific. This approach leverages economic interdependence to promote regional integration, and places more weight on pragmatic outcomes in the strategic interactions among Asian nations.

This "hegemonic stability" model has been applied by both Asian and Western powers. The Chinese tributary system paved the way for an era known as Pax Sinica, a period of peace in East Asia spanning nearly 500 years from 1368 to 1840. The tributary system established a diplomatic and commercial framework that enabled nations to meet their demand for goods peacefully, both with China and with each other, thus minimizing resource-based plunders. The prospect of participating in this thriving trade network encouraged polities to prioritize economic growth and adopt strategies geared toward long-term prosperity, which in turn reduced their inclination toward conflict.

Similarly, by underwriting the stability in Asia, especially after World War II. The United States enabled countries in Asia to prioritize economic development and trade over regional rivalries.

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However, this conventional “road to peace,” which has served the region well for so long, is now confronted with three challenges.

First, the burgeoning Asian economy may paradoxically be contributing to its escalating instability. As countries grow more prosperous and stronger, they may experience rising societal expectations, amplified national ambitions, and intensified nationalism. These sentiments could motivate competition for status and heighten the risk of conflicts over lingering historical territorial disputes.

Further, interdependence may lead to increased fragmentation and division within the Asian region. The late Professor Robert Jervis of Columbia suggested that states may resist deeper economic ties due to concerns that increased interdependence could lead to strategic vulnerabilities, such as undue influence over national security and sovereignty, supply chain disruptions, and economic coercion. This tension is mitigated between countries with aligned values, but it can escalate among nations with stark differences, potentially leading to the division of the region into separate blocs.

Lastly, from an environmental viewpoint, economic strategies solely centered on material growth risk societal destabilization over the medium to long term. They could worsen inequality and heighten geopolitical tensions over scarce resources, fuelling climate risks and a cycle of blame for deteriorating conditions. This is particularly relevant to the Asian region as its diverse geography and climate conditions make the region vulnerable to a variety of climate risks.

The concept of hegemonic stability in Asia is also undergoing a significant transformation. Whereas Chinese dynasties and the United States dominated the region and set the rules in the past, every Asian nation now possesses agency in shaping the region’s future. For instance, as the only region facing both the Pacific and Indian oceans, Southeast Asia is crucial to the Sino-U.S. strategic competition. Central Asia’s strategic location at the junction of China, Russia, and Europe gives it crucial regional influence. As major U.S. allies hosting US military bases, Japan and South Korea are pivotal to Asian security. India’s rising influence in the region is also undeniable.

This newfound agency among Asian nations presents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Asian countries could band together to foster the development of a more robust and comprehensive security architecture, encouraging China and other regional powers to pursue more accountable and cooperative engagements. On the other hand, Asian countries might try to vie for centrality in the regional order. This desire for influence could potentially hinder collective efforts to address regional challenges.

Navigating this complex security landscape in Asia paradoxically calls for both boldness and caution. Asian nations must tread softly and take careful steps to manage the myriad of current tensions and flashpoints amid profound uncertainty. To begin with, it is vital that they bolster communication and collaboration among security institutions within Asia’s subregions, including the East Asia Forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. These inter-institutional dialogues should aim to not only facilitate candid and constructive

discussions about ongoing tensions, but also devise practical steps to prevent crises and disputes and offer policy measures for de-escalation when they arise.

At the same time, the region needs a novel and bold agenda to match the magnitude of the challenges it faces. Looking into the future, in an age marked by polycrisis involving not just seismic geopolitical shifts but also various non-traditional security threats including climate risks, technological upheaval, and societal transformation, it is crucial for Asia to collaboratively reconceptualize the concept of security to go beyond traditional geopolitical rivalry.

First, it is essential that Asian nations adopt a holistic view and embed non-traditional security challenges at the heart of Asia's security discourse. Second, they must recognize that these intertwined non-traditional security challenges extend beyond the confines of any one nation, rendering the notion of "siloed security" obsolete. Cooperation is imperative. A possible starting point could be to adopt the concept of human security introduced by the United Nations Development Program as a guiding principle for the region, as it acknowledges the deep interrelations among human well-being, economic stability, environmental sustainability, and technological advancements.

The tasks of managing tensions and reconceptualizing Asian security must be pursued simultaneously. An exclusive focus on shared non-traditional security risks could heighten strategic distrust by neglecting the present risks of conflict and deeper causes of regional tensions. However, efforts towards the reconceptualization of security should begin immediately to catalyze cognitive shifts and cultivate innovative thinking about new patterns of cooperation between states. This approach may provide fresh perspectives for tackling the current complex security issues and enhance resilience against Asia's future challenges.

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A New ‘Coalition of the Unwilling’



Jay Vinayak Ojha

As Narendra Modi’s new government takes shape in India, the now three-term Prime Minister has done everything possible to emphasise continuity from his second term. The reappointment of seasoned diplomat Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar to his role as Minister of External Affairs is a vote of confidence in his stewardship of India’s foreign policy in perhaps the tensest geopolitical environment of the last half-century. India’s fleet-footed approach to her external relationships elicited reactions ranging from respect and acceptance to frustrated upset, particularly from the United States.

What India’s partners may perceive as unprincipled opportunism (actions such as dramatically increasing the imports of Russian crude oil, even in the midst of the Ukraine conflict, and re-exporting refined oil to Western Europe; or deepening relations with ‘autocratic regimes’ such as Myanmar and Iran), however, India’s leadership sees as a steadfast and necessary commitment to India’s national interest, and a corrective to the perceived idealism of the past. In his landmark 2019 lecture on the present phase of Indian foreign policy, Dr Jaishankar set out a very simple doctrine: “A clearer definition of interests is the next step and its determined pursuit of that the one thereafter.”

How India will define these aims depends on how it sees the world. India’s world policy should be seen as a mingling of three intellectual streams: a fierce and passionate nationalism, particularly when it comes to national defence; anti-colonialism, including opposition to what it sees as neo-colonial structures; and a civilisational aspiration to play a role in the world. These streams supply the rationale, for India’s

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approach to China, the United States, and BRICS and the broader 'Global South' respectively.

The first stream—nationalism—explains India's hesitance towards China and its growing closeness to the United States. Contrary to what recent anxieties about a purportedly 'Hindu nationalist' foreign policy would suggest, India's foreign policy has always had a strong nationalist streak which has included the idea of a 'sacred soil', in the words of the Parliamentary resolution passed in the wake of India's 1962 defeat at the hands of China in a border war. Anxiety about a rising China's capacity to use its military might to chip away Indian territory threatens India's own sense of nationhood.

It is such anxieties which explain India's enthusiasm to sign agreements with the United States. These include the four 'foundational agreements' signed between 2002 and 2020: the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA); the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA); the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA); and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). These agreements allow for greater information sharing between the two nations' security establishments and interoperability between their armed forces. As commentators have pointed out, this orientation represents a definitive move away from India's own 'Monroe doctrine' which once sought to exclude great powers from the Indian Ocean.

It is here, however, that the second stream cuts the first. India's colonial past, alongside which are wrapped memories of American imperiousness during the Cold War, have engraved a historical memory in India which puts a hard limit on the extent of cooperation with the 'Anglosphere.' India's abortive attempt at rapprochement with the United States in the 1960s is instructive in this regard. The 1962 border war, during which the United States aided India with massive airlifts of arms and supplies, sparked a positive change in Indo-US relations. Soon afterwards, however, the United States' refusal to sell F-104 'Starfighters' to India drove India to double down on its relationship with the USSR, and President Johnson's desire to cut the 'India lovers' in the State Department to size sent relations on a downward course once again. Recent tensions between India and the USA and Canada over alleged assassination plots in North America have deepened the sense that there are limits to India's relationship with the 'Five Eyes' nations. The US threat of sanctions over the Indo-Iranian deal to build the Chabahar Port—creating a link between India and Central Asia which bypasses Pakistan—is also likely to smart, serving as a reminder of the bygone days in which the USA used its technical and agricultural assistance to India as a lever of influence.

This history goes a long way to explain why India has been reticent to join the more explicitly securitised aspects of the Quad structure. India steered well clear of AUKUS, the Australian-British-American security alliance. Prime Minister Modi recently emphasised the need to correct the "abnormality in our [Indo-China] bilateral interactions." For now, it may still be accurate to say that 'China has lost India' but India does not trust the United States enough to slam the door shut even on an increasingly assertive China.

It is the third stream of India's foreign policy which presents the most unrealised potential: its renewed vision of a 'Global South,' realised through multilateral institutions such as BRICS. India has positioned itself as the 'Voice of the Global South' and taken on inequities in the global economic order, including issues such as intellectual property in essential medicines.

This is a vision that goes beyond the clichés of Cold War era non-alignment. India's 'Vaccine Maitri' mission involved the gift of 14 million doses of covid vaccines to 98 developing countries, and the export of hundreds of millions of doses. A precarious but growing economy, a large population, and increasing capacity to deliver on its promises mean that India wishes to make its presence felt in the world. Other nations in the Global South are also likely to appreciate the prospect of a 'safe harbour' if the Sino-US rivalry intensifies.

Unlike in the 1950s, this role need not be based on sentiments of anti-colonial solidarity—real or imagined—but on a hard-nosed analysis of mutual interests. China and the USA are India's largest trading partners, with the former claiming the top spot again this year. The same pattern repeats across much of Southeast Asia. Domestic political and cultural convulsions in the United States and Europe should also give pause to those Asian nations taking US-backed security structures for granted. Even a pre-eminent United States may decide to follow the example of the Emperor Hadrian, who, in Gibbon's words, "confessing himself unequal to the task of defending the conquests of Trajan," retreated behind secure borders to ensure peace and prosperity at home. The age of multipolarity is now dawning. Whatever its merits, the American writ will no longer run unchallenged throughout the world. India has the opportunity to work with like-minded nations, particularly in Southeast Asia, to create a 'coalition of the unwilling'—unwilling to compromise on their sovereignty, unwilling to enter entangling alliances, and unwilling to have their journey towards development derailed by a new global conflict.

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Asia's Middle Powers' Activism a Plus for Regional Stability



Huong Le Thu

As geopolitical crises expand and proliferate, and major powers find themselves preoccupied with mutual rivalry—along with, in many cases, pressing domestic issues—the room for so-called middle powers has grown in the international arena. So much so that some believe it is these middle powers who will be the architects of the new world order, even though their increasingly proactive diplomacy is for now largely uncoordinated.

Middle powers, by no means a new or a uniform concept, are broadly understood as countries that are neither “major” nor “small”, and which are well integrated into the global economy.

But increasingly, the concept is best defined by these countries’ demonstrated energy and proactivity in international affairs, particularly in their respective regions.

The strategic calculus, economic trajectory, and even demographic trends among middle powers differ greatly, but what they do have in common is a growing sense of confidence in the role they can play in shaping the changing world order—particularly in their immediate neighbourhoods.

While these countries are logically first and foremost focused on ensuring their own security and prosperity, they are increasingly expanding their ambitions to broader roles.

The reality of strategic activism among middle powers is often determined not by their size, but by their mindset. Take, for example, Singapore. Despite being one of the smallest countries in the world, the city state has managed to develop close relations with both the US and China, as well as many other middle powers.

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As a result of these trust-building efforts, it has been a location of choice for convening meetings between adversaries, including the landmark US- North Korea summit in 2018. As the host of the yearly Shangri-La Dialogue—arguably the most important defence and diplomacy gathering in the Asia-Pacific—Singapore continues to contribute to greater global collaboration, innovation, and connectivity. This diplomatic activism has been very effective in giving it a voice in shaping global policy and narratives.

At the other end of the size spectrum is Australia. While the country has long been protected by both its geographical location and the United States' security umbrella, Canberra has in recent years come to the view that these are no longer sufficient as its only security. Australia has been increasingly proactive in shaping its preferred environment, through a combination of both active diplomacy and increased deterrence. It has, in particular, doubled down in engaging with the United States and its partners, primarily through the economic and security initiatives of the Quad (along with Japan and India) and Aukus (along with the United Kingdom), to boost its security role in the Indo-Pacific region.

This newfound assertiveness has not gone down well in Beijing and, at times, contributed to a heightened perception of how great power competition between China and the US may spill over to Washington's Asian allies. Canberra's desire to shape its neighbourhood, while not detached from the goal of outcompeting China, has also had a constructive role in strengthening defence capabilities of its Pacific neighbours.

Vietnam has also emerged in recent years as one of the more diplomatically proactive actors in the region, successfully managing relations with competing major powers: the US, China, and also Russia.

Hanoi has managed to maintain close relations with China, including in terms of attracting Chinese investments, despite being a party to the South China Sea dispute. In parallel, it has consistently worked with other claimants towards rules-based dispute management, which, despite the long-term and multi-actor nature of the maritime disputes, has yielded some breakthroughs.

In December 2022, Vietnam and Indonesia agreed to delimit their respective Exclusive Economic Zones after 12 years of negotiations, symbolically timing their agreement with the 40th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos). Following this success, Hanoi and Manila, which similarly faces sovereignty challenges from China, have expressed willingness to discuss their overlapping claims in the South China Sea.

Notionally a "pacifist" nation since World War II, Japan has long played a role in the promotion of peace. But growing distrust between China and Japan, fuelled in part by growing tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands dispute, has prompted Tokyo to assume an increasingly assertive—even possibly militaristic—role in the region.

Japan's leadership in supporting South-east Asia's—and the more broadly the so-called Global South's—pursuit of AI-inclusive governance is an example of its contributions to tech standard setting. Following the global successes of its Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), it has recently expanded its regional outreach with

an Overseas Security Assistance (OSA) programme, through which it aims to support the maritime nations of South-east Asia and the Pacific with training, exercises, and workshops. While the programme is at a nascent stage, its ultimate goal is to contribute to a more stable, or at least less imbalanced, and more prosperous, Indo-Pacific.

Active middle powers are dissimilar in many respects, have distinct national interests, and even sometimes bet on different strategic choices, but in Asia in particular, the ones identified above share a common desire—to live and prosper in a peaceful, stable and less risky environment.

Asia's middle powers are not selfless. Neither do they aspire to big leadership roles. Determined to protect their sovereignty while balancing their relations between great powers, they take on the causes that are in their interests.

But, in doing so, as they invest in their own capacity to live in an increasingly contested world and manoeuvre growing geopolitical tensions, they can contribute to greater peace and stability in the region.

Their efforts would be even better served by closer cooperation and coordination among them, in order to collectively act as a stabilising force for a more predictable shared environment. In the current turbulent geopolitical arena, with conflicts and crises on the rise globally, their growing footprint in international affairs is essential in preserving regional stability.

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Nuclear Stability in the Twenty-First Century



Rakesh Sood

The beginning of the nuclear age in 1945 generated two conflicting emotions among scientists, superbly captured in the film “Oppenheimer.” One was a sense of achievement at unlocking the mysteries of the universe, and the other was apprehension at having created a bomb so destructive that it could destroy humanity.

Since 1949, when Soviet Union exploded its device, casting a nuclear shadow on the bipolar world, this dilemma has been at the heart of “nuclear deterrence.”

For nuclear deterrence to work, the threat of nuclear use had to be credible, while ensuring that these weapons should never actually be used. Two schools of deterrence theory soon emerged. One was led by Bernard Brodie, who was of the view that deterrence is automatic and ensured through retaliation because the one who initiates the nuclear attack cannot be certain that the adversary’s entire nuclear arsenal has been eliminated. In a 1946 essay, Brodie made the famous statement: “Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on, its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other purpose.”

The other school was led by Albert Wohlstetter, who believed that credible deterrence needed assured second-strike capability and therefore large and survivable arsenals to prevent a nuclear Pearl Harbor. For Brodie, just the risk of retaliation was an adequate deterrent; for Wohlstetter, it was the certainty of retaliation with large numbers that was necessary.

Looking back, clearly Wohlstetter carried the day, leading to Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) as both the United States and the Soviet Union developed thermonuclear bombs, with yields of hundreds of times the bomb dropped in Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945.

The 1962 Cuban missile crisis was a wake-up for the leaders in both Washington and Moscow, making them realize how close to the brink they had come. Despite the rivalry, the two nuclear hegemonies converged on two issues that were to shape

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the first nuclear age—the need for strategic stability and the importance of halting the spread of nuclear weapons. The former laid the grounds for nuclear arms control and crisis management and the latter led to negotiations in Geneva resulting in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

In a world dominated by two nuclear superpowers, both with enormous overkill capacities, strategic stability was equated to nuclear stability. Nuclear stability in turn was based on deterrence stability, managing the nuclear arms race, and fail-safe communications for crisis management.

Thomas Schelling, a Nobel winning economist, applied game theory to nuclear conflict and concluded that while deterrence had to be framed as a system of dynamic adjustment among two rational actors, the uncertainty of “something left to chance” was necessary for credibility. The temptation to undertake an all-out first strike was removed by ensuring “mutual vulnerability” (the 1972 ABM Treaty limited the anti-ballistic missiles that each side could deploy) and symmetry in terms of doctrines and arsenals, thereby giving both adversaries an assured second-strike capability.

In short, irrespective of the steps on the escalation ladder (Herman Kahn designed a 44-step escalation ladder), there would be no winners or losers in a nuclear exchange between the US and Soviet Union.

Hotlines and nuclear risk reduction centers were established for round the clock monitoring of the skies and seas using radars and early warning satellites. Arms control negotiations led to agreements on numbers of strategic launchers and warheads. Though these did little to curb the arms race (the combined nuclear arsenals of the two reached nearly 70,000 in 1986), the dialogue helped manage it and created a semblance of stability. Despite these efforts, there were quite a few close calls; fortunately, common sense and luck ensured that the nuclear taboo was never breached.

The first nuclear age ended with break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia inherited the Soviet arsenal but the transformed politics dissipated the rivalry. The United States’ unipolar moment, which lasted two decades, led to progressive reductions in nuclear arsenals from a high of 70,000 to approximately 14,000. Russia and the U.S. cooperated to denuclearize Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, strengthen export controls on nuclear-related dual-use technologies, focus on threats posed by non-state actors, and extend the NPT into perpetuity (its original span was 25 years).

Deterrence took a back seat as the United States no longer had a nuclear rival. President Barack Obama in 2009 even spoke of “a world without nuclear weapons,” sparking a debate in Washington about moving to a no-first-use policy. However, the second nuclear age turned out to be an interregnum.

New technological developments were changing the nature of conflict. The idea of a networked hybrid conflict zone created a seamlessness that blurred the conventional-nuclear firebreak. Dual capable vectors, which could carry conventional or nuclear payloads, were introduced, raising apprehensions about nuclear entanglement.

India and Pakistan went nuclear in 1998. Even as their tense relations led to South Asia being called a nuclear flashpoint, the United States' conventional global-precision capability and expanded missile defense shield raised doubts in Moscow and Beijing about their nuclear deterrent. North Korea withdrew from the NPT to announce its arrival on the nuclear stage.

Nevertheless, broadly, the non-proliferation consensus held, and the major powers acted in tandem. However, with the return of geopolitical rivalries, both Russia and China embarked on a process of nuclear modernization. The nuclear interregnum that characterized the second nuclear age was ending by the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The third nuclear age has forced strategic thinkers to confront the dilemma of nuclear deterrence anew, this time in a multipolar nuclear world. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the United States flagged the nuclear threat it faces, describing Russia as a "disruptive power" seeking a reordering of the "European and Middle East security and economic structures in its favor," and China as a "pacing challenge" seeking regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region in the near term and a "displacement of the US to achieve global pre-eminence in the future."

Schelling's notion of making nuclear deterrence credible with "something left to chance" between two rational actors no longer seems reassuring in an age of multiple rivalries characterized by nuclear asymmetry—asymmetry in terms of arsenals, doctrines, and stakes in a future stand-off. Today's nuclear asymmetry challenges the notions of "parity" and "mutual vulnerability" that had formed the basis of the old Soviet-U.S. arms control, something that China had never bought into.

It's hardly surprising that the old arms control agreements like the ABM Treaty and the INF Treaty has collapsed and the New START is under strain with no prospects for any talks in the future. Russia's stakes in Ukraine or China's in Taiwan open up the temptations for a salami-slicing approach that relies on brinkmanship.

Nuclear saber-rattling by Russia has bounded the Ukraine conflict; NATO has refrained from committing troops even as it continues to assist Ukraine, and Russia has refrained from attacking NATO supply lines. But at the same time, the continuation of the conflict has given rise to speculation about if Russia will resort to tactical nuclear weapons to bring about a termination.

China is widely believed to be undertaking a rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal, expected to reach 1000 warheads by 2030, and 1500 by 2035, indicating that this would be a precursor to a shift away from its no-first-use to a launch-on-warning policy. This has led to Taiwan increasingly emerging as a flashpoint.

The United States issued a new Nuclear Employment Policy in March to implement a congressional recommendation that the U.S. should have the capability to simultaneously deter both China and Russia and (if deterrence failed) to prevail in a conflict. The focus of modernization was on more accurate and low-yield weapons, but these would blur the firebreak and lead to escalation.

Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia are self-declared nuclear-weapon-free-zones, but the new conflicts and rivalries are undermining the non-proliferation consensus too. With Sweden and Finland joining NATO, almost all of Europe relies

on nuclear security—the United Kingdom and France as nuclear powers and the rest the United States’ extended deterrence. In Asia, Japan and South Korea are less reassured and an internal debate on options is underway. In the Middle East, the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action has led Iran closer to the nuclear threshold. If Iran moves forward, Saudi Arabia (and perhaps Egypt and Turkey) would want enrichment and reprocessing rights, at the least.

With AI and growing cyber and space capabilities, strategic stability has become too complex to be limited to nuclear stability, but this makes its objective clearer—to preserve the nuclear taboo. Nuclear deterrence in the third nuclear age must be redesigned to work in a multipolar, asymmetric nuclear world where there are multiple nuclear dyads but linked into nuclear chains.

Since nuclear weapons cannot be wished away, we need to lengthen the nuclear fuse. A doctrinal shift toward a no-first-use and technical measures toward de-alerting can go a long way in mitigating the growing nuclear risks.

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Managing the US-China Contest

Beware of Munich



Khong Yuen Foong

How do wars start? Sometimes, it's because leaders apply the wrong lessons of history. U.S. President Lyndon Johnson (1963–1968), for example, scribbled to himself while deliberating whether to intervene massively Vietnam, “To give in = another Munich. If not here—then Thailand.” Johnson's old friend Senator Mike Mansfield repeatedly warned him that Vietnam was not “another Munich” but Mansfield's warnings fell on deaf ears. The net result was a war lost, over 50,000 American soldiers killed, and millions of Vietnamese killed.

The Biden Administration should exercise caution about its favourite lessons of history as it begins thinking of new strategies towards Asia. Clues about the Biden Administration's thinking on the strategic challenges and opportunities in Asia can be gleaned from a 2019 *Foreign Affairs* article by Messrs. Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan. In that article, Campbell and Sullivan, the new administration's “Asia Czar” and National Security Adviser respectively, laid out a levelheaded road map—compared to the “fire and fury” approach of the Trump administration—on co-existing with Asia's risen power, China. This co-existence “would involve elements of competition and cooperation” with China; for the U.S. to achieve the most favorable outcomes, it should leverage on its strengths as well as harness the efforts of U.S. allies and partners to “shape China's choices across all domains” in ways conducive to peace and stability.

Hearteningly, Campbell and Sullivan reject the relevance of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War analogy in their road map: containment is unlikely to work for reasons detailed in the article. They do, however, draw on many lessons from the Cold War to manage the U.S.-China competition to prevent it from spiraling into military conflict.

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Identifying Taiwan and the South China Sea as two of the most dangerous flash points in Asia—and threats to their co-existence model—they argue for the importance of maintaining a sustainable deterrence posture in East Asia, the utility of setting up military hot lines, codes of conduct, and concluding arms control agreements to regulate the military competition and to prevent accidents from spiraling out of control. These measures helped prevent a direct U.S.-Soviet military clash during the Cold War.

I would like to add one item to their list of do's and don'ts: be wary of "the lessons of history" invoked by key decision-makers in the event of a military crisis or confrontation over Taiwan or the South China Sea. Here I focus on the "lessons of history" most frequently invoked by American decision makers; it will be interesting to find out from Chinese foreign policy specialists about the "lessons of history" favored by the Chinese leadership. The "lessons of history"—usually encapsulated in the form of a historical analogy such as "no more Munichs" or "this is another Vietnam"—affect decision outcomes by framing the nature of the challenge; in so doing they provides "answers" about the gravity of the stakes, the morality of action/inaction, as well as the action to be taken and its probability of success. When invoked, these "lessons" can play an important role in structuring the decision outcome. In the two "hot" Asian land wars that America fought during the Cold War—Korea (1950–53) and as indicated above, Vietnam (1965–75)—the lessons of the 1930s, encapsulated in the Munich analogy, were invoked in the internal deliberations to assess the nature the challenge, the stakes, and to prescribe a strong military response.

Munich, for Johnson's generation, referred to the 1938 meeting between British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler in Munich, where the former acceded to Hitler's demands on the Sudetenland (in Czechoslovakia). Forever stigmatized as "appeasement" thereafter, the strategic lesson American decision makers drew from Munich was that the stakes were extremely high (for Europe, the US, and world peace); in suing for peace but at the price of not defending the Czechs, Chamberlain whetted Hitler's appetite, and made World War II inevitable. The policy takeaway is that it would have been better to show dictators like Hitler the mailed fist at Munich—even if it meant war in 1938—than to appease them because accommodating the Hitlers only meant a more disastrous war later.

To be sure, we are now almost a century past the Munich years and there is a plethora of other historical analogies that American policymakers can draw on, from "the lessons of Vietnam" to those of Afghanistan, and of course Iraq; these latter analogies warn against fighting unwinnable wars in faraway lands. Yet Munich remains an important part of America's historical repertoire—an analogy that can be easily triggered—when it comes to confronting autocrats.

Munich has a special hold on the American imagination for three reasons. First, it tells America the kind of great power it sees itself to be: one that acts with great resolve and able/willing to act in time to prevent a greater disaster later. Second, and related to the first reason, it is also a code word for the importance of maintaining one's prestige and credibility—Britain's reputation as a great power was irreparably damaged after Munich—allies would no longer believe in its guarantees and

assurances. This consideration about losing prestige and credibility was also crucial in the U.S. decision to fight in Korea and Vietnam—a major worry on the U.S. part was that if it failed to save South Korea and South Vietnam, her allies and adversaries in Europe and Asia would no longer take the U.S. word seriously. In his first foreign policy speech, President Joseph Biden spoke about the importance of “reclaiming our credibility and moral authority.” Third, Munich is also attractive because it is based on an unproven assumption or counterfactual: that Hitler would have been stopped if Britain had been more resolute at Munich, and that World War II would have been avoided. It is a controversial assumption, but the point is that it allows the policymaker using the analogy to insert his predicted outcome into the narrative. And that narrative is one that amplifies the importance and utility of a forceful response.

The point being made here is not that it is never justified to go to war. Rather it is that when a major crisis in the Taiwan straits or the South China Sea punctuate the U.S.-China competition, decision-makers should exercise great caution in relying on historical analogies—especially Munich—to “evaluate” the stakes and options. For international relations specialists have found that in general, historical analogies have tended to lead policymakers astray. This is so because historical analogies, by highlighting the similarities between the past and the present, will obscure or miss out crucial differences. There may be good reasons for showing resolve and perhaps even fight, but it is better to arrive at those conclusions without referencing Munich. The Munich mindset inflates the stakes, assumes moral certainty, and propels one along a military path based on a counterfactual. It is safer for the U.S. and the rest of the world to assess the situation in terms of a sound understanding of the facts surrounding the case, clearly articulated strategic principles, and the relevant international laws or norms. Therefore, if “Munich” is invoked in a future East Asian crisis, red lights should go flashing in our minds; we need to warn all involved “Beware of the Munich analogy!”

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The Anchorage Meeting Will Buy America Needed Time



Douglas Paal

Global media had a rare treat March 18–19, watching China’s and America’s top diplomats depart from normal diplo-speak and score points off each other in Anchorage, Alaska. Accusing each other of violating protocol and etiquette, they squared off over perceived signs of disrespect, hegemonic behavior, interference in internal affairs, and more.

But when the cameras were gone and the diplomats had boarded their planes, their meetings (the public session, plus three private sessions) were described as “a high-level strategic dialogue that both sides believe was timely and helpful and deepened mutual understanding.”

What gives? Fans of professional wrestling might recognize the process: ‘I will pretend that you beat me to a pulp, if you pretend that I took you within an inch of your life.’ Both their audiences will be happy. In today’s terms, China has shown itself standing up to American bullying at long last, and the U.S. will show it is not going to take China’s aggression and cheating anymore. The media and commentators in both countries ate it up.

So, was it all just a show for home consumption? No, some serious business got done. As the Chinese Xinhua new service summarized, without being disputed by the U.S.:

The two sides agreed to follow the spirit of the Xi-Biden telephone conversation on Feb. 11 to maintain dialogue and communication, conduct mutually beneficial cooperation, avoid misunderstanding and misjudgment, forestall conflict and confrontation, and promote sound and steady development of China-U.S. relations.

Both sides expressed the hope to continue such type of high-level strategic communication.

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Both sides committed to enhancing dialogue and cooperation in the field of climate change, and they agreed to establish a joint working group on climate change.

The United States reiterated its adherence to the one-China policy on the Taiwan question.

The two sides discussed making reciprocal arrangements for the COVID-19 vaccination of each side's diplomats and consular officials.

They agreed to hold talks on facilitating activities of each other's diplomatic and consular missions and personnel, as well as on issues related to media reporters, in the spirit of reciprocity and mutual benefit.

The two sides also discussed adjusting relevant travel and visa policies according to the epidemic situation, and gradually normalizing personnel exchanges between China and the United States.

They also exchanged views on a series of other topics, including economy and trade, military, law enforcement, culture, health, cyber security, climate change, the Iranian nuclear issue, Afghanistan, the Korean Peninsula and Myanmar, and agreed to maintain and enhance communication and coordination.

In other words, the Chinese and American top diplomats agreed to tackle the range of global and bilateral issues that have bedeviled the U.S.-China relationship in recent years. The scope of agreement covers many issue areas from which the previous Trump administration had unilaterally walked away, from climate change to closing missions to denying visas to journalists. So from Beijing's perspective, a case can be made that the new administration under Biden, despite the vituperation in Alaska, was opening the possibility of retreating to a more pragmatic relationship with Xi Jinping's government.

Beijing could also show that the days of perceived unequal relations with Washington, a legacy of 200 years of Chinese weakness, were now behind them. China, too, can set the terms of the debate.

As headlines arrive daily about China's economic prowess, growing trade and aid relationships, and new military capabilities, one might miss the key point in the list of "strategic dialogue" accomplishments: Taiwan.

The Trump administration pursued a hybrid Taiwan policy. Trump himself did not seem to care much about the place, as John Bolton's memoir showed. But Trump's lieutenants pursued an approach intended to strengthen unofficial and official connections with the island, while vaguely assuring Beijing that it was operating within the framework agreed to by previous administrations: to pursue a "one China policy," governed by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three joint communiqués with China, and the unilateral U.S. "six assurances" to Taiwan. Toward the end of the Trump term, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo seemed to be trying to throw the entire history of the relationship out the window as he left office, when he ordered State Department guidelines on business with Taiwan to be discarded.

It was important to Beijing to make sure this did not happen. From the earliest days of relations with the U.S., the Taiwan issue has been front and center for Beijing. Chinese leaders proved willing over time to be quite flexible on Taiwan with the U.S. for strategic, economic or other purposes, but they could never permit undermining of the ultimate dream of "reunifying" with Taiwan. Doing so would

invite domestic destruction of the Communist Party's pretensions to its claim to realize the dream of Chinese nationalism, a core buttress for their regime.

Since Joe Biden was elected, he has also continued some of the hybrid behavior of his predecessor's administration. He has echoed the strong views in favor of Taiwan coming from both parties in Congress. In the face of Chinese military patrols near Taiwan, Biden's spokesperson pronounced support for Taiwan to be "rock solid." Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly called on Paraguay's government not to switch relations from Taipei to Beijing. Taiwan is said to be included in a planned "summit of democracies" later this year.

But, when Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen placed a congratulatory phone call to Biden, Blinken took the call instead, avoiding the controversy incurred when Trump personally accepted a similar call in 2016. In early February, the Chinese news agency reported State Department spokesman Ned Price affirming the "one China policy" of the U.S.

So Biden's team wants to have its cake—sounding tough on Taiwan—while eating it, too—not pushing Beijing over the edge by abandoning the one China policy.

Is this a good thing for China but a bad thing for the U.S.? Not in my view. The U.S. needs Biden to repair much of the damage done internationally by Trump, and not to make things unstable in the meantime. Visiting allies, virtually gathering the Quad (leaders of the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia), restoring American reliability, all these recent actions will help. But the U.S. has to reach deep within itself to deal with the pandemic, right social wrongs, and restore competitiveness. These are the work of years, not days. Keeping the peace in the Taiwan Strait meanwhile is not a high price to pay to buy the time necessary. It is statesmanship.

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Navigating Troubled Waters: Ideas for Managing Tensions in the Taiwan Strait



Ryan Hass

Is the situation in the Taiwan Strait on a one-way escalator to eventual conflict?

Given the persistent ratcheting up of tensions in the Taiwan Strait in recent years, it is becoming easier for analysts to argue that the situation will continue to escalate until it reaches a breaking point. Such lazy cynicism is dangerous, though. The hard reality is that there is no military solution to tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

Any conflict in the Taiwan Strait that involves the United States and China would mark the first war in human history between two nuclear-armed powers with long-range strike, cyber, and space capabilities. Given the national identities of all the actors involved, it is hard to conceive of any side surrendering to the other. Thus, short of threatening the absolute destruction of the other side(s), there is no plausible path to war termination. There also is no guarantee that any conflict, once launched, would remain limited in geographic or military scope. More likely, a conflict in the Taiwan Strait would lead to the global economy being shattered, real risk of nuclear escalation, and generational setbacks for all countries involved in fighting.

Even in spite of these inescapable risks, a key challenge is that it is growing harder for policymakers to foresee future scenarios that avoid conflict. This problem has both a proximate dimension and a deeper structural component. At a proximate level, former State Department Assistant Secretary Danny Russel has rightly observed:

The dialogues and the mechanisms that have in the past restrained escalation and fostered some sort of resolution of an incident, aren't working right now...The

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problem is that right now, an accident quickly becomes a crisis and a crisis could lead to conflict.

At a deeper level, the risk is that all sides are growing concerned about their capacity to protect their vital interests. Many in Washington are alarmed that China's combination of expanding military capabilities and shrinking strategic patience could portend future conflict. There also are concerns in Taipei that President Xi will feel a personal legacy requirement to show progress in pulling Taiwan closer to the People's Republic of China (PRC). As Xi dismantles collective decision-making and concentrates power in himself, so the argument goes, risks could rise. Conversely, in Beijing, there is concern that Washington is using Taiwan to split and weaken the PRC and that Washington is reflexively opposed to unification, peaceful or otherwise.

The one interest that all three sides presently share is that they each view avoidance of conflict as serving their interests. In other words, they do not agree on what to do. They do not hold out hope of building trust. They only agree on what to avoid. This shared priority on conflict avoidance should serve as the starting point for managing tensions.

To this end, there are a few practical steps available to mitigate risk. One step is to shrink space for surprises and miscalculation. Predictability, steadiness, transparency, and direct dialogue all limit miscalculation.

Washington and Beijing each want the other side to change course over Taiwan. They both must recognize that their ability to influence the other will be enhanced if they register their requests and concerns privately rather than air grievances publicly. Direct, authoritative, private communications reduce the reputational costs to the other side of adjusting course, whereas public statements or actions virtually guarantee the other side will harden its posture to avoid being perceived as caving to demands from the other.

In this spirit, it also is important for leaders in Taipei, Washington, and Beijing to allow the other sides to preserve confidence in their theory of the case for managing cross-Straits tensions. Cross-Straits stability is strengthened when each side can tell itself a story that time is on its side.

Taiwan's theory of the case is that by improving its democratic governance, sustaining credible deterrence, and deepening links with other like-minded democratic countries, it will be able to withstand pressure from Beijing. Over time, Taiwan could serve as a source of attraction and emulation, leading to future evolutions in China's governance model.

Beijing's theory of the case is that the asymmetry in power between China and Taiwan is tilting toward China, more so with each passing year. So, too, is China's capacity to hold American forces at risk from intervening in cross-Straits contingencies. Beijing believes Washington is weakening itself from within and America's best days are behind it. They hold out hope that with time and improvements to their own domestic circumstances, the people of Taiwan will conclude that their interests are best served by entering political negotiations.

There also is very little risk of Taiwan changing its legal identity, either toward independence or unification. Any change likely would require a constitutional

amendment. The bar to changing the constitution is exceedingly high in Taiwan. To date, Taiwan's voters have demonstrated a stronger preference for sustaining the status quo than they have for any specific outcome to cross-Strait differences.

Given this reality, it is unwise for Washington to steal problems from the future by predetermining cross-Strait outcomes it would accept or oppose. America's interests are better served by remaining anchored in principles it shares with the rest of the region—support for preservation of cross-Strait peace and stability and opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo.

Given these dynamics, now is not the time for any party to force a showdown in the Taiwan Strait. The minimum requirement for all sides is to avoid conflict. If leaders in Washington, Taipei, or Beijing perceive they are riding a one-way escalator to conflict, they should step off it and give other sides the political space to do the same.

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It's Dangerous Salami Slicing on the Taiwan Issue



Richard W. Hu

Power transition is a powerful logic in international relations discourse. Power transition between rising powers and existing powers—or a formerly weaker power overtaking a stronger one—is often viewed as dangerous in world politics. International relations scholars A. F. K. Organski, Jacek Kugler, and Robert Gilpin have long argued that power transition is a basic cause of systemic war. We have seen many wars occur when an emerging power threatens to displace an existing power. The rises and falls of great powers have happened like this throughout history. A few years ago, Harvard Professor Graham Allison coined the term “Thucydides Trap” to describe the likelihood that the US and China would go to war, as Sparta and Athens did 2000 years ago when Athens was threatening to overtake Sparta. The Thucydides Trap has framed today’s mainstream thinking and academic discourse. The world is increasingly concerned by the idea that China and the US may fall into the Thucydides Trap when the former overtakes the latter.

Yet, although wars have often occurred in the context of power transition, they are ultimately caused by human error, not by power rivalry at the international level. Using the power transition theory to predict war is deadly wrong. It is true that power transfers between rising and existing powers as they grow at differential rates, altering their relative power. However, a power transition between competing powers is not a necessary and sufficient condition for war. It is not countries’ relative power position but their domestic and foreign policies that determine whether they go to war.

The rise of China is inevitable, and the power transition between China and the US can be peaceful. Many of the concerns over China catching up with or even

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overtaking the US in the short run are exaggerated. The rise of China and the relative decline of the US power will not turn the post-war international order upside down. China is not trying to take over the US' role in world affairs and replace the existing world order with a China-centric order. The US and its allies are still powerful and will remain powerful in world politics for a long time to come. We must not be swayed by distorted rhetoric about an impending US-China war, nor by pessimistic forecasts that a more dangerous world order—characterized by growing US-China hostility, a remilitarized Europe, inward-oriented economic blocs, digital division along geopolitical lines, and increasing weaponization of economic policies—is inevitable. Perpetuating such misperceptions will lead us to a self-fulfilling prophecy of war and conflicts between rivaling powers.

Contrary to the received wisdom, the real danger for war and international conflicts is rooted in domestic politics, not in the international system. Domestic politics are causing the deterioration of relations between the US and China, including on the most dangerous issue in US-China relations: Taiwan. This is the only issue that can cause war between the US and China. This is why previous US administrations have been cautious on Taiwan. For example, when Taiwanese President Chen Shui-Bian proposed a referendum on Taiwan-China relations in the early 2000s, the US under President George W. Bush strongly opposed this move. Bush stated, "We oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo. And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally, to change the status quo, which we oppose."

However, succeeding US administrations have increasingly undermined the decades-long framework governing the US' relations with Taiwan through 'salami slicing'. The Trump administration overturned, in stages, the terms of the US' relationship with Taiwan. In 2019 and 2020, the US increased its naval presence around the Taiwan Strait and exponentially increased sales of arms and equipment to Taiwan—at a scale unprecedented since the early 1990s. In October 2020, high-ranking US officials visited Taiwan, the first such visit since 1979. In January 2021, the Trump administration further lifted the decades-long restrictions on interactions between high-ranking US and Taiwanese officials. The Biden administration continued this salami slicing approach. Deviating from his more nuanced view on defending Taiwan when he was Senator, President Joe Biden has shown more "strategic clarity" on the issue, and repeatedly affirmed (including in mid-September 2022) that the US would defend Taiwan in case of an attack by China. The proposed Taiwan Policy Act 2022 would further cement the US' military and strategic relationship with Taiwan, further undermining the US policy of strategic ambiguity on Taiwan.

It is dangerous to let domestic partisan politics drive US-China relations. As US-China relations deteriorate further, American domestic political alignments and partisan struggles could become the primary driving force behind Washington's China policy and the future trajectory of US-China relations. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recent trip to Taiwan stirred up so much bilateral and regional tension that many people are calling it the fourth Taiwan Strait crisis since 1949. To many

people, it's clear that Washington has picked a fight with China over Taiwan at the wrong time, when its strategic attention is much needed in Ukraine. But in the context of American domestic politics, China is an easy target. On the Taiwan issue, Beijing is viewed as a bully that must be responded to with strength. In response to Beijing's warning, Speaker Pelosi said she must not back down on visiting Taiwan. Her trip has shown that US foreign policy can be undertaken for domestic partisan reasons and that overall national interest could well be hampered by myopic self-interests in domestic politics.

From the Chinese perspective, Washington's salami slicing is gradually hollowing the US' promise to keep to the one China policy and squeezing Beijing's strategic space on the use of force for reunification. Since the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, Washington has followed a one China policy that encourages peaceful cross-Straits relations while deliberately staying ambiguous on whether it would come to defend Taiwan against Beijing's forced unification. To Washington, maintaining the *status quo*—i.e. “no war and no unification”—is in the best interest of the United States. The US is far away from the Taiwan Straits, and defending Taiwan is not a US vital security interest and will incur a high cost. But for China, reunifying Taiwan is a core national interest. It is part of the mission of the Chinese dream of great national rejuvenation. No Chinese leader can afford to let Taiwan secede from China. If the White House cannot bring its domestic partisan politics under control, Washington and Beijing may come to blows over the Taiwan issue. Instead of sleepwalking into a spiral of crisis and even war over Taiwan or other thorny issues, it would be better for Washington and Beijing to clearly communicate their concerns and red lines, tune down populist discourse on both sides, and more effectively manage their relationship in the context of ongoing power transition.

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US-China Trade and Investment Cooperation amid Great Power Rivalry



Yuhan Zhang

Since 2018, the United States has been responding to China's meteoric economic rise and its own relative decline with a slew of protectionist policies, such as subsidies, at-the-border and behind-the-border trade barriers, and foreign investment restrictions. These policies have naturally elicited retaliations [1] from the Chinese government. As a result, over the last few years, great power competition between the United States and China has intensified. However, despite this intensification in competition and increase in trade protectionism, bilateral trade and investment have not diminished. What explains this contradictory phenomenon?

Despite the ongoing U.S.-China trade war, U.S. exports to China in 2021 witnessed a 21.4% increase to \$151 billion. U.S. imports from China also increased by 16.5% to \$506 billion. More notably, U.S. trade with China in 2021 rose above the prior five-year average [2]. Last year, bilateral trade continued to grow. China remained the top source of U.S. goods imports, which reached \$537 billion in 2022. In the same year, U.S. goods exports to China exceeded \$153 billion [3]. The top commodity sectors in U.S.-China bilateral trade are Machinery and Mechanical Appliances, Chemicals, Plastics, Rubber, and Leather Goods [4].

It is undeniable that both the Trump and Biden administrations have strengthened export controls to China. Still, the U.S. Bureau of Industry and Security approves the majority of Chinese export and re-export license applications. Between 2017 and 2021, approved licenses for tangible items, software, and technology to China increased impressively from approximately 3000 to nearly 4000, although the average processing time doubled over the 5 years [5], suggesting that U.S. scrutiny has indeed become stricter.

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On the investment front, despite tougher regulations such as the U.S. *Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act* and Chinese *Measures on National Security Review of Foreign Investment* [6], foreign direct investment in the United States from China increased from \$35.4 billion at the end of 2018 to \$38.5 billion in 2021 [7]. Moreover, Chinese venture capital investments in the United States increased to \$3.2 billion in 2020 from \$2.3 billion in 2019. More than half of these investments were in the Health, Pharmaceuticals, and Biotechnology sector [8].

In the meantime, U.S. investments in China also have not diminished. U.S. foreign direct investment in China was \$123.9 billion in 2020, a 9.4% increase from 2019 [9]. In the artificial intelligence sector alone, from 2015 to 2021, U.S. investors accounted for 17% of global investment transactions into Chinese companies. In addition, 37% (\$40.2 billion) of the total capital raised for Chinese artificial intelligence companies involved U.S. investors [10]. U.S. multinationals such as McDonald's, Starbucks and Ralph Lauren are expanding—rather than pulling back—their investments into China [11].

One explanation for the continuing trade and investment ties between the two countries is that both countries are deeply embedded in the global supply chains, making “decoupling” nearly impossible in the near and medium term. Another reason for continuous two-way investments is that both the U.S. and Chinese markets are enormous. Profit-driven companies in both countries are incentivized to continue doing business with one another. The third reason is that there is a bidirectional causal relationship between foreign investment and trade [12]. Finally, multinational firms (including U.S. firms) remain bullish on the long-term growth prospects of China's huge consumer market—the second largest in the world.

In the future, from a neoliberal economic perspective, and if both countries want to maximize economic gains for themselves, both the United States and China need to strengthen trade and investment through bilateral and multilateral channels.

At the bilateral level, not only should high-echelon officials communicate with each other, but—perhaps more importantly—influential multinational corporations also need to engage with local communities. Wanxiang America is a good example of how a company can maintain responsible stewardship and successfully navigate great power rivalry. As a subsidiary of China-based company Wanxiang Group, it has invested massively in the U.S. market, including the automobile and clean energy sectors; created numerous American jobs; and donated roof-top solar panels to more than 50 American schools [13]. With more community-based companies emerging, mutual understanding and economic interconnectedness will be entrenched and reinforce each other, moving both countries toward a cooperative equilibrium.

At the multilateral level, many platforms, such as the World Trade Organization, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, are either ineffective or exclusive. Yet the World Economic Forum and G20 Summit can play an important role in establishing a direct line of

communication by providing a venue for policymakers to meet, reduce misperceptions, and correct misinterpretations of each other's strategic intentions and policies. For instance, Chinese Vice Premier Liu He recently delivered China's investment pitch in Davos, making it clear that "foreign investments are welcome and the door to China will only open up further," [14] which will likely boost investors' confidence and promote bilateral economic cooperation. Likewise, when the U.S.-China relationship seemed to be in freefall on the heels of Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the meeting between Xi Jinping and Joe Biden during the G20 Summit in November 2022 may have helped to get it back on track.

While many are concerned about great power competition and pessimistic about U.S.-China relations, the silver lining is that two-way trade and investments remain. Now it is high time for both sides to use bilateral and multilateral avenues to further such cooperation, which will benefit not only the great powers themselves but also the international community at large.

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Averting the Grandest Collision of all Time



Graham Allison

If Thucydides were asked about what's happening in relations between the US and China today, what would he say? That was the question posed to me at the Davos World Economic Forum in January. I responded that he would say that this is a classic Thucydidean rivalry in which the two parties are right on script, each competing to show which can best exemplify the typical rising and ruling power—leaving him on the edge of his seat anticipating the grandest collision of all time.

The debate that began in 2017 with the publication of *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* is now in the rear-view mirror. No one can deny that China is the most formidable rival a ruling power has ever seen. Over the past generation, China has risen further and faster along more dimensions than any nation in history. During Xi's first decade in power, China's GDP has risen from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of the US economy (measured in MER). China has displaced the US as the world's number one manufacturer, number one trading partner, and become a source of the most critical items in global supply chains. It has also strengthened its military capabilities, with a specific focus on contingencies along its border and peripheral seas, to the point that it now has significant advantages in potential conflicts, particularly Taiwan contingencies.

Meanwhile, what Winston Churchill called the “deadly currents” in domestic politics that drove Britain to war with Germany in 1914 are now running rife in the US. As anyone who watched the opening hearings of the newly-established House Select Committee on China saw vividly, Republican and Democratic politicians are rushing to show who can be tougher on China. Presidential hopeful Mike Pompeo has already called for the US to recognize Taiwan as an independent country. The

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bipartisan Taiwan Policy Act—co-sponsored by Democratic Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez and Republican Lindsey Graham—initially proposed to designate Taiwan a “major non-NATO ally.” It is instructive to note that it was Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, not US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who appreciated the likely consequences of another visit to Taiwan by the Speaker of the House and proposed a less provocative alternative.

We see similar rumblings in Beijing, where Xi Jinping accused the US and its allies of pursuing the “containment, encirclement, and suppression” of China in a fiery speech at China’s “Two Sessions” last week. Xi’s comments were echoed by new Foreign Minister Qin Gang, who said “hysterical neo-McCarthyist” politicians in the US wanted to cripple China in a “zero-sum game” of life and death.

Fortunately, in Biden and Xi we have two serious, sane leaders who recognize that war between their nations would be catastrophic. If a local war over Taiwan escalated to a full-spectrum war with nuclear attacks upon each other, it would risk the survival of both their nations. However extreme the differences between the two rivals, if the alternative to coexistence really is to co-destruct, rational leaders in both Washington and Beijing will have to find a way to cooperate in some areas while competing ruthlessly in others.

As thinkers in both governments are struggling to find a framework to do this, there are lessons to learn from the ancient Chinese concept of “rivalry partners.” Rivalry partners sounds like a contradiction. But it describes the relationship the Song Dynasty established with the neighboring Liao, a Manchurian kingdom on China’s northern border, a millennium ago. Concluding that his armies would not be able to defeat the Liao in military conflict, the Song Emperor negotiated the Chanyuan Treaty of 1005 in which both sides agreed to be fierce rivals in some arenas but great partners in others. This unique arrangement saw the Song—the ruling power—pay tribute to the Liao, who agreed to invest that payment in the Song’s economic, scientific, and technological development. The framework established by the Chanyuan Treaty averted war between the two powers for over a century.

Conceptually, the Song-Liao rivalry partnership drew on even older Chinese wisdom from the Spring and Autumn period. As Sun Tzu wrote of the rival Wu and Yue kingdoms in *The Art of War*, “the people of Wu and Yue were mutual enemies, but when they sailed on the same boat and encountered a storm, they helped each other like left and right hands.” Where survival requires cooperation, even the deadliest of enemies can rise to the occasion.

What would a rivalry partnership in US-China relations today look like? The starting point would be recognition of the fundamental structural realities both nations face today. In a phrase, they must survive in a MAD world. Both the US and China now have nuclear arsenals that are capable of withstanding a first strike from the other and retaliating with an attack that destroys the attacker. Thus, as certainly as it did in the most dangerous days of Cold War between the US and Soviet Union, President Ronald Reagan’s insistence that “a nuclear war cannot be won and therefore must never be fought” remains a foundational truth in relations between the US and China.

Recognizing this nuclear risk and the ways in which Putin's threats to conduct tactical nuclear strikes against Ukraine would violate the "nuclear taboo" that has emerged over the past seven decades, in November, President Xi and German Chancellor Scholz took a major step forward. They declared unambiguously that they opposed even the threat to use nuclear weapons. As China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, Xi declared that the international community should "oppose the threat or use of nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons cannot be used and that nuclear wars must not be fought, and prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia."

The Xi-Scholz "no nuclear threat" doctrine takes a bold step beyond any previous statement of any major government. China, for example, has a "no first use" policy but has never said "no threat of use," and though Chancellor Scholz did not comment on it, Germany's national security depends on US "extended deterrence" that leverages the threat of nuclear first use to defend its treaty allies. The Xi-Scholz doctrine is a vivid demonstration that however sharp the differences between China and the US, on the issue of preventing Putin from conducting nuclear strikes and averting the proliferation incentives such a decision would create, China can act to advance an interest the rivals share.

As inhabitants of the same enclosed biosphere, Americans and Chinese also face an analogue of MAD in unrestrained greenhouse gas emissions. China is the world's number one greenhouse gas emitter; the US is number two. On our current trajectories, either country can by itself so disrupt the climate that neither of us can live in it. In the current globalized world, we also have a thickly -integrated financial system that is subject to crises like the Great Recession of 2008 that could cause another Great Depression. In 2008, that was narrowly escaped—but only by a carefully-coordinated joint stimuli by the US and China. Beyond these shared interests there are pandemics, mega-terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and other global challenges that neither can manage by itself. And finally, there are the irresistible benefits of global integration, particularly in the economic arena that bring with them MAED (mutual assured economic disruption).

Of course, some arenas will be marked by fierce rivalry. The military arena is mostly zero-sum, where "every domain is contested," as former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis put it starkly in his 2018 National Defense Strategy. Since the two rivals will also be competing for economic and technological dominance, selective decoupling is inevitable.

In sum, the US and China are locked in conditions defined by two contradictory imperatives: to compete in the greatest rivalry of all time, and to cooperate for each to ensure its own survival. For each, creating a grand strategy that combines competition and cooperation will require extraordinary strategic imagination. As policy-makers in both nations are wrestling with this assignment, clues from the "rivalry partnership" that gave the Song and Liao 120 years without war can be instructive.

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China, America and the Saudi-Iranian Normalization



Trita Parsi

The Saudi-Iranian normalization deal brokered by China has sent shockwaves throughout the region. Regional actors had not expected China to suddenly desire a political role in the Persian Gulf. Others were skeptical of Beijing's diplomatic capacity and skills. Few, however, were as surprised as foreign policy hands in Washington—even though it is the United States' actions and missteps that inadvertently created both the opportunity for Beijing to mediate and the environment that compelled regional actors to sue for peace.

More: Not Less—Than Meets the Eye

Despite skepticism in the West of the depth and durability of the normalization deal, Tehran and Riyadh appear to have moved at an impressive pace to implement the agreement signed in Beijing earlier in March. On April 12, only a month after the signing of the deal, the Iranian embassy in Saudi Arabia reopened its gates for the first time in 7 years as an Iranian delegation arrived to inspect the premises. Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman, has invited Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to visit Riyadh. It would be the first visit of an Iranian President to Saudi in 24 years. Raisi has reportedly accepted.

Moreover, fruits of the normalization are starting to emerge throughout the region, again, faster than many expected. (The only regional state explicitly opposed to the agreement is Israel.) The war in Yemen is now on the verge of a permanent

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truce with the Saudis and Houthis engaged in intense peace talks. A major prisoner exchange has already taken place with roughly 900 prisoners released. Talks are underway to release up to 15,000 prisoners. Fabrizio Carboni, the Red Cross' regional director, said the release "gives a sense of momentum" for efforts to end the war.

This does not necessarily mean that the Yemeni conflict will be fully resolved, as the Yemenis must still come to an agreement amongst themselves on a political solution. But Saudi Arabia's exit from the war and the lifting of the blockade are critical steps towards an intra-Yemeni political dialogue.

Washington's Irritation

Commentators in Washington have sought to downplay China's role and the importance of the agreement by either shifting credit to Oman and Iraq—two countries that played an important role in laying the groundwork for the agreement—or by asserting that resolving the Saudi-Iranian dispute was a low hanging diplomatic fruit.

Neither criticisms are fully valid. Though Iraq and Oman both played important roles in setting the stage for the normalization, Beijing's role was instrumental in bringing the deal across the finishing line. By acting as the guarantor of the deal, China helped overcome Tehran and Riyadh's mutual mistrust. Neither of them can afford tensions with Beijing, which gave both of them confidence that the other party would abide by the agreement.

Still, Washington's annoyance is understandable. At a time when the United States seeks to portray China's rise as a threat to the Global Order, Beijing found a way to demonstrate its stabilizing capacity and its knack for peacemaking. Moreover, the agreement frustrates the Biden administration's Middle East policies in two important ways.

First, it throws cold water on the Abraham Accords—the decoupling of Israeli-Arab normalization agreements from progress on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Expanding the Accords has been the Biden administration's top priority—far exceeding the desire to revive the Iran Nuclear Deal, for instance. Much of the Biden administration's embarrassing deference to the Saudi Crown Prince has been rooted in the hope Riyadh would join the Accords under Biden's watch. Instead, MBS normalized relations with Iran.

Saudi Arabia may still normalize relations with Israel down the road, but there will be no major Middle Eastern powers opening embassies in Israel any time soon.

Secondly, as Biden has failed to revive the JCPOA (a failure that Iran also bears significant responsibility for), the United States' *de facto* Plan B is an intensification of Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" strategy—a policy that the Biden team itself has deemed unworkable. Intensifying Iran's economic and political isolation will be much harder if Iran is improving relations with key neighbors such as Saudi Arabia.

America Deserves Inadvertent Credit

Yet, America's own policies have inadvertently helped bring out the breakthrough between Iran and Saudi Arabia. On the immediate level, the timing of the normalization between the two Persian Gulf powers reflects their mutual realization that continued hostility served neither side.

Iran's support to the Houthis had inflicted major pain on the Saudis, but the marginal utility of continuing the seven-year-long conflict was fast diminishing. On the other hand, the recent protests in Iran, which the Saudis had—at least in the minds of Iranian decision-makers—helped fuel through the Saudi-funded and managed Iran International TV station, had created the most significant legitimacy crisis the Iranian theocracy has faced to date.

Still, the clerical regime was not faced with an existential threat, and that realization rendered the marginal utility of Riyadh stoking further unrest questionable. Indeed, had MBS been under the impression that the regime in Tehran was about to fall, he surely would not have struck a deal, let alone one that entailed significant Saudi concessions.

But at a structural level, the realization that though the United States might not be leaving the region militarily, it no longer has the will to fight in or for the region, has spurred a flurry of intra-regional diplomacy—from Turkish-Egyptian talks to the burying of the hatchet between Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Doha, to Saudi-Iranian talks.

Once US partners realized that they no longer could hide behind American military power, diplomacy with their regional foes became vastly more attractive. But as long as the US's military presence tilted the balance of power in their direction, sustaining the conflicts and avoiding diplomacy was the optimal policy. Indeed, Riyadh only agreed to dialogue with Tehran after Donald Trump refused to go to war against Iran in retaliation for Tehran's role in the drone attack against Saudi oil fields in 2019.

Intended or not, America's military domination has served as an obstacle to regional conflict resolution.

As my colleague Annelle Sheline pointed out to me shortly after the normalization deal was announced: MBS has only 7 years left to realize his Vision 2030. For that, he needs to extract Saudi Arabia from its many conflicts. He could go with the American option of continuing to buy American weaponry while hoping that Iran would be deterred by the fear that America might still come to Riyadh's defenses. Or he could go with the Chinese option of attaining deeper security by suing for real peace with Iran. He chose the latter.

The Middle East will indeed enter a new era if this becomes the new normal: A China that offers more reliable security through peace than America can offer through deterrence.

At a minimum, Washington must by now recognize that more and more countries are welcoming a transition toward a multipolar world where China is a major stakeholder. Seeking to reverse this geopolitical trend will only further weaken America

and destabilize the world. America's best option is to adjust to this reality and explore ways to collaborate with China in order to create a more stable planet where our focus increasingly can shift from inter-state conflicts to shared challenges such as Climate Chaos. In that process, the Saudi-Iranian normalization can be turned into a stepping stone toward multilateral stabilizing efforts from Afghanistan to even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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Coexistence: The Only Realist Path to Peace



Stephen M. Walt

The United States and its Asian partners want to maintain a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, ostensibly to prevent China from becoming a “regional hegemon” there. They worry that Beijing will gradually persuade its neighbors to distance themselves from the United States, accept Chinese primacy, and defer to Beijing’s wishes on key foreign policy issues. In 2018, for example, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis warned that China “is harboring long-term designs to rewrite the existing global order... The Ming Dynasty appears to be their model, albeit in a more muscular manner, demanding other nations become tribute states kowtowing to Beijing.” Former U.S. officials such as Rush Doshi and Elbridge Colby and prominent realists writing on U.S. grand strategy—myself included—have made similar arguments, and China’s stated desire to be a “leading global power” and its efforts to alter the status quo in the South China Sea and elsewhere appear to justify these concerns.

The implications of this view are troubling. If China is actively seeking to become a regional hegemon in Asia and the United States is dead set on preventing it, a direct clash between the world’s two most powerful countries will be difficult to avoid.

But are these fears justified? Although China might be better off if it could expel the United States from Asia and become a true regional hegemon, that goal is probably beyond its grasp. A Chinese bid for regional hegemony is likely to fail and do enormous harm to China (and others) in the process. The United States can take a relatively sanguine view of this prospect, therefore, even if it cannot dismiss it completely. Even as they strive to preserve a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific,

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therefore, the United States and its allies must ensure that their efforts do not convince China's leaders that they must try for hegemony despite the obvious risks.

Why Regional Hegemony Is Desirable

It is easy to understand why a powerful state might like to be a regional hegemon (i.e., the only great power within its geographic area). If there are no other major powers nearby, a regional hegemon has little reason to fear direct attacks on its home territory. A great power that dominates its surroundings in this way will also be less vulnerable to blockades or other forms of pressure, and it can expect deference from the weaker states in its sphere of influence even if it does not rule them directly. The absence of local dangers also makes it easier for a regional hegemon to project power into other areas of the world if doing so seems necessary or desirable.

The history of the United States illustrates these benefits nicely. The United States is separated from the other great powers by two enormous oceans and insulated from many of their quarrels. This "free security" gave U.S. leaders enormous latitude: they could remain neutral when conflicts erupted elsewhere or fight "wars of choice" far from home if that seemed advisable. When these distant interventions failed—as they did in Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan—the United States could eventually withdraw without putting its security at serious risk.

China's leaders undoubtedly think their country would be more secure if it achieved a hegemonic position in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing would have less to fear if the United States were not closely aligned with many of its neighbors and did not have powerful military forces stationed throughout the region. China would be less vulnerable to blockades in the event of war, a significant concern given the constricted maritime geography of East and Southeast Asia and Beijing's substantial reliance on foreign trade. With fewer local dangers to worry about, it would also be easier for Beijing to project power elsewhere if it so desired.

These same factors also explain why the United States wants to prevent this situation from arising. Since it became a great power at the dawn of the twentieth century, the United States has sought to preserve a rough balance of power in Europe and East Asia and prevent any single power from dominating either region. U.S. leaders were concerned that a European or Asian hegemon might eventually amass equal or greater economic and military power than the United States. No longer concerned with local threats, it could choose to intervene in other areas as the United States has been able to do. A rival of this sort might even ally with states in the Western hemisphere and force Washington to focus its attention closer to home. The enduring desire to prevent a regional hegemon in Europe or Asia is why the United States eventually entered the two World Wars and why it kept substantial military forces in both regions during the long Cold War.

If regional hegemony were readily achievable, therefore, it might make good strategic sense for China's leaders to want it and for U.S. leaders to go all-out to prevent it. But what if this seemingly attractive goal is in fact a mirage: difficult and maybe impossible to achieve? If so, Beijing would be foolish to pursue this objective and Washington can take a more measured approach to discouraging it.

Why Regional Hegemony Is (Nearly) Impossible to Achieve

Regional hegemony may be desirable in theory, but history suggests that it is an elusive goal. As Jonathan Kirshner points out, several different great powers have launched bids for regional dominance in the modern era and all but one of these attempts ended in disaster. France failed under Louis XIV and Napoleon Bonaparte, Germany was beaten decisively in both World Wars, and Japan's attempt to establish a hegemonic order in Asia ended in total defeat as well. Only the United States managed to pull off becoming the only great power in its region. In the modern world, in short, the success rate is less than 20%.

Furthermore, the failures were not just minor setbacks: they were unmitigated disasters for the countries that made the attempt. Perhaps a million Frenchmen lost their lives in the Napoleonic Wars and Bonaparte died in exile on a remote island in the South Atlantic. Germany suffered mightily in both World Wars and ended up divided into separate states for more than 40 years. Japan was firebombed in World War II, had two cities destroyed by atomic bombs, and its political order was remade by a foreign occupier. *Being* a regional hegemon might be desirable, but trying to become one almost always makes a state less rather than more secure.

Bids for hegemony fail for two main reasons. First, as defensive realists have long emphasized, there is a powerful tendency for major powers to balance against threats. When a powerful state is nearby, when its military forces seem tailored to project power against others, and when it seems to have revisionist ambitions, nearby powers typically band together to deter or defeat them. If a would-be hegemon reveals its aims by starting a war, balancing behavior becomes even more pronounced and effective.

The second barrier to regional hegemony is nationalism. As Napoleon discovered when he invaded Spain, as the Soviet Union and United States both learned in Afghanistan, and as Moscow is now being reminded in Ukraine, local populations will make enormous sacrifices to repel invaders. Even nations that have been temporarily vanquished often remain restive and eager to throw off an aspiring hegemon's yoke. The dissolution of the European colonial empires during the twentieth century further illustrates how the spread of nationalist doctrines has strengthened resistance to foreign dominance.

The United States is the one exception to this recurring tendency: it is the only regional hegemon in the modern era. Other would-be hegemonies faced coordinated opposition from formidable and well-organized nation-states, but the United States was an ocean away from the other great powers and able to expand across North America without having to fight another major power or overcome a balancing coalition. The indigenous population tried to resist, but it was weakened by its susceptibility to European diseases and divided into many loosely organized tribes and nations. Although indigenous opposition to American expansion persisted until the late nineteenth century, the native tribes faced insurmountable collective action problems and a dwindling population and were eventually swamped by an irresistible demographic tide. To put it plainly, the United States got lucky.

Could China Become a Regional Hegemon Today?

The conditions that allowed the United States to dominate the Western hemisphere and exclude other major powers do not exist in Asia today. China may be stronger than any of its neighbors, but several of them are major industrial powers with considerable potential to check Chinese power and the world's other major power—the United States—remains committed to helping defend them. India's population is now larger and significantly younger than China's and its economy is growing more rapidly. Many of China's neighbors are already balancing more energetically: defense budgets are rising sharply, and Australia, India, and Japan are coordinating with each other and with the United States. The greater their fear of Chinese hegemony, the more vigorous such responses will be.

In addition, India already has a nuclear arsenal and Japan or South Korea could acquire a nuclear deterrent if the need arose. Officials in Tokyo and Seoul have made it clear that they see this as a viable option should circumstances require, and possessing their own deterrent would further limit China's ability to intimidate them. If China does not want more of its neighbors to acquire nuclear weapons, therefore, it should limit its ambitions and make such a step unnecessary.

Nor are Asian powers likely to be swayed by Xi Jinping's suggestion that "it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia." Such statements are obviously intended to make America's role in Asia seem less legitimate, but the belief that a shared "Asian" identity will override each individual state's self-interest ignores the power of modern nationalism, which did not exist when the pre-modern, Sino-centric tributary system was in place. Nationalism is a powerful force in China, of course, but also in India, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam. It is hard to imagine any of these states preferring subordination to Beijing to national autonomy.

Lastly, modern surveillance and communications technology makes it much easier for states to identify threatening powers and coordinate defensive responses. A Chinese bid for hegemony in Asia would be impossible to disguise and states threatened by this attempt could share concerns, pool resources, and formulate a collective response quickly. As the rapid and vigorous Western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates, countries facing a common danger can act with surprising swiftness when necessary.

If Regional Hegemony Is Not an Option, What Then?

If China's prospects for regional hegemony are limited, then what do United States and China have to fight about? Each is a vast country populated by hundreds of millions of patriotic citizens. They have large and sophisticated economies that no outside power could successfully strangle, powerful conventional military forces, and second-strike nuclear capabilities. An enormous ocean separates them and neither side could possibly mount a successful invasion of the other. Coexistence is not merely desirable; it is unavoidable.

Yet China's leaders could still decide to choose the same risky path that other would-be hegemonies have followed. If they believed the regional balance of power heavily tilted in their favor, that nearby states could be bullied into neutrality, that one or two triumphs will render subsequent resistance impossible and that other states in Asia would eventually regard Chinese primacy as legitimate, then the risks of a hegemonic bid (however ill-advised) would rise. In the worst case, Chinese leaders convince themselves that conditions temporarily favored a bid for regional hegemony while at the same time fearing that the balance of power would turn against them decisively if the opportunity was not seized. This combination of wishful thinking and paranoia is that textbook condition for preventive war; precisely the logic that convinced German and Japanese leaders to launch unsuccessful bids for hegemony during the first half of the twentieth century.

The implications for the United States and its Asian partners are clear. On the one hand, they should work to mitigate the various factors that can impede effective balancing and could lead Beijing to erroneously conclude that a bid for hegemony might succeed. At the same time, however, the United States and its allies need to make it crystal-clear that they not trying to threaten China's independence or territorial integrity, undermine the authority of the Chinese Communist Party, or crash the Chinese economy. Reassurance is needed so that China's leaders do not conclude that they have no choice but to pursue hegemony even if the odds of success are small.

Consistent messaging will be essential. Although recent speeches by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen were clearly intended to reassure Beijing about the scope and purpose of U.S. export controls and other economic measures, efforts to give NATO a strategic role in Asia and the more confrontational closing statement issued after the G7 summit meeting in May send a different signal, one that cannot help but heighten Chinese fears of being encircled by a hostile U.S.-led coalition.

On several occasions over the past three centuries, a great power concluded that its security required it to establish a dominant position over its neighbors. All but one of these attempts failed catastrophically. China would be unwise to make the attempt, but the United States and its allies would be equally unwise if their own actions unwittingly convinced Beijing that a risky bid for hegemony was still their best option.

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America Can't Stop China's Rise



Tony Chan, Ben Harburg, and Kishore Mahbubani

There's little doubt that the American government has decided to slow China's economic rise, most notably in the fields of technological development. To be sure, the Biden administration denies that these are its goals. Janet Yellen said on April 20, 2023, "China's economic growth need not be incompatible with U.S. economic leadership. The United States remains the most dynamic and prosperous economy in the world. We have no reason to fear healthy economic competition with any country." And Jake Sullivan said on April 27, 2023, "Our export controls will remain narrowly focused on technology that could tilt the military balance. We are simply ensuring that U.S. and allied technology is not used against us."

Yet, in its deeds, the Biden administration has shown that its vision extend beyond those modest goals. It has not reversed the trade tariffs Trump imposed in 2018 on China—even though Presidential candidate Biden criticised them in July 2019, saying: "President Trump may think he's being tough on China. All that he's delivered as a consequence of that is American farmers, manufacturers and consumers losing and paying more." Instead, the Biden administration has tried to increase the pressure on China by banning the export of chips, semiconductor equipment, and selected software. It has also persuaded its allies, like the Netherlands and Japan, to follow suit. More recently, on August 9, 2023, the Biden administration

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issued an executive order prohibiting American investments in China involving “sensitive technologies and products in the semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and artificial intelligence sectors” which “pose a particularly acute national security threat because of their potential to significantly advance the military, intelligence, surveillance, or cyber-enabled capabilities” of China.

All these actions confirm that the American government is trying to stop China’s growth. Yet, the big question is whether America can succeed in this campaign—and the answer is probably not. Fortunately, it is not too late for the United States to reorient its China policy toward an approach that would better serve Americans—and the rest of the world.

America’s decision to slow China’s technological development is akin to the folly revealed by the old cliché: closing the barn door after the horse has bolted. Modern China has shown many times that China’s technological development can’t be halted.

Since the creation of the PRC in 1949, several efforts have been made to limit China’s access to or stop its development in various critical technologies, including nuclear weapons, space, satellite communication, GPS, semiconductors, supercomputers, and artificial intelligence. The US has also tried to curb China’s market dominance in 5G, commercial drones, and electric vehicles. Throughout history, unilateral or extraterritorial enforcement efforts to curtail China’s technological rise have failed and, in the current context, are creating irreparable damage to long-standing US geopolitical partnerships. In 1993 the Clinton Administration tried to restrict China’s access to satellite technology. Today, China has 541 satellites in space and is launching a competitor to Starlink.

The same principle played out with GPS. When America restricted China’s access to its geospatial data system in 1999, China simply built its own parallel BeiDou Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) system in one of the first waves of major technological decoupling. In some measures, BeiDou is today better than GPS. It is the largest GNSS in the world, with 45 satellites to GPS’s 31, and is thus able to provide more signals in most global capitals. It is supported by 120 ground stations, resulting in greater accuracy, and has more advanced signal features such as two-way messaging. Other nations have also previously tried and failed to block China’s technical rise. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the USSR withheld nuclear weapons technology from China, China launched its own ‘Manhattan Project’ in the early 1960s and succeeded in testing its first nuclear weapon by 1964. Russian nuclear leverage over China ended that day.

Many of the measures taken by the Biden administration against China were also executed without factoring in China’s capacity to retaliate. While China does not physically construct many truly irreplaceable components of the American tech stack, they are keenly aware of the importance of their raw materials inputs (rare earths) and demand (revenue generation) in fuelling the American innovation ecosystem and are now using them as leverage. In the current tit-for-tat dynamic, China will start squeezing these two critical ends of the value chain in response to American technology and capital export restrictions. China’s July ban of the gallium and

germanium exports was merely an opening shot across the bow to remind America (and its aligned allies) of China's dominance in the rare earths and critical metals space. The country has a near monopoly in the processing of magnesium, bismuth, tungsten, graphite, silicon, vanadium, fluorspar, tellurium, indium, antimony, barite, zinc, and tin. China also dominates in midstream processing for materials essential to most of America's current and future technology aspirations such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and copper, which are critical for the rapidly developing EV industry globally.

While America and other neutral countries have mineral reserves of many of these materials, it would be naïve to believe that one can simply flip a switch on production. It will take at least 3–5 years just to build the requisite extraction and processing infrastructure. This is to say nothing for recruiting and training skilled labour, or receiving requisite operational and environmental permits for such activities. Both could prove impossible. The processing of rare earths is a highly toxic and environmentally destructive endeavour. It's unlikely such approvals will be granted. If Arizona is struggling to find qualified workers for its TSMC Fab, and to address domestic union opposition to importing foreign skilled labour, it's unlikely that America can develop similar capabilities for material processing. Along the way, China gets to play kingmaker in how it doles out access to its processed materials, likely restricting supply to American technology and defence giants. The failure to factor in China's retaliatory capacities indicates that the US doesn't have a well-thought-out and comprehensive approach to dealing with China.

Potentially even more disastrously, American measures to deprive China access to the most advanced chips could damage America's large chip-making companies more than it hurts China. China is the largest consumer of semiconductors in the world. Over the past 10 years, China has been importing massive amounts of chips from American companies. According to the US Chamber of Commerce, China-based firms imported US\$70.5 billion worth of semiconductors from American firms in 2019, representing approximately 37% of these companies' global sales. Some American companies, like Qorvo, Texas Instruments, and Broadcom, derive about half of their revenues from China. Sixty percent of Qualcomm's revenues, a quarter of Intel's revenues, and a fifth of Nvidia's sales are from the Chinese market. It's no wonder that the CEOs of these three companies recently went to Washington to warn that US industry leadership could be harmed by the export controls. American firms will also be hurt by retaliatory actions from China, such as China's May 2023 ban on chips from US-based Micron Technology. China accounts for over 25% of Micron's sales.

The massive revenue surpluses generated by these sales to China were ploughed into R&D efforts which, in turn, kept American chip companies ahead of the game. The Chamber of Commerce estimates that if the US were to ban semiconductor sales to China completely, US companies would lose US\$83 billion in annual revenues and would have to cut 124,000 jobs. They would also have to cut their annual R&D budgets by at least US\$12 billion, and their capital spending by US\$13 billion. This would make it even more difficult for them to remain competitive on the global scale in the long run. American semiconductor firms are painfully aware that

US actions against China in the chips arena will harm their interests more than Chinese interests. The US Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA) released a statement on July 17, 2023 saying that Washington's repeated steps "to impose overly broad, ambiguous, and at times unilateral restrictions risk diminishing the U.S. semiconductor industry's competitiveness, disrupting supply chains, causing significant market uncertainty, and prompting continued escalatory retaliation by China", and called on the Biden administration not to implement further restrictions without more extensive engagement with semiconductor industry representatives and experts.

The Chips Act cannot subsidise the American semiconductor industry indefinitely, and there is no other global demand base to replace China. Other chip producing nations will inevitably break ranks and sell to China (as they have historically) and the American actions will be for naught. And, in banning the export of chips and other core inputs to China, America handed China its war plan years ahead of the battle. China is being goaded into building self-sufficiency far earlier than they would have otherwise. Prior to the ZTE and Huawei components bans, China was content to continue purchasing American chips and focusing on the front-end hardware. Peter Wennick, CEO of ASML, states that China is already leading in key applications and demand for semiconductors. Wennick writes, "The roll-out of the telecommunication infrastructure, battery technology, that's the sweet spot of mid-critical and mature semiconductors, and that's where China without any exception is leading."

A sleeping giant was awoken by short-sighted American protectionist policies. America now faces the short-term threat of loss of critical revenue that fuelled the R&D that made it an innovation leader and the long-term inevitability that China will build its own full scale semiconductor ecosystem. The ability of Huawei to launch the Mate 60 Pro, a new smartphone powered by a domestically produced 5G chip and operating system, despite severe American sanctions on the firm illustrates how unwise American policies have been in trying to stop China's technological growth and development.

Since America is unlikely to stop China's technological growth and development (and, indeed, is unlikely to stop China's emergence as a peer global power), there is a more enlightened approach to engagement. It is best illustrated by Aesop's fable, "The North Wind and the Sun". In the story, the North Wind blows hard and fails to remove the traveller's cloak. It is, rather, the warm rays of the sun persuade the traveller to remove his cloak.

It's now widely held among American policymakers that America's five-decade-long policy of engagement with China has failed. As Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner candidly state in their *Foreign Affairs* article, "Nearly half a century since Nixon's first steps toward rapprochement, the record is increasingly clear that Washington once again put too much faith in its power to shape China's trajectory. [...] China has instead pursued its own course, belying a range of American expectations in the process."

Certainly, if the policy of engagement was intended to transform China's internal system of governance, it has failed. Yet, if this was the goal, it was an act of

remarkable hubris for a 250-year-old Republic (with one quarter of China's population) to believe that it could transform a 4000-year-old civilisation to its liking. However, if the goal of American policy was to encourage the emergence of China as a "responsible stakeholder" (to use the words of Bob Zoellick), the policy may well have succeeded. A comprehensive study done by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, the American Friends Service Committee, and four independent researchers has documented that China's behaviour was altered by various policies of engagement, particularly as it pertains to reducing climate change, improving public health, and global financial stability. Former State Department official Susan Thornton, who oversaw the study as Director of the Forum on Asia-Pacific Security at NCAFP, said: "This audit of US-China diplomacy shows that we can make progress through negotiations and that China follows through on its commitments. The notion that engagement with China did not benefit the US is just not accurate." Indeed, the record shows that there is wisdom contained in the moral of "The North Wind and the Sun": "Gentleness and kind persuasion win where force and bluster fail."

One fundamental problem is that domestic politics in America are forcing American policymakers to take strident stands against China instead of pragmatic positions. For instance, sanctions preventing the Chinese Defence Minister, Li Shangfu, from travelling to the US are standing in the way of US-China defence dialogues to prevent military accidents. Yet, the hands of the US government are tied. It cannot lift sanctions, even if they have proved to be ineffective at securing American policy goals.

This is why the time has come for America to do a major re-evaluation of the methods it uses to secure foreign policy goals. Its go-to tactic of imposing sanctions has failed to either halt China's technological development or influence China's behaviour in any significant way—and most countries do not find that it is in their interests to go along with them. Are there more effective alternatives to sanctions?

In a statement explaining the Biden administration's approach to China, Anthony Blinken said in May 2022: "we'll compete with confidence; we'll cooperate wherever we can; we'll contest where we must." We agree with this approach. Rather than undermining its own interests and fortifying a geopolitical and economic competitor, America should practice a more enlightened technology policy. The focus must be placed on initiatives that sustainably support and extend America's innovation leadership, while surgically removing specific national security threats.

In lieu of a zero-sum framing of the US-China technology competition, a sustainable structure for collaboration is beneficial to both countries and humanity. Most Western emissions reductions targets cannot be met without participation from China, who hold many of the patents and core inputs for solar, wind and electric battery power. Joint research programs, clinical trials and data sets are critical for solving chronic global health issues like cancer. Decoupled technology ecosystems not only retard advancement, but also create other endemic risks resulting from parallel development and unilateral regulation. Unchecked growth in potential doomsday technologies like AI or nuclear immediately comes to mind. Continuing to welcome scientific talent from China to study, work and settle down in the United

States is beneficial for the scientific progress of both countries as well. These scientists can act as a bridge towards scientific collaboration between the United States and China.

The American government should also consider rebooting in full all the high-level dialogues that had been initiated by the Bush administration, continued by the Obama administration, and ended by the Trump administration. A resumption of high-level dialogues, together with the establishment of a high-level science and technology dialogue bringing together the top scientists from both countries, could well result in more positive outcomes for American long-term national interests.

Initially, this great power collaboration could be focused on areas where both sides have common long-term interests (like climate change, pandemic preparedness, global economic stability, education). When basic levels of trust are established, dialogue and cooperation can be expanded step by step. None of these moves will result in a diminution of American power and standing in the world. Indeed, America's prestige and standing could well rise as the rest of the world sees America pursuing reasonable policies that are serving both American and global interests. America will remain the most admired country in the world, if it pursues a wiser course with China.

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Biden-Xi Summit: A Positive Step in Managing Complex US-China Ties



Chan Heng Chee

There is a cottage industry emerging of analyses on the Biden-Xi summit in San Francisco. Most of the writings fall into, for want of a better description, the glass half-full or the glass half-empty or, in some extreme cases, a glass totally empty school.

What meaning one makes of the four-hour meeting, the atmospherics around President Xi Jinping's visit and other events depends a great deal on where one stands. The US-China relationship is too complex and complicated to be hastily unpacked and served with a dismissive attitude.

Both the United States and China considered the Nov 15 summit a success. President Joe Biden described the meeting to the press as "some of the most constructive and productive discussions we've had". The US could count a few deliverables.

The Chinese side was also pleased with the talks. There were three speeches prepared for President Xi to be delivered at the dinner with American chief executives that took place after the Biden-Xi meeting. Mr Xi selected the most friendly one, which reflected his mood after the summit wrapped up. He emphasised the people relationship throughout and that "the future of the China-US relationship will be created by our peoples".

Mr Xi talked of three things that would not change in the bilateral relationship. He spoke of the historical trend of peaceful co-existence between China and the US, the ultimate wish of the peoples for exchanges and cooperation, and the expectations of the whole world for a steadily growing China-US relationship. Compared with his March remarks when he highlighted the US-led "comprehensive

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containment, encirclement and suppression of China”, this was a big change in tone. It came as a surprise to the audience, who was expecting to hear lots of statistics and the usual China growth story. President Xi received a standing ovation for the speech.

But there was no breakthrough and no reset. None was expected. Both sides set about lowering expectations before the meeting. The purpose was to stabilise the relationship or, as US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said, “to set a floor” to the downward spiral.

It had been a year since the Bali summit and both leaders had not met. Throughout 2023, the US continued to roll out measures banning technology exports to China considered a national security risk. The Biden administration continued to reinvigorate the strategic deterrence of treaty allies in Asia. In January, a Chinese balloon crossed over the Pacific to the United States, and US tensions with China were at their worst.

China continued its military manoeuvres across the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea. There was talk in some quarters of a likelihood of conflict. America’s friends and allies, as well as Chinese friends and partners, were gently urging both powers to work out their relationship because they owe it to the rest of the world and to themselves not to make a dangerous global order worse.

President Biden should be recognised for his efforts to reach out to China, which was initially not keen to respond. In the latter’s view, nothing came out of the Bali talks, and the sanctions continued. Much groundwork was thus laid ahead of the San Francisco meeting. In May, Mr Sullivan met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Vienna, indicating both sides wanted to move beyond the balloon incident. Mr Sullivan and Mr Wang met again in September in Malta and in Washington on Oct 27, by then to finalise the Biden-Xi meeting.

From June to August, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and Special Climate Envoy John Kerry made trips to China with the message that the US did not intend to decouple economically from China.

In October, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer led a bipartisan congressional delegation to China, assuring the Chinese that the US did not want to decouple from China but sought reciprocal and fair treatment for American companies.

China’s economy, meanwhile, was running into serious trouble. Recovery post-Covid-19 had been much slower, and foreign direct investment was slowing down rapidly. China understood it had to manage its relationship with the US better.

The Chinese, on their part, were discreetly preparing for the bilateral summit too, albeit seeking reassurance that nothing would embarrass China and Mr Xi. The Chinese held a Track 2 dialogue (non-official) and an important Track 1.5 dialogue (including officials) with US think-tanks in preparation for a potential meeting.

What Were the Results of the Biden-Xi Meeting?

There was obviously strong incentive to meet, as if the list of bilateral issues was not grave enough. Global stability was further challenged by the eruption of yet another war, in the Middle East.

Arguably, the most critical and substantive parts of the talks involved the two sides exchanging views on the Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas war, feeling out whether they could work together, especially since each had diverse (and often divergent) perspectives on the two conflicts.

All reports from the meeting are that both China and the US do not want the two conflicts to turn into wider wars or be viewed through Cold War lenses. Dr Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group political risk consultancy, described both powers as “adults geopolitically” and this was not just the two presidents but also the senior officials down the line. This exchange clears unnecessary speculation and suspicions and is an important achievement.

Each side has its own prioritisation of the deliverables.

President Biden presented the agreement on fentanyl as the centrepiece of the meeting. The fentanyl crisis is a huge domestic issue in the US. It hits American families and especially young people. It was brought up during Secretary Blinken’s visit to Beijing in June. The illegal fentanyl in the US is said to come from Mexico, produced using Chinese chemicals.

Before the meeting, China had already taken necessary measures to tell Chinese companies not to export 51 ingredients used in making the drug. The meeting agreed to set up a working group of both sides for counter-narcotics and law enforcement. For China’s cooperation on fentanyl, the US removed from its “entity list” and lifted sanctions imposed on the Ministry of Public Security’s Institute of Forensic Science, which includes the National Narcotics Laboratory of China. This was to facilitate the work.

The US had pressed for and achieved the restoration of high-level military-to-military communications, which were cut off after the August 2022 visit by then US Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan. Two meetings will be put back on track—the US-China Defence Policy Coordination Talks and the US-China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement. Telephone conversations between theatre commanders would resume. This is considered critical for stabilising the relationship and to avoid misunderstanding in case of accidents at sea or in the air because of close encounters.

The US and China agreed to address the risks of advanced artificial intelligence (AI) systems through US-China government talks. It was a short paragraph in the White House read-out, but coming on the heels of China’s participation at the AI Safety Summit organised by the British government on Nov 1 to 2, there is clearly room to expand this area of cooperation.

Government officials and companies, as well as academia and civil society, attended the Bletchley Park meeting. Other than the US and China, participants

included representatives from the European Union as well as India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

The US was represented by Vice-President Kamala Harris and China by its Vice-Minister for Science and Technology Wu Zhaohui. CEOs of top tech firms, such as Mr Elon Musk, Mr Sam Altman, Mr Brad Smith (Microsoft) and Mr Dennis Hassabis (DeepMind), and Alibaba and Tencent were also present. All 28 countries plus the EU signed on to the Bletchley Declaration, which called for transparency and accountability from actors developing frontier AI technology. There was talk that the group should work on a framework to be modelled after the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change. Discussions would continue in 6 months when the meeting is held in South Korea, and 6 months later in France.

This AI agreement shows that the US and China, in spite of their rivalry, especially in technology, are willing to work together on existential safety questions concerning AI.

The Chinese view of the Biden-Xi summit was shared by China's Ambassador to the US Xie Feng. He spoke of five pillars that had been laid out in San Francisco for the sound development of the US-China relationship. He listed cooperation in counter-narcotics, law enforcement and AI as one pillar. Like climate change, these three items would be something the US and China could work on going forward. Importantly for the Chinese, at the summit President Biden reiterated that "the US does not support 'Taiwan independence', does not seek a new Cold War or to suppress China's development or to decouple from China".

China would want to see some of the restrictions and sanctions lifted, though that would involve tough negotiations. Presumably, Dr Yellen's economic and financial working group, established with Vice-Premier He Lifeng to deepen communication, and Ms Raimondo's commercial issues working group, established with Chinese counterpart Wang Wentao, would help to reduce misunderstanding and find solutions to trade and investment issues.

Easing of Regional Tensions

But there is a larger security consequence enabled by the summit of the two leaders. It has allowed the allies of the US to work out their relationships with China too. Australia, under the Albanese government, had been working on improving its relationship with China, which, of all US partners and allies, has deteriorated the fastest and deepest, according to Australian strategic analysts. China, on its part, wanted to turn the page with Australia, after the Scott Morrison government. The outcome of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's visit to Beijing early in November was viewed as positive on both sides. Mr Albanese was in Washington before he went to Beijing.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, too, met Mr Xi during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in an effort to thrash out many thorny bilateral issues. On Nov 26, the foreign ministers of South Korea, China and Japan met for talks to discuss preparations for a trilateral leaders' summit, the first in 4 years.

There is no doubt that as a result of the Biden-Xi summit, regional tensions have somewhat eased for the moment, which is a relief for the Asia-Pacific countries.

It is better for leaders to talk than not. All are aware that with the US presidential election in 2024, campaign rhetoric will undermine the bilateral relationship, with Republicans and Democrats trying to out-tough the other on dealing with China. At the summit, the US and China agreed that high-level visits and meetings would continue in 2024 to keep communications going, which may be helpful as a counterbalance, but positions taken next year by the US will have an eye to the election.

The path ahead for stabilisation is still rocky but the San Francisco summit was a necessary and positive step to provide guard rails to manage the US-China relationship.

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The US and China Can Lead the Way on Nuclear Threat Reduction



Zhou Bo

Since the end of the Cold War, the role of nuclear weapons has only grown. Nuclear arsenals are being strengthened around the world, with many nuclear states continuing to modernize their arsenals. In June, outgoing NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that the alliance was in talks to deploy more nuclear weapons, taking them out of storage and placing them on standby. Robert C. O'Brien, a former national security advisor to former U.S. President Donald Trump, has urged him to conduct nuclear tests if he wins a new term, arguing that it would help the United States “maintain technical and numerical superiority to the combined Chinese and Russian nuclear stockpiles.”

There are two bleak conclusions about nuclear diplomacy in this age. First, it will be impossible to ban such weapons anytime soon. Since its passage in 2017, no nuclear-armed states have signed the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, some of them instead contending that it will distract attention from other disarmament and nonproliferation initiatives.

It is also very hard, if not impossible, to convince these states to reduce their nuclear stockpiles amid ever-intensifying geopolitical and military competition. On the contrary, in February 2023, Russia announced that it was suspending its participation in the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START)—the last remaining nuclear arms control treaty limiting Russian and U.S. strategic nuclear forces.

In response, the United States has also suspended the sharing and publication of treaty data. In November, Russia went a step further and withdrew its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), citing “an imbalance” with

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the United States, which has failed to ratify the treaty since it opened for signature in 1996.

Amid such a situation, it is impossible for Beijing to stand by idly. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates that the size of China's nuclear arsenal has increased from 410 warheads in January 2023 to 500 in January 2024, and it is expected to continue to grow. For the first time, China may also now be deploying a small number of warheads on missiles during peacetime. According to the U.S. Defense Department, China is likely to increase its nuclear warheads to 1500 by 2035.

Given this reality, perhaps the most promising near-term way to guard against nuclear risks is not by limiting the number of nuclear weapons but by controlling the policies that govern their use. In this regard, a pledge by nuclear-armed states of "no first use" of nuclear weapons looks to be the most realistic approach in reducing the escalation of nuclear threats.

In theory, no first use refers to a policy by which a nuclear-armed power formally refrains from the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in warfare, except in the case of doing so as a second strike in retaliation to an attack by an enemy power using weapon of mass destruction.

Of the five nuclear states that have signed onto the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—only China has ever declared a no-first-use policy. On Oct. 16, 1964, when China successfully detonated its first atomic bomb, the country immediately declared that it would not be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and unconditionally committed itself not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear states or in nuclear-weapon-free zones.

India, which is not a party to the NPT, made a similar pledge in 1998, but stipulated that the promise extended only to states that did not have nuclear weapons and were not aligned with a nuclear-armed state.

American scholars, however, have long doubted the validity of China's pledge and debated whether Beijing might use or threaten to use nuclear weapons in a worst-case scenario, such as during a conflict over Taiwan. Some observers in the United States believe that if China's leaders decide to attack Taiwan, there is nothing that anyone can do to change their minds if conventional means fail to achieve success.

Such arguments are not really tenable. An ever-stronger China is now in a better position to honor its decades-old policy than ever before. Although China has not ruled out the possibility of using nonpeaceful means for what it refers to "reunification" in specific circumstances, Beijing has never mentioned use of nuclear weapons against the people of Taiwan, whom the mainland refers to as "compatriots." In semiofficial nuclear arms talks held in Shanghai in March, the Chinese delegation told the U.S. side that they were absolutely convinced that China would be able to prevail in a conventional fight over Taiwan without using nuclear weapons.

All nuclear powers could afford to adopt a formal no-first-use policy—taking the moral high ground without reducing their capabilities for retaliation.

Though it has never adopted a no-first-use policy itself, the United States' nuclear posture is actually more similar to China's than it seems. In its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, the Biden administration declared that it would only consider the use of nuclear weapons "in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners." But it is hard to imagine which interests are so vital that they might require Washington to use nuclear weapons as a first measure to defend them.

To be sure, it is important for the United States to assure its allies that it will follow through on its deterrent promises. It is equally hard to imagine who would venture to launch a nuclear strike on a U.S. ally, knowing the dire potential consequences.

The United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent, meanwhile, is operationally independent. But in terms of its nuclear policy, the British government has made it clear that "we would consider using our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO allies." France, meanwhile adheres to a principle of "strict sufficiency."

The real challenge, then, is getting Russia to commit to a no-first-use policy. The Soviet Union adopted a formal policy of no first use in 1982. But after its dissolution, the Russian Federation reversed this approach in 1993, likely to mitigate the comparative weakness of the Russian Armed Forces in the post-Soviet era.

In Article 4 of an executive order on nuclear deterrence published in 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that "in the event of a military conflict, this Policy provides for the prevention of an escalation of military actions and their termination on conditions that are acceptable for the Russian Federation and/or its allies." This has been interpreted by some international nuclear observers as describing nonnuclear scenarios in which Russia might use such weapons.

From the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there has been a concern that Russia might explode a tactical nuclear bomb somewhere to send a warning to Ukraine and NATO. Although Putin has never explicitly threatened the use of nuclear weapons, he has repeatedly hinted at Russia's willingness to use them and said at the May 9 Victory Day parade in Moscow that "our strategic forces are always in a state of combat readiness." And in May, Russia carried out tactical nuclear weapon drills close to the Ukrainian border.

This strategy has been dubbed "escalate to de-escalate" by some observers, which indicates early escalations, such as threats to use nuclear weapons (even in a limited fashion), followed by demands for immediate war termination. The goal of such a strategy is not to completely disable or defeat the enemy, but rather to compel the adversary to decide to quickly end the conflict on terms set by the escalating state.

Like it or not, Russia's escalate to de-escalate strategy has partially worked in the war in Ukraine, limiting NATO's direct involvement and prompting the United States to put limits on what Ukraine can do with the weapons that it supplies.

So why should Russia consider adopting a no-first-use policy instead?

The escalate to de-escalate method depends on fear and bluffing. If a nuclear-armed state really launches an attack against another nuclear power, it cannot

control the scale of the retaliation by its adversaries. A tit for tat risks becoming a full-blown nuclear war that no one wants. Russia has effectively limited itself in Ukraine when it comes to nuclear weapons exactly because their usage would likely prompt the very thing that Moscow fears most—NATO involvement.

The actual usage of a tactical nuclear bomb could prompt that involvement. So—to avoid mutual destruction—Moscow has to make its utmost effort to deter NATO from joining the war.

A dual-track approach may be the best bet for the adoption of a formal no-first-use policy.

In Europe, NATO can start with a unilateral no-first-use pledge against Russia as a gesture of goodwill. Even if such an offer isn't immediately reciprocated by Russia, it might begin to thaw tensions.

As a second—and crucial—step, NATO could pledge to halt any further expansion of its alliance in exchange for Moscow adopting a no-first-use policy. This would be a difficult pill for the alliance to swallow. But after Sweden's and Finland's entry earlier this year, there are only three aspiring countries on the waiting list: the barely significant Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Georgia and Ukraine, which have deeply problematic ongoing conflicts with Russia that NATO is sensitive about.

The path forward would likely be smoother if it went through Asia. Both Russia and China have already agreed to no first use against each other. China and the United States could reach a similar agreement, thus de-escalating potential conflicts involving U.S. allies—such as the Philippines and Japan—as well as the dangers that could be provoked through accidental collisions in the sea or air. A U.S.-led example might then make it easier to bring the Europeans on board.

This may seem far-fetched in the current geopolitical climate, but there is precedent for it. When India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices in May 1998, they incurred swift condemnation from the U.N. Security Council, which called for both countries to sign both the NPT and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In a rare show of solidarity, China and the United States made a joint declaration in June 1998 agreeing to de-target their nuclear weapons against each other.

This was largely a symbolic and unverifiable step. But it was not only a defusing of tensions, but also good to see nuclear states at least partially honoring the vision of nuclear disarmament laid out in Article VI of the NPT. And this China-U.S. joint statement eventually led to another joint statement among the five nuclear-armed permanent Security Council states in May 2000, which affirmed that their nuclear weapons are not targeted at each other or at any other states.

No first use is a big step forward from nontargeting. It's not out of bounds to imagine that, with enough diplomatic capital, a similar but more important pledge of no first use could be made today. In fact, in January 2022—only a month before Russia's invasion of Ukraine—these five nuclear powers agreed in a joint statement that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”

What is more significant is that during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow last year, China and Russia reiterated this commitment, even amid Russia's ongoing war.

If, indeed, a nuclear war cannot be won, then what is stopping these nuclear powers from taking a no-first-use pledge? Nuclear weapons didn't help the United States in its wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan—or the Russians in Ukraine. A commitment of no first use by the nuclear-armed states would give people hope that a nuclear-free world, however distant, is still possible one day.

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Conflict Management in South Asia

China and India: A New Diplomacy



Kanti Bajpai

China-India tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh in June 2020 indicate that relations between the giants of Asia are brittle. The military clash of June 15 is unsettling, but both powers must take the long view. The relationship is complex. However, at the heart of it is the border quarrel over which they went to war in 1962. Despite negotiations before and after the war, over several decades, they have not resolved their differences. A settlement is a necessary condition for long-term peace. Unfortunately, the border quarrel is not ripe for resolution. In the meantime, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) must be stabilized.

This essay argues that rather than pursuing a settlement of the border or insist on defining the LAC to the satisfaction of both parties, they should aim for a new structure of diplomacy. This new structure would rework the erstwhile diplomacy between China and India and tackle the problem of patrolling transgressions in fourteen key “pockets” where tensions tend to flare along the vast frontier.

The Old Diplomacy

Until June 15, 2020, China and India had not inflicted casualties on each other after the 1962 war, except in the incidents of 1967 and 1975. Stability was partly a function of geography. The Himalayas made it difficult and dangerous to carry out military operations of any great scope. Nuclear weapons and growing conventional military capabilities deepened the implausibility of war.

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Beyond deterrence, after Rajiv Gandhi's Beijing visit in 1988, China and India built a diplomacy of regular high-level summits, military confidence-building measures (CBMs), border negotiations, and trade. This structure helped further undergird the peace. It has however come under increasing strain. The border confrontations of 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017 and now 2020 indicate that the old diplomacy is not enough. Its four elements have not softened conflict or fostered trust to the point that a resolution of the border quarrel has been made possible and stability and peace are assured.

Without jettisoning the diplomacy of the post-1988 period altogether, it is time to consider three initiatives which could restore trust more effectively.

Resetting Summitry

First, while China-India summitry has played a crucial role at key moments, it needs to be reset.

The 1988 Deng Xiaoping-Rajiv Gandhi meeting was a breakthrough. At it, the two sides agreed that despite differences over the border it was time to normalize relations and to restart negotiations on a final settlement of the boundary. The summits of 1993 and 1996 were notable for accords on the first set of military CBMs. At the 2003 summit, China and India agreed to the appointment of Special Representatives (SRs) to discuss the nature of a boundary settlement. The 2005 summit saw the first fruits of the SR-level discussions, namely, a broad set of guidelines on which a settlement might be reached.

Since 2010, the two sides have held bilateral summits almost every year. In 2010, they signed a hotline agreement. The 2014 summit, despite the shadow of the Chumar confrontation, brought Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi together for their first bilateral summit. The first informal summit, in 2018, just months after the Doklam standoff, was intended to repair relations and resulted in a directive to their militaries to improve communications. The 2019 informal summit was less substantive, but it repeated the need for continued strategic communication between the two governments.

The bilateral summits since 1988 have played a positive role in China-India relations. They have however lost their edge. This is to be expected when they are held with such regularity. To be productive and have a lasting impact, summits need careful preparation and should only be held when substantive outcomes have been clearly defined. The signing of a well-curated and truly consequential accord must be the objective. Leaders need to "put something on the line" otherwise there is little incentive to follow through on commitments. Furthermore, officials and departments down the chain must get the sense that summit agreements are important and must be honoured. Summits build a process of cascading trust. They can erode trust when they are routinized and open-ended.

Back-Channel Diplomacy

This suggests a second and more positive initiative: back-channel diplomacy. New Delhi used this with Islamabad between 1999 and 2016 (and perhaps continues to do so). In 2006–07, the mechanism almost produced an agreement on the Kashmir dispute. China and India need to invest in a similar problem-solving mechanism that supports the build up to a substantively rich summit.

Instead of regular and sometimes anodyne summits, China and India could benefit from a dedicated and sustained communication process between trusted high-level envoys who outside the public glare negotiate on key disputes. The envoy must have the trust and respect of the leaderships and must report directly to the leader. Unhindered access to the top leadership is vital.

In the case of China-India, the envoys have a potentially rich agenda including the border quarrel, crisis management, combating terrorism, policies towards various third parties, bilateral economic relations, and climate change cooperation. But to be effective, the back-channel must be given as narrow and definite an agenda as possible since no envoy can range across too broad a spectrum of issues.

Virtual Patrolling

The third initiative flows from the idea of the back-channel. Since a back-channel cannot be about everything at once, the first thing it should be about is stabilizing the border. China and India negotiated on the border for years before the 1962 war and then again, almost without interruption, since 1981. It would be infructuous to return to that subject at this point. More plausible and viable is to focus on the fourteen “pockets” that have been identified as the most contested. It is in these pockets that border confrontations have occurred and are most likely to recur.

Confrontations arise from patrolling areas of vital interest with hazy boundaries. Stabilizing the contested pockets might be achieved without human patrolling. Active military posts and forward deployed units would be withdrawn from these areas to be replaced by a combination of monitoring technologies. Sensors, cameras, drones, and satellite reconnaissance in combination would constitute a formidable surveillance system. Admittedly, a virtual system may not work in all pockets all of the time. Moreover, its deployment presumes that both sides are indeed committed to maintaining peace. The idea can only proceed on an understanding that pending a final resolution of the border and without prejudice to either side’s claims, the two countries prefer peace over war. The hardware and the software for a system of virtual patrolling exists. It is time for China and India to replace nineteenth century with twenty-first century forms of border control.

Conclusion: Rebuilding Trust

The events of June 2020 have been a jolt but present an opportunity to rethink bilateral diplomacy. At the core of the three inter-related propositions advanced here is the notion that China and India have to build trust differently from the recent past. Resetting the summits, instituting a back-channel, and replacing real with virtual patrolling in select frontier areas could lay the basis for an abiding peace. The new diplomacy could rebuild trust to the point that a final border settlement becomes possible.

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Can South Asia Put India-Pakistan Hostilities Behind to Unite for Greater Good?



Ramesh Thakur

With nearly 1.9 billion people living in South Asia, the eight-member South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) is clearly among the biggest regional organisations in the world by representative population, yet it has failed to unite member states on common issues in the mould of the better known, and larger, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which has 10 members, or the 27-member European Union.

Instead, despite their shared histories and administrative and economic traditions inherited from the British Raj, integration within South Asia—comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—has progressively weakened over the years. A major factor has been the constant hostility between India and Pakistan since their split into independent countries in 1947.

That hostility has translated into disarray within the entire organisation, whose members last got together in person all the way back in November 2014, in Kathmandu, Nepal. A summit scheduled for November 2016 in Islamabad, Pakistan, was cancelled after India decided to boycott attendance after a terrorist attack in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir in September of the same year.

But with all eight Saarc countries facing common, intractable issues like poverty, threats to internal security and economic scarcity, the urgency to hold a summit and find solutions to their problems is now paramount. The grouping, which represents around 21% of the world's population, 4% of the global economy and 3% of the world's area, also faces a shared fragility made worse by the coronavirus pandemic and climate change.

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There are three ways Saarc leaders, in particular the prime ministers of India and Pakistan, Narendra Modi and Imran Khan, respectively, can rise to the challenge of promoting greater regionalism and economic development within the bloc—with the stronger economies in turn resulting in deeper social welfare programmes across South Asia.

The first goal should be to prioritise regional integration: India and Pakistan (and others) should not skip summit meetings even if their relations are fraught. The second: decouple trade with geopolitical relations, with a particular focus on normalising trade between India and Pakistan regardless of the state of ties. The third: As the largest country in South Asia (by land, population, economy and other indices), India should have a greater stake in strengthening Saarc. If regionalism is elevated to the status of a high-priority plank of India's foreign policy, it would enhance the country's global importance, influence and role.

India by itself accounts for around 75% of South Asia's total population, 63% of its land area and 80% of its economic product. Its position within Saarc is also distinguished by the fact that only the Maldives and Afghanistan do not share a border with it. Geography ensures that India is open to the influence of any major social and political forces sweeping its neighbours, and vice versa, for example Sinhalese-Tamil tensions in Sri Lanka or the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in India. These features distinguish South Asia and shape its intraregional dynamics in a unique way that is not true of any other region in the world.

As the giant of the group, India took the initiative to fashion a regional response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with the leaders of all Saarc countries taking part in a videoconference convened by Modi last March. Only Khan was absent from the videoconference, although Pakistan was represented by a senior health official.

After that meeting, Modi committed US\$10 million towards a Saarc Covid-19 Emergency Fund. The other Saarc countries, including Pakistan, also donated to the fund, bringing the total contribution to US\$21.8 million. Modi also offered a rapid-response team of doctors and specialists, as well as online training help.

Following this offer, medical teams from India travelled to the Maldives and Nepal to train local doctors and set up medical centres and quarantine facilities. India also sent supplies and testing equipment to Nepal, the Maldives, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Around 23 t of essential medicines were sent to Nepal alone.

In addition, India, the world's largest producer of vaccines, has begun its mass coronavirus vaccination campaign and has already sent free vaccines to neighbours including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Such cooperation could be a cornerstone for transforming the lives of ordinary citizens within the group and also help take the sting out of the bitter enmity between India and Pakistan, making it possible to keep channels of cooperation in other areas open and deliver positive outcomes for the region as a whole, instead of engaging in zero-sum strategic games.

One of the positive outcomes would be better economic integration, which would benefit a common market undergirded by affordable social security safety nets for the poor and underprivileged, leading to a quicker climb up the human development ladder. Working together will also help South Asian countries tackle the other

challenges that lie ahead, and are potentially much bigger, such as climate change and environmental degradation.

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An India-Pakistan Ceasefire That Can Stick



Ameya Kilara

A rare piece of good news on India-Pakistan made headlines at midnight on 25 February 2021—a joint statement between Indian and Pakistani officials renewing their commitment to the 2003 ceasefire. This pressed a pause button on a rapidly deteriorating bilateral relationship. The joint statement was the product of secret backchannel talks between the two governments.

The Indian Army Chief confirmed that not a single round was fired (barring one incident) for the whole month of March following the ceasefire joint statement. This is the most significant reduction in violence achieved at the Line of Control (LoC) over the past decade. If it sticks, it could become the foundation for a long-awaited India-Pakistan dialogue.

The fragility of ceasefire agreements was brought home, however, by a second incident of firing along the LoC, which took place on May 3, just over two months after the agreement. Both countries accused each other of violating the ceasefire.

Ceasefires tend to be notoriously fragile. Like good marriages, lasting ceasefires are not just standalone commitments. Rather, they are underpinned by a network of positive steps to build trust, cultivate habits of dialogue and enlarge the pie of shared benefits for the parties involved and their constituents.

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Challenges to an India-Pakistan Ceasefire

The ability of India and Pakistan to arrive at, and then to consistently maintain a ceasefire, is further impeded by domestic political compulsions in both countries, as well as a deep mistrust between their security establishments. To sustain the ceasefire, the leaders of both countries will have to anticipate and overcome at least three key challenges.

In India, a spectacular terror attack like Pulwama or Uri will put pressure on Prime Minister Modi, from the Indian public and political parties, to end talks and retaliate. In Pakistan, leaders will be under continuous pressure from military and religious hardliners accusing them of capitulating to India and betraying the Kashmir cause, if they were to agree to a ceasefire.

Finally, given the long-standing alienation and disaffection among the Kashmiri people and strong local support for militancy in some pockets, several Kashmiri groups may perceive a ceasefire as an India-Pakistan deal that excludes them.

Steps to Sustain the India-Pakistan Ceasefire

Even though the challenges remain, it is possible for both sides to take a series of mutually reinforcing steps to help insulate the India-Pakistan ceasefire from the challenges outlined above.

A Narrative on Terrorism

First, Prime Minister Modi and his advisors will need to frame a domestic public narrative to accompany the ceasefire. This narrative should link the image of strong leadership with the courage to pursue peace, despite attacks by ‘enemies of India-Pakistan peace’, which is what violent terrorist groups should be portrayed as. This will involve a subtle shift away from portraying Pakistan as the ‘enemy’, to assigning blame to particular groups alone. Government statements, after any terror attacks, should declare that India will not allow its peace efforts with Pakistan to be deterred by groups, that are antithetical to peace in the region.

There are lessons to draw in how the Indian political leadership has justified keeping diplomatic and military negotiations open with China, even after arguably more serious military confrontations at the India-China border, since June 2020.

Agreeing to a Crisis Response Plan

Second, in the event of crisis situations such as an escalation at the LoC or a terror attack in India, backchannel interlocutors, delegated by both countries, should agree in advance to a series of steps to deescalate and keep talks going. These steps could include joint statements by the two governments immediately condemning an attack; activation of bilateral channels of communication; efforts to moderate hostile rhetoric by government officials; and perhaps bolder measures such as a joint investigation team to identify perpetrators.

A Verification Mechanism with Discreet International Support

Third, the concerns of the Indian security establishment, that a ‘soft approach’ on terror will create perverse incentives for the Pakistani state to ramp up support for terrorism, need to be allayed. This is where international allies trusted by both countries can play a role. A mechanism, where specific costs and consequences are brought to bear on those responsible for terror attacks, can be evolved. A judicious mix of carrots and sticks will need to be deployed, including conditions-based military aid; trade and economic incentives; membership into international groupings such as G7 and the UN Security Council; as well as sanctions on members of governments, as well as individuals and institutions held responsible for terror attacks. The mechanism would need to win the confidence of both sides by demonstrating objectivity, taking serious action on terrorism without scapegoating Pakistan, and avoiding any impression that India has permitted external intervention on Kashmir.

Timely Reciprocal Gestures

Fourth, to help the Pakistani leadership overcome the impression among their domestic constituents that the ceasefire was a unilateral concession on its claim to Kashmir, India will need to make a visible and timely reciprocal gesture. This could be in the form of a visit by Prime Minister Modi to Pakistan for the SAARC summit, or an announcement of positive political steps, such as restoring statehood of the current union territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

Early Consultations with the Kashmiri People

Fifth, people living on either side of the LoC should be consulted early on and brought into a parallel track of dialogue. Consultations can begin with issues relating to the practical implementation of the ceasefire, such as the positioning of bunkers to accommodate local concerns, de-mining efforts in priority areas with schools and homes, and aid for victims of cross-border shelling.

The India-Pakistan conflict has adversely impacted the populace in both Pakistan and Indian administered Kashmir for decades; it is also directly related to the separatist movement in Kashmir. As confidence grows between India and Pakistan, the Indian and Pakistani governments will need to take political stakeholders in Kashmir on board as well. This can be achieved by designing an inclusive dialogue that accommodates the core issues for the Kashmiri people: fear of losing their identity, anger at past atrocities, and the desire for a dignified settlement. This will also be crucial to ultimately addressing the continuous threat of violence from insurgent groups. If handled sensitively and early on, people affected by the conflict could become helpful partners rather than spoilers in the India-Pakistan dialogue.

Sequencing CBMs

Finally, governments should carefully sequence confidence building measures (CBMs) to build trust incrementally. Previous Kashmir-specific CBMs such as cross LoC trade, suspended since 2019, can be revived. New CBMs could also be crafted to respond to current challenges, such as a Covid 19 CBM to allow the virtual exchange of local information and resources on pandemic responses involving civil society, universities, doctors, technical experts, and bureaucrats in both Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir.

CBMs related to the wider India-Pakistan relationship, such as cross-border religious tourism, cross-border environmental cooperation, and resumption of border trade, can then be slowly pursued.

The February '21 ceasefire between India and Pakistan has the potential to form the basis of a historic opening for peace at a time when the region is desperately in need of some relief. However, a sustainable ceasefire will require a carefully planned and sophisticated political and technical architecture, comprising elements outlined above, to overcome domestic political compulsions in both countries and the concerns of the affected populations on both sides of the LoC in Kashmir.

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China and India: More New Diplomacy



Kanti Bajpai

A year ago in July 2020, in a short essay for the Asia Peace Programme (APP), I suggested that China and India needed “a new diplomacy”. The old diplomacy consisted of four main elements; regular summitry; military confidence-building measures (CBMs); border negotiations; and trade. My suggestion was to abandon high-profile summitry for now, to turn to back-channel diplomacy between politically trusted envoys instead, and to replace border patrolling with virtual patrolling that relies on remotely controlled airborne vehicles (drones, UAVs), sensors, cameras, and satellites.

A year later, this new diplomacy can be supplemented by further new diplomatic initiatives which are based on modest confidence building. Before I deal with those, it is worth saying that of the four elements of the old diplomacy, at least two still subsist: the old CBMs that were negotiated between 1993 and 2013; and trade. Particularly in India, there has been a view since the events of July 2020 that the CBMs have been rendered useless. This has been accompanied by calls for an economic decoupling from China including trade—India should, in this view, quickly move towards self-reliance in key areas or seek alternative suppliers.

In fact, though, the old CBMs still have value: the general commitment to negotiations and discussions between both military and civilian authorities in the case of border confrontations is the basis for the military disengagement talks currently in progress; and specific constraints on military actions and behaviours continue to be observed such as the avoidance of provocative air flights near the border and artillery and other firing close to the border.

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In July 2020, in Galwan, it was another CBM that prevented escalation of the fight into a wider and more violent conflict. The two armies had long ago agreed that advance border patrols would not carry more than a modicum of arms and would in any case stop short of using them in case of a local dispute. As a result, the Galwan fracas saw the two militaries resort to hand-to-hand fighting, ensuring thereby that casualties were kept low.

In the wake of the Galwan incident, India moved to a limited economic decoupling with from China. It banned over one hundred mobile phone apps, introduced rules that increased the vetting of investments from China, and reviewed and/or cancelled tenders from Chinese firms.

However, despite these measures, in 2020–21, China-India trade remained at a very robust \$77 billion (even if this represented a reduction from \$85 billion the previous year). Significantly, in the first half of 2020–21, China-India trade exceeded US-India trade. India imported \$58.7 billion worth of goods from China, which is more than it imported from its next two biggest trading partners, the US and UAE, combined. In addition, reports suggest that Chinese companies continue to apply for foreign direct investment permission in India and that the Indian government is not routinely rejecting these applications.

Nevertheless, clearly, the old CBMs and trade and investment will not altogether stabilize China-India relations and defuse the continuing eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation in eastern Ladakh. At least three things would help to add momentum to the ongoing talks and negotiations.

First, both sides need to end megaphone and publicly aired diplomacy. They have already taken steps to do so since the crisis events of July 2020. Accusatory and denunciatory language in public has receded over the months; but it needs to be sustained. In addition, it would be helpful to put a lid on the public announcements of every round of talks—when they are scheduled to be convened, who sat at the table, and what was achieved or not achieved. Delhi and Beijing also need to stop leaks that reveal the purported statements and stances adopted by the two sides during diplomatic and military talks.

Second, sensible force reductions in Ladakh would help stabilize the military relationship in this brittle sector. The two sides apparently now have up to 200,000 troops on the Ladakh front. These are backed by light tanks, artillery, and drones (drone are particularly in evidence on the Chinese side). Both sides may also have moved up aircraft as well. In my recent book, *India Versus China: Why They are Not Friends*, I argued that they are prone to misread each other's military moves in the border areas. This suggests that with the enormous amount of force deployed in the remote heights of the mountains the conditions for a firefight are higher than ever, with the danger of escalation.

Thinning their forces in the entire theatre would help reassure the two militaries. Force reductions may not have to be rigidly and mechanically symmetric. Chinese infrastructure and the flat terrain of Tibet allows the PLA to move forces quickly. India's weaker infrastructure and highly mountainous approaches to the border slows down deployments. Arms reductions will therefore need to be done with

sophistication and a sense of the achievable. Its benefits are not just material but also psychological, signaling a desire for a return to more normal border management.

Third, beyond Ladakh, the two sides have large force deployments in the so-called eastern sector of the border, in what India calls Arunachal Pradesh and what China calls South Tibet, and therefore this could be the next flashpoint. India controls the state, China lays claim to most of it. The claims and counterclaims here are much larger than in Ladakh. It is well to remember that this was the most active theatre of conflict during the 1962 war. Satellite imagery shared in the Indian media over the past several months seems to indicate that China is creating new villages in areas that India claims.

The area also got high-level attention on the Chinese side. President Xi Jinping visited Tibet at the end of July, the first trip by a Chinese President in over 30 years. He inspected new infrastructure connecting Lhasa right up to Nyingchi and traveled to Nyinchi which adjoins Arunachal Pradesh. Both Lhasa and Nyingchi have Theatre Command Units. Nyingchi is only 335 km from Tawang, which is home to one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. The Yarlung Tsangpo (the Brahmaputra river in India) flows through Nyingchi, and upper riparian China is constructing major dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo.

If conflict were to occur in this sector, it will almost certainly be more violent given the stakes. India and China need to ensure that they avoid a heightening of tensions here. At the very minimum, they need to keep force deployments at present levels and not increase them. Regular local commander meetings here, as provided for in their original confidence building measure going back to 1993 and 1996, as a preventative initiative would help as well.

These are modest proposals. They do not ask too much of either side. They are without prejudice to their respective positions on the final delineation of the border. Nor do they involve any humiliating one-sided concessions. India and China cannot stand still on their border quarrel. As two rising powers, their sense of pride and position will not allow it. Before they return to border negotiations towards a final settlement, they must “undo the knot” they tied in the summer of 2020 in Ladakh and stabilize the military situation.

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Safer Together: Why South and Southeast Asia Must Cooperate to Prevent a New Cold War in Asia



Sarang Shidore

As China's rise continues unabated, it is hardly a secret that the United States is reorienting its grand strategy to counter China in all domains, with the AUKUS announcement as its latest manifestation. Washington's goal is to prevent the emergence of China as a peer competitor and retain (or recover) U.S. global dominance. The steadily militarizing U.S.-China rivalry threatens to roil South and Southeast Asia and could convert it into a set of "frontline states." However, such a dystopian future can be prevented if India and ASEAN led by key ASEAN states such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore, succeed in forging a common strategic intent. They must do so before it is too late.

The international system has become economically more multipolar but remains very much unipolar in the military sphere. The United States spends more on defense than the next 11 countries combined (seven of which are American allies), maintains hundreds of far-flung bases, and has by far the largest set of treaty allies. This peculiar structure of uni-multipolarity, combined with the anxiety of decline, is tempting Washington to prioritize hard security as a counter to China. The United States has steadily whittled away at the One-China policy and persuaded treaty allies Japan and South Korea to wade into the Taiwan question. AUKUS has catapulted Australia into the status of a "frontline state." NATO has also recently portrayed China as a military challenge. The U.S. Congress is in the process of passing legislation replete with cold war-era language on China. And aggressive Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) only serve to provoke Beijing in a region where there is little threat to sea trade and travel.

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The United States has also helped construct a new China-balancing geography termed the “Indo-Pacific,” and is doubling down on the four-nation Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) also including Japan, Australia, and India. Though the Quad’s recent rhetoric has focused on non-traditional security, military inter-operability and war-fighting exercises between these same four states are intensifying.

Meanwhile, China is also expanding its military footprint across the region. This includes seeking new naval bases in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean regions. Beijing’s excessive maritime claims and military exercises, especially in the South China Sea region, have given rise to allegations of incursions from countries in Southeast Asia.

Next to Taiwan, it is in the largely unallied South and Southeast Asia that the encroachment of the “great power competition” generates the greatest risks, which AUKUS only heightens. The intensifying US-China rivalry may be the biggest longer-term threat to the cohesion of ASEAN, a grouping with an enviable record of promoting peace and prosperity. Despite Washington’s denials, there could well be tremendous pressure on ASEAN states to take sides, threatening the region’s dream of peaceful rise. A crisis in the seas risks conflict in the shorter term as well. It is patently in the interest of Southeast Asia to prevent these scenarios. Key countries—Vietnam and Singapore among others—already recognize this.

Matters are more complicated in South Asia. India’s relations with China have worsened substantially since their clash in June 2020 in the wake of alleged Chinese intrusions into Indian-controlled territory. New Delhi is also upset at China’s increased support for India’s arch-rival Pakistan and a lack of sensitivity to Indian concerns in the Indian Ocean. But, from Beijing’s perspective, India has departed from the “Wuhan Spirit” by signing military inter-operability agreements with the United States and participating in joint armed forays into disputed waters off its coast. Beijing has concluded that the United States and India have constructed an informal anti-China alliance. This is a classic case of the security dilemma in action. Meanwhile, smaller South Asian states such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka find themselves pressured from all sides in this brawl.

How could South and Southeast Asian states prevent a new cold war from roiling their regions? If they have a chance, it is only by acting together. The crucial prerequisite for the South and Southeast Asian states is to agree to a common strategic understanding of the principal geopolitical threat, which is not so much a particular great power’s rise or decline, as the emergence of military rivalries and a cycle of blocs and counter-blocs in Asia. Once this recognition is arrived at, it can then lead to specific policy prescriptions toward each other and with respect to the great powers. India has spoken of the centrality of ASEAN to Asian security and the “inclusive” nature of the Quad. But it has failed to translate this into a meaningful strategy. Its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative appears to be aligned with the Quad’s China-countering agenda. New Delhi’s walking away from the ASEAN-led RCEP trade agreement was also a strategic error.

Southeast Asia, for its part, too needs a shift in its strategy towards South Asia. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is too broad for this purpose. In general,

ASEAN states have tended to engage South Asia more in the economic sphere. But Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore are well-suited to lead a new strategic outreach. Indonesia is the region's largest power, Vietnam is a major player with a historically close alignment with India, and Singapore is ASEAN's most prosperous member with deep ties to New Delhi. Smaller South Asian states will likely join this coalition if larger countries lead.

When it comes to the great powers, South and Southeast Asian states should publicly encourage the U.S. and China to focus on non-military, positive-sum competition in their regions. They should also jointly propose confidence-building measures in the maritime domain to curb intrusive incursions and aggressive FONOPs. The Quad should expressly stay away from militarization and bloc formation, however informal.

At the same time, the countries in Southeast and South Asia should look to maintain good relations with both China and the United States, even as some of them retain preferential bilateral partnerships with either. Greater trade and investment ties with the great powers should be encouraged. Non-traditional security is another important focus area—combating the grave threat of climate change ought to be an anchor of cooperation.

Will Beijing and Washington get the message? There are no guarantees. But China might be willing to meaningfully de-escalate if it sees New Delhi pushing to reverse the ongoing militarization of the Quad. Washington too might step back if it sees the “Indo-Pacific” pushing back against the politics of blocs and alliances. This would be consistent with the increasingly resonant case being made within the United States for a grand strategy of Restraint.

A South and Southeast Asian strategic convergence, as outlined above, is best attempted sooner rather than later. If the U.S.-China rivalry militarizes further and pressures on nations escalate, South and Southeast Asia will lose a major opportunity for enshrining a future of peace and prosperity in their region.

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India-Pakistan: Peace by Pieces



Kanti Bajpai

India and Pakistan are famous for quarrelling incessantly and periodically going to war. In fact, however, since 1947 they have cooperated and made peace many times over. Ironically, even Indians and Pakistanis fail to remember this history and to take encouragement from it. Today, a big bang, comprehensive settlement of core disputes is politically unviable. Peace by pieces is more plausible. Delhi and Islamabad can and should dust off putative agreements on Sir Creek, Siachen, and trade and investment to lay the foundation for more ambitious agreements on core disputes.

A Brief History of India-Pakistan War and Peace

The record of India-Pakistan cooperation and peace initiatives is impressive. By 1964, the two countries had solved virtually every bilateral problem—except for Kashmir. This includes the Indus Rivers water-sharing agreement, which was signed in 1960. This agreement has been honoured by both countries, even in times of hostilities. Even on Kashmir, bilaterally and through the UN, they came close to a solution. The day Jawaharlal Nehru died in November 1964, Sheikh Abdullah, the undisputed leader of Valley Kashmiris, was in Pakistan with a message from the Indian prime minister, as part of ongoing negotiations with Pakistan over Kashmir. Following Nehru's death, these negotiations were abandoned.

After 1964, India and Pakistan went to war in 1965, 1971, and 1999. They have had several war-scares as well: in 1986–87, 1990, 2001–2, 2008, and most recently,

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in 2019 after the Pulwama terrorist attack in Kashmir and Indian retaliation in Balakot. However, India and Pakistan have also signed peace treaties and agreements: Tashkent, after the 1965 war; and Simla, after the 1971 war. When tensions ran high after their nuclear tests in 1998, they signed the Lahore Declaration in February 1999.

Even in war, India and Pakistan have tacitly cooperated. They have never resorted to strategic bombing of population centres. They have treated prisoners-of-war correctly. Violence during hostilities has been limited, and casualties have been low. In 1988, they signed an accord by which they exchange a list of nuclear facilities annually and are pledged not to attack each other's reactors.

From 1998 to 2012, India and Pakistan negotiated on Kashmir, security (read terrorism), other territorial disputes, and trade and investment. Between 1998 and 2008, they instituted a "back-channel" between the leaderships that nearly produced a Kashmir solution. Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's promise not to negotiate until Islamabad satisfactorily tackles cross-border terrorism, Indian and Pakistani leaders and officials, including the National Security Advisors (NSAs), have intermittently met.

Sceptics may argue that the many India-Pakistan agreements are "smoke and mirrors", signifying little. If so, virtually all agreements between rivals lack much credibility. In fact, the desire for peace, both at the elite and mass level in South Asia, is substantial going by the repeated efforts at cooperation.

"Peace by Pieces" Or a "Big Bang Peace"?

How can India and Pakistan construct a stable long-term peace? Should they aim for "peace by pieces" or a "big bang peace"? Should they solve those disputes that are easy to solve and then move on to the bigger ones; or should they go directly to the core disputes?

The record shows that they have tried both methods. Clearly, the big bang approach has failed: specifically, Kashmir and cross-border terrorism remain the main conflicts. After India's decision in August 2019 to abolish Kashmir's special constitutional status and after the Pulwama terrorist attack, discussion on both core issues is off the table, for India and Pakistan, respectively. If peace by pieces is the more viable path ahead, agreements on two persisting territorial conflicts, Sir Creek and Siachen, and on trade and investment already exist. They could immediately be actioned and change the atmospherics around India-Pakistan relations.

Sir Creek is an old dispute, and the two sides came to an agreement on it several times going back to the early 1990s. It is an easy enough conflict to resolve. Using the Thalweg principle of international law, the creek can be divided down the middle and the resulting line can be extended out into the Arabian Sea to which it is connected to define the offshore boundary. India walked away from the original agreement. Delhi can, with no great cost, dust it off and sign.

Siachen is thought to be the third largest glacier after the Arctic and Antarctic. Here again, India and Pakistan came to an agreement in the 1990s. India is in substantial possession of the disputed glacier. This is a dubious advantage: hundreds of troops have died or been disabled at the 5400-metre heights. India's claim that control of Siachen is vital because it overlooks the Karakoram Highway is unconvincing. Given the treacherousness of the heights, Siachen provides no strategic benefit. A solution is in plain sight: Indian and Pakistani troops would pull back to lower ground; and satellites, ground sensors, and patrols would prevent fresh incursions.

Finally, Pakistan must be the first mover on trade. It has always denied Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to India, largely on security and political grounds. As a result, bilateral trade is usually no more than 2% of their total trade. Trade will benefit both sides and is happening anyway through the Gulf. A bilateral trade deal with India will benefit Pakistani consumers and businesses, increase its tax revenues, and earn Islamabad goodwill. Pakistan has been farsighted in allowing Indian investment. A trade deal could get India to revise its investment regime for Pakistani businesses.

Conclusion

Peace by pieces will not ensure a sustained peace. A stable, long-term peace will require Kashmir's final status and cross-border terrorism to be addressed squarely. On the other hand, dealing honestly with both these issues requires much stronger governments in India and Pakistan. Agreements on Sir Creek, Siachen, and trade and investment are "on the table" and could be signed with little further discussion or bargaining. They could create public goodwill in both societies which could prepare the ground for more ambitious agreements. Delhi and Islamabad have a history of not holding all issues hostage to resolution of core disputes. They can build on that history.

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India-China Relations: Going Beyond the Military Stalemate



C. Raja Mohan

Restoration of peace on the border disturbed by the clashes between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army in the summer of 2020 could help arrest the continuing downward slide in Sino-Indian relations and create much needed diplomatic space for resumption of normal relations between Delhi and Beijing. Disengagement and de-escalation of the military standoff in the high Himalayas could also reopen possibilities for international cooperation between the two Asian giants amidst the great churn in major power relations following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It is a little over two years since China surprised India by a massive military mobilisation in Ladakh and unilaterally changed the territorial disposition along the disputed frontier. That China's action came in the middle of India's struggle to cope with the massive breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic, shocked the government and triggered a massive anti-China backlash in the political and chattering classes.

As three decades of military confidence-building all along the so-called Line of Actual Control broke down in April 2020, India responded by a counter mobilisation of its army. The military faceoff in the Western Himalayas produced a clash between the two armed forces in mid-June 2020 that saw significant loss of life for the first time on this disputed border in nearly four decades.

Military tensions on the Sino-Indian border in Ladakh produced a number of strategic consequences—intended or unintended. Notwithstanding the pandemic, there has been a notable decline in high level political engagement between Delhi and Beijing. Although trade between the two countries continues to grow, India is consciously reducing the long term economic exposure to China.

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The conflict has also pushed the foreign policies of the two Asian giants on divergent paths. India has elevated its strategic cooperation with the US, both bilaterally and in minilateral formats such as the Quadrilateral Forum that brings together Australia, India, Japan and the United States. Meanwhile, China has drawn closer to Russia and is locked in a deepening confrontation with the United States.

The Sino-Indian conflict in the Himalayas is increasingly intertwined with the profound shift in great power relations marked by President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine that has united the Western alliance against Russia. The new focus on European security has not diluted the US and Western strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Quad has been elevated to the summit level, with new mechanisms like the AUKUS—a military technological collaboration among Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Himalayan border dynamic has had a great impact on India's great power relations and the conflict among great powers, in turn, continues to influence Sino-Indian relations. Put simply, a reasonable relationship between Delhi and Beijing is critical for reducing the impact of the new Cold War in Asia and its waters.

On the face of it, the prospects for a reconciliation between India and China appear bleak; but a careful assessment of the ground situation suggests there is a narrow path for India and China to move forward.

To be sure, the current approaches between the two sides are indeed very different.

China argues that the border issues should be set aside and the two sides should focus on normalising bilateral relations and jointly develop an Asian approach to stabilising the global political and economic system shaken to the core by the war in Ukraine. That was the burden of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's argument when he visited Delhi in April 2022.

The Indian response, articulated by the external affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, was that the easing of the military tensions was critical for the normalisation of bilateral relations. India, which has taken an independent approach to the war in Ukraine, has not closed the door for global cooperation with China.

But Delhi insists that any political partnership with China can't be constructed amidst the muscular military coercion by the PLA on the disputed border. Contrary to widespread misperception, India's emphasis is not seeking a settlement of the border dispute that dates back to the 1950s.

What Delhi wants is the restoration of peace and tranquillity on the border—to be done in two phases—disengagement of the troops from face to face confrontation and de-escalation by moving the troops away from the points of military friction.

On the positive side, 15 rounds of talks between military commanders of China and India have led to disengagement at some of the friction points on the border. Completion of the disengagement initiation of de-escalation will open up enormous space for bilateral diplomacy.

This is by no means impossible. There are sensible imperatives on both sides to end the military tensions on the border. Continuing the military confrontation and moving towards permanent deployment of troops at heights uninhabitable to human beings is of no military value to India or China.

For China, the limited territorial gains it might have won from its manoeuvre in April 2020 is far outweighed by the political costs in the relationship with India. For India, the military conflict with China has been a needless distraction from the threats it faces on its Western frontiers from the growing instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, China's challenges on its eastern borders are only growing.

Rebuilding military confidence on the border will also free up Beijing and Delhi to pursue their more natural foreign policy orientation. Chinese military pressure on the border has seen India move steadily closer to the United States. In fact, the progress in the US-Indian strategic partnership can be directly correlated to the military conflicts between China and India at the Doklam plateau in Bhutan during 2017 and in Ladakh in 2020.

China, which has strongly denounced the Quad as "Asian Nato", can easily reduce the Indian incentives to support the forum by getting the People's Liberation Army restore the status quo on the border that prevailed in 2020. Peace on the border with China will encourage India to return to its basic instincts that emphasise Asian solidarity, strategic autonomy, and the pursuit of a multipolar world.

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Restoring Trust Between China and India: A Modest Suggestion



Shivshankar Menon

Is it possible to restore trust between India and China after recent events have soured the relationship?

Given the chequered history of the relations between these two countries since the republics were established in the middle of the last century, and after Chinese PLA actions resulted in the first deaths by hostile action on the border in 45 years in mid-2020, this appears difficult. But given the increasing role that both countries play in Asia and the world, it is legitimate to hope that they will be more successful and consistent in managing their relationship in the future. That would require a minimum of trust or at least an understanding between the two governments.

Today's situation in the relationship can be summed up as complicated and unsettled. Both sides reportedly have over 100,000 troops in forward positions along the line of actual control (LAC) that divides them and that they are legally obliged to respect under bilateral agreements. It is fair to say from their actions on the ground and the buildup of military infrastructure that trust is today in short supply.

But there are some hopeful signs. Transactional parts of the relationship continue to move ahead. In 2021 China was India's single largest trading partner, and trade set new records. Besides, both governments are signalling a desire to de-escalate the tense situation on the LAC and avoid further conflict or escalation. But an impasse is apparent, with India seeking a restoration of the status quo as it obtained in spring 2020 before PLA movements and buildup, and China wishing to move on from the present position.

So what might be done to restore trust in this situation? Is that even a realistic goal?

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We will only know whether this is a realistic goal if an attempt is made by both sides to build that trust. What that effort might consist of, in the first place, is to establish an understanding of each other's approach and compulsions on the border. The limited goal to begin with would be to establish predictability in the relationship, and to ensure, to the extent possible, that there are no surprises from either side. The only way I know of doing this is a serious dialogue on the border which then moves on to the other issues that divide the two countries.

As part of introducing predictability in the relationship, they might jointly review existing confidence building measures (CBMs), see which ones are still workable given recent behaviour, and consider steps to reduce the risks of accidents and misunderstandings escalating into conflict on the border. Verification and crisis management mechanisms between them will probably need to be improved considerably.

These initial steps would be insufficient to restore trust, even if both sides were to agree to restore the status quo on the border as it existed before April 2020 in terms of territorial control and access to disputed areas. That should be the minimum goal that both sides must seek and then respect. An understanding on activities that both sides would undertake on their side of the line, and an agreed definition of the line, would help. If this minimum is not acceptable to one side, the conclusion is inescapable that that side wishes to keep the border unsettled and unstable and seeks further changes in the status quo.

This discussion could prepare the ground for a much more detailed conversation on the political and other differences between the two countries without the imminent threat of a crisis on the border hanging over the heads of the interlocutors.

The modest initial goal suggested here would enable each side to be reasonably confident that the other will follow their own definition of self-interest, and that both see peace as being in their interest. Such an understanding, if arrived at, would enable the successful management of the present unsatisfactory border situation and then a tackling of other issues that divide the two neighbours, thus providing a possible way out of the present impasse.

Even thereafter, given the long history and experience of a difficult relationship, this attempt if successful is unlikely to result in the restoration of trust between the two sides. It would still leave open several worrying issues such as the purpose of China's rapid buildup of military infrastructure and power projection capabilities on the Tibetan border in the absence of an external threat, other divergent interests, and China's perceived unhappiness with India's rise.

Trust, once broken, is not easy to restore. If trust is truly to be restored between these two neighbours, it will require demonstrated changes in behaviour over a period of time. Since the initiative to change the status quo in the last decade was taken by China, much of what has to be done will also have to be by China. Both sides are presumably learning lessons from this difficult phase in their relationship and will change their behaviour accordingly. They certainly have the capability and the traditions of statecraft that should enable them to find a better equilibrium that would enable them to concentrate on the pressing internal tasks that face both societies and economies in today's difficult world.

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India Can Still Be a Bridge to the Global South



Sanjaya Baru

Since Russia invaded Ukraine more than a year ago, India has refused to take sides in what it views as essentially a power struggle between the East and West. New Delhi has instead opted to walk the middle path: preserving its time-tested relations with Moscow, seeking to improve relations with Beijing, and strengthening relations with Washington and Tokyo. More than a few times, the challenge of balancing Russia and the United States has nearly jolted India from its tightrope.

India's middle-path approach has gained greater relevance and urgency with its leadership of the G-20 this year. This week, the group's foreign ministers gathered in New Delhi. Speaking at the start of the meeting on Thursday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi lamented the state of multilateralism: "Global governance has failed," he said, citing issues including financial crisis, climate change, the pandemic, and terrorism.

India takes the mantle of G-20 leadership from Indonesia; it will be followed by Brazil and then South Africa in 2024 and 2025, respectively. This period of leadership presents an opportunity for the countries of the global south at a time when tensions between great powers threaten to undermine the G-20. But the outcome may also depend on the G-7 group of developed economies, led this year by India's new friend Japan.

This year, Modi has leaned on New Delhi's long-standing policy of nonalignment, first embraced by founding father Jawaharlal Nehru and creatively rephrased as "multi-alignment" by current Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar. Multi-alignment, according to Jaishankar, is "more energetic and participative." India currently balances its memberships in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,

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alongside Russia and China, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as the Quad) with Australia, Japan, and the United States.

The G-20 has become an important forum for India, which remains marginal to the decision-making systems of most multilateral organizations, including the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Last year, India's leaders watched as Indonesia had to work hard to ensure that the fallout of Russia's war in Ukraine did not derail the annual G-20 summit in Bali, Indonesia. This year, New Delhi aims to take the G-20 in a new direction—as well as to cement its status as the leader of the global south, as it saw itself under Nehru.

With a virtual meeting of nearly 125 developing countries at the start of the year (called “Voice of Global South”), India set a new focus for the G-20's annual summit in New Delhi in September. The summit will aim to concentrate on far-reaching challenges that concern the global south, such as economic recovery, access to COVID-19 vaccines, climate justice, and terrorism. India hopes to present itself as a bridge power that seeks a new deal for the global south, but it remains to be seen how much support it has for its aspirations: Not many heads of government tuned in to hear Modi speak during the virtual meeting.

Jaishankar said at the G-20 summit, India aims to confront obstacles posed by bad economic headwinds—especially the global south's debt burden—and to address issues of energy and food insecurity, which have increased as a result of the war in Ukraine. These concerns seek the attention of the G-7 economies, but Jaishankar also seemed to send a message to both Russia and China in his comments, saying the summit in New Delhi would “[a]ssert the primacy of rule of law, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, and relying on diplomacy to resolve differences.”

On the global stage, India has adopted a tough posture on climate change by asserting the right to economic development and on COVID-19 cooperation by seeking exemption from intellectual property rights protections for vaccines against the virus. These positions have attracted considerable support, and Indian officials have echoed them in preparation for the G-20 summit. “We will call for equity for the global south,” Indian Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya told reporters in January.

India is likely to place significant emphasis on debt relief for developing economies, and Modi recently expressed concern that unsustainable debt threatens many countries' “financial viability.” During the Cold War, countries in the global south were able to secure greater development aid from major economies, given Western concern about communist influence. In the 1990s, the World Trade Organization was constructed so as to give special and differential treatment to countries in the global south.

These gains have withered away as wealthy countries have reduced assistance, imposed trade conditionalities, and sought to reverse globalization processes. In this context, India should seek consensus on a few concrete measures to help the global south—to be continued by Brazil and South Africa as its G-20 president successors.

A sustained focus on debt relief, reduction in global inflation, access to affordable medicine, and climate justice would make India a credible leader of the global south.

To start, the G-20 should agree to sovereign debt restructuring for least-developed and emerging economies dealing with large debt burdens, just as the group stepped in to create mechanisms that helped bail out Western economies after the 2008 financial crisis. Global inflation caused by both U.S. policy and Russia's war in Ukraine make this particularly urgent. The G-20 should also support the United Nations' recommendation to create a Sovereign Debt Workout Institution to implement debt restructuring.

Under India's leadership, the G-20 should also call on developed economies to increase their contribution to climate finance to help the global south, beyond the \$100 billion agreed to at the annual U.N. climate change conference (known as COP27) last November, known as COP27. Existing climate commitments still aren't adequate to meet the needs of emerging economies. This would echo global south-led efforts at COP27 to provide so-called loss and damage funding for especially vulnerable countries.

Next, the G-20 should declare a waiver of intellectual property rights protection for vaccines against COVID-19 and its variants. The group should also agree to price controls on life-saving drugs, especially during crises. Although the pandemic has receded, securing this demand would set a precedent for future global health challenges. Access to affordable medicine and health care remains a major concern in the global south. India's record in low-cost pharmaceuticals manufacturing and affordable health care would allow it to make a powerful case against Big Pharma.

Finally, the G-20 should agree to revitalize multilateralism in trade, including by extending the World Trade Organization's special and differential treatment facility, which allows for some tariff protection and a more gradual tariff reduction for developing economies compared to developed economies. (The principle first came under threat while former U.S. President Donald Trump was in office.) As Russia's war in Ukraine has heightened food security concerns, the G-20 should also agree on a policy for public stockholding and price support to farmers in developing economies, especially for the grain market.

If just these four points were agreed to at the G-20 summit in New Delhi later this year, then it would mark a major turning point for the group, which has not had much to show for its global leadership lately. With India at the helm, the time has come for the G-20 to help the global south in a dramatic fashion.

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Would You Care for a ‘Package Deal’? The Future of a Territorial Swap on the Disputed Sino-Indian Boundary



Ameya Pratap Singh

Disputes over territory are perhaps the largest contributors to interstate conflict, as the recent examples of the Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts have evidenced. The most insurmountable in this category, at least in terms of the length of the disputed boundary, is the 2100-mile long disputed Sino-Indian border. But boundary disputes of such magnitude are not set in stone either, and just as the ebbs and flows of the rivalry over the years have proffered moments of tension and war, they have also lent opportunity to political entrepreneurs to craft *détentes*, and occasionally, even consider the possibility of a settlement.

The use of territorial swaps to settle boundary disputes is assumed to be taboo, owing to the immutable properties of a state's territorial holdings. Domestic publics generally view any compromise of a state's territory as a surrender of national prestige, ideology, and even the nation's *raison d'être*. However, in certain moments, such concessions are proposed and seriously deliberated upon. Two such moments took place in Sino-Indian relations in the Nehru-Zhou and Rajiv-Deng periods. This is unsurprising if one considers the larger historical register. Despite a significant number of outstanding territorial claims, China has also resolved boundary disputes with neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan etc. India too has resolved its share of boundary disputes, most notably for the exchange of enclaves with Bangladesh in 2015. The two Himalayan rivals came close to a 'package deal' on the Sino-Indian border too (twice!), but the proposal did not materialise. Do these failed attempts offer hope of a resolution or portend the inevitably ruinous future of diplomatic attempts to terminate the rivalry?

In 1960, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, accompanied by Foreign Minister Chen Yi and a thirty-one-member Chinese delegation, arrived in Delhi to negotiate a final

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settlement of the disputed Sino-Indian boundary with his Indian counterpart Jawaharlal Nehru. The boundary was a British-colonial vestige and had been in dispute for longer than the existence of the Republic of India as well as the People's Republic of China. The British Empire had purposefully maintained Tibet as a 'buffer state'. This allowed them to claim territorial largesse when the need arose, while continuing to deny its great power competitors a foothold in the region. The British Empire could countenance such an expedient arrangement with the Chiang Kai-shek led Nationalist China. But this would only hold aspirational value for Independent India faced with Communist China on its North-Eastern border. The Indians were mere spectators as the Chinese annexed Tibet in 1949, making the two postcolonial states neighbours on a historically contested and un-demarcated border.

Both, the Indians and the Chinese knew of the disputed nature of the border but did not want to raise alarm until they had militarily secured their status and legitimacy in border areas. When the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" were chronicled through a bilateral trade treaty on India's commercial rights in Tibet in 1954, Indian and Chinese interlocutors deliberately and carefully avoided mentioning any disputed parts as trade posts. Isolated stand-offs in feeding pastures along the Himalayan border had also begun to creep up as early as 1954 in areas in the Central Sector such as Bara Hoti. Historically, these boundaries were highly fluid and had been used by agrarians on both sides. However, the imposition of nation-statehood now demanded territorial exclusivity. Despite this, both India and China did not choose to directly address the boundary issue, opting instead to build a stronger negotiating position before showing their hand.

However, their position was forced when the Tibetan Revolution broke out in 1957. PLA forces, chasing Tibetan rebels, entered disputed border areas, often provoking confrontations with Indian border patrols. Since there was no formal demarcation of the boundary, the armed forces of both sides found themselves in a highly unenviable situation. In 1959, in the Western Sector (Aksai Chin Region), a clash at Kongka Pass led to the death of nine Indian soldiers; the first casualties of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute. This forced Nehru and Zhou's hand. Leaving the boundary ambiguous was no longer tenable. Chinese conduct was being heavily criticised by Soviet Union. In a meeting on 2 October 1959, Nikita Khrushchev unequivocally asked Mao and Zhou to settle the dispute in order not to alienate India from the Communist bloc. Begrudgingly, the latter committed that they would respect the "McMahon Line" in the Eastern sector and soon bring the issue to an end. In a nutshell, this was the 'package deal'—a status quo solution. The Chinese would accept India's claims in the Eastern Sector, which was more critical for India's security of its North-Eastern region, for Indian acceptance of Chinese sovereignty in the Western Sector of Aksai Chin, which was the region that housed the arterial road that connected Chinese forces to the Tibetan plateau via Xinjiang.

On his part, Nehru too had been preparing the grounds for this 'package deal.' In parliament, he repeatedly mentioned it as an inhospitable terrain. This provided some defence for India's inability to prevent Chinese encroachments. The Indian side had long been willing to trade Chinese presence in the Aksai Chin region, for China's formal recognition of the McMahon Line in the Eastern Sector. However,

public opinion in India would not countenance such a deal in 1960. The Chinese could navigate the pitfalls of public diplomacy over a complex border issue much better than the Indians. Once the death of Indian soldiers on the border, and the scale of Chinese territorial claims became public knowledge, Nehru's room for manoeuvre had diminished significantly. Accepting the status quo meant the vindication of Chinese aggression on India's borders, and was thus considered intolerable. Despite the Chinese being the militarily stronger power, they proposed the 'package deal'. And despite this arrangement being acceptable to India's political leadership earlier, it was declined as this simply could not be justified to the Indian peoples or parliament. This is why the talks between Nehru and Zhou failed in 1960.

The 'package deal' was revived in 1979, when Deng Xiaoping proposed it to then Indian Minister of External Affairs, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, during his China tour. Once again, the proposal was rejected by the Indian side as they continued to insist on a detailed historical study to resolve the border in each Sector. In 1986–87, the intractability of border talks eventually led to a military stand-off in the Sumdorong Chu Valley in the Eastern Sector. A weak coalition government led by Morarji Desai, which only lasted in office for 2 years did not have the ability to push through such a settlement. The deal was offered to Desai's successor and Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, in 1984. But her assassination curtailed any serious consideration. The deal was offered once again by Deng to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. Deng wanted India to make minor territorial concessions to the Chinese on the Eastern Sector for its acceptance of the McMahon Line (which was to be renamed) in lieu of minor Chinese territorial concessions to India in the Western Sector for India's acceptance of Chinese sovereignty in the Aksai Chin region.

Chinese Diplomat Yang Wenchang recounts the exchange as follows:

As a diplomat in late 1980s, I witnessed a chance to solve the problem with Prime Minister Rajiv and Deng, who was also a strong man. We do some compromise on west wing, you do some on the east wing then we can have a new border. We offered but Prime Minister Gandhi didn't have a response. After that I felt very sad we lost the chance.

Rajiv Gandhi had the parliamentary mandate required to formalise a 'package deal'. But he too chose not to jeopardise his political future, settling instead for confidence building measures on the border to ensure "peace and tranquillity".

Twice, political compulsions and domestic weaknesses have compelled Chinese leaders to offer a 'package deal' to their Indian counterparts. But in both cases, the pulls and pushes of parliamentary democracy in India have made 'managing the dispute' more palatable than its resolution.

Now, the scales have changed significantly. At least since 2017, in light of China's sustained economic growth and new-found military strength, especially relative to the Indian side, the Chinese no longer want a 'package deal' solution based on the status quo. Instead, they have proposed a new 'package deal' that disproportionately demands concessions from India in the Eastern Sector, particularly in the populated region of Tawang. While Deng's proposal in the 1980s too required a concession in the Eastern Sector, this was relatively minor and was to be

reciprocated by Chinese concessions in the Western Sector. If a much more favourable ‘package deal’ couldn’t pass muster, Xi’s new proposal is highly unlikely to do so.

But ultimately, it is in the interest of both states to achieve a final settlement of the border and some variation of the ‘package deal’ is most likely to prove fruitful in this respect. Unlike Taiwan for China or Kashmir for India, the Sino-Indian boundary dispute does not concern key pillars of national identity. Neither do the concerned border territories offer any particular advantage in terms of natural resources or larger strategic advantages beyond the rivalry. Therefore, the revival of a package deal would be favourable to India’s growth prospects as well China’s global ambitions. And until the conditions for such a solution are arrived at, they should find ways and means of enhancing other important aspects of their relationship and managing conflagrations at the border. More so than the South China Sea, it is the resolution of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute that will determine if “Asia” will be a term that geopolitical experts will use as a reference of power, or to signify an arena of unending conflict and violence in the emerging world order.

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Why India-Pakistan Relations Need a New Era of Engagement



Farhan Hanif Siddiqi

Discussions surrounding India-Pakistan relations often revolve around two questions: can they manage their rivalry? And what will it take to foster goodwill in bilateral ties?

While important, these queries obfuscate a critical reality: despite their long-standing animosity, India and Pakistan have occasionally engaged constructively.

These periods of cooperation, often overlooked and underemphasised, provide insight into how these nuclear-armed rivals might work together, even amid significant tensions.

This duality of conflict and engagement characterises their postcolonial history, presenting a complex narrative of rivalry interspersed with attempts at collaboration.

The year 2019 serves as a poignant illustration of this conflict-engagement dynamic. In February, a terrorist attack in Pulwama, Kashmir, led to a retaliatory Indian air strike into Pakistani territory, which escalated into an aerial dogfight that resulted in the capture of an Indian pilot. It reportedly took intense backchannel diplomacy from the United States to de-escalate the situation.

Later that year, in August, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in New Delhi revoked Kashmir's special constitutional status, which led to a freeze in India-Pakistan relations. Since then, bilateral trade has effectively ceased, diplomatic ties have been downgraded, and people-to-people interactions have been dramatically reduced.

Pakistan has repeatedly insisted that any dialogue must begin with the restoration of Kashmir's previous status, while India demands that Islamabad renounce its

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support for the separatist insurgency in the disputed region, which India terms “cross-border terrorism”. These rigid positions have stalled meaningful dialogue between the two governments since 2019.

Yet amid these tensions, both nations did agree in November 2019 to open the Kartarpur Corridor, allowing predominantly Sikh devotees from India to visit their spiritual leader’s birthplace in Pakistan. This visa-free access demonstrates a different facet of India-Pakistan relations—a willingness to engage despite prevailing hostilities.

This engagement through the Kartarpur Corridor stands in stark contrast to the mutual hostility over Kashmir. In this sense, while Kashmir exemplifies the zero-sum nature of the India-Pakistan relationship, Kartarpur is indicative of the potential, even the desire, for cooperation.

A Decade of Engagement

Cold War historians have described a phase of “oscillatory antagonism” between the US and the Soviet Union—dating from the end of the Korean war in 1953–1969—that was typified by periods of managed rivalry and cooperation even amid significant tensions.

India and Pakistan have exhibited a similar pattern, oscillating between hostility and constructive engagement. Following the Kargil conflict in 1999, Pakistan’s then-President Pervez Musharraf sought to redefine relations with India, working with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his successor Manmohan Singh, fostering increased diplomatic dialogue and backchannel negotiations.

In the mid-2000s, these talks produced an innovative and radical framework for resolving the Kashmir conflict, moving beyond entrenched positions. For Pakistan, this meant sidestepping the United Nations-administered plebiscite, while India would shift focus from demanding Pakistan’s cessation of support for Kashmiri separatism. The proposed framework included easing travel restrictions along the Line of Control, demilitarising the area, and granting self-governance to Kashmiris through a joint management mechanism. During this period, in 2007, Prime Minister Singh articulated a vision for open borders across South Asia, where one could have “breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, dinner in Kabul”.

The 2008 Mumbai attacks did not escalate into a full-blown crisis largely due to the prevailing norm of engagement between the two states. This goodwill helped both nations manage tensions, as seen again in January 2016, when a terrorist attack on the Pathankot airbase in India led to a short-lived yet significant collaboration between Indian and Pakistani security agencies, instead of a rift in bilateral relations.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s unscheduled visit to Lahore in December 2015 to meet his Pakistani counterpart laid the groundwork for this spirit of engagement. His trip, from Kabul to Delhi through Lahore, also echoed Singh’s earlier aspirations. Unfortunately, this visit also marked the tail end of a promising era in India-Pakistan relations.

Finding a Way Forward

Despite ongoing tensions, an India-Pakistan ceasefire agreement reached in 2021 remains in effect along the Line of Control, showcasing the possibility for cooperation even amid geopolitical tensions. This agreement has led to a significant reduction in hostilities, with the previously volatile border region now largely peaceful for more than 3 years—demonstrating that India and Pakistan can work together at military and political levels.

Trade between the two nations has plummeted since 2019, following Pakistan's suspension of trade relations and India's withdrawal of "most favoured nation" status, increasing import duties on Pakistani goods to 200%. Ironically, both countries continue to trade indirectly through third countries such as the United Arab Emirates, with India exporting an estimated US\$1.2 billion in goods and services to Pakistan last year, while US\$3 million in of Pakistani exports went in the other direction.

The success of the ceasefire agreement and continued informal trade suggest a willingness to engage on both sides. Whether a more substantial bilateral engagement akin to that in the mid-2000s can be revived depends on imaginative and courageous leadership in both nations. Such leadership must prioritise a long-term vision over short-term, zero-sum outcomes.

While current tensions suggest a high likelihood of future militarised crises, they do not negate the underlying potential for India-Pakistan engagement. If collaborative efforts were enhanced, the whole of South Asia would benefit.

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Why Have China and India Come Together?



Kanti Bajpai

India-China relations turned a significant corner in October 2024. Two sudden developments heralded this change.

First, on October 21, 2024, India announced an agreement with China on resuming patrolling rights in Depsang and Demchok in Ladakh which was denied to it after the military clash in Galwan in June 2020. The resumption of patrolling will be followed by the withdrawal of thousands of Chinese and Indian troops deployed in forward positions since the 2020 clash. The October agreement came after stabilizing buffer zones were created at other conflict points in Eastern Ladakh in 2021–22. The second development was the almost simultaneous announcement that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping would hold a bilateral meeting at the BRICS Summit. The meeting was duly held on October 23.

What caused this positive change in China-India relations? While there is no official account of the reasons, three factors may have led to a détente.

The first likely factor was economic. India's economy is growing at an average of 7% per annum, but if it wants to raise GDP growth to 8–10% per annum it needs critical Chinese products (metals, active pharmaceutical ingredients or APIs, and machinery and electricals) as well as Chinese investment. China's economy is trending to the 3–4% per annum growth range. Hence, the Indian economy, as it closes in on Japan's GDP, is becoming more attractive as an export and investment destination, particularly as China's economic ties with the West shrink from de-risking strategies.

A second possible factor propelling the detente is the realization that the two sides are in a stalemate. Unless China and India are looking to settle matters on the

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battlefield, the massive post-Galwan deployments are a waste of men, money, and materiel. Since both sides understand that a decisive military victory in East Ladakh is implausible, the deployments are militarily futile (they have outlived their symbolic value as well).

In addition, both militaries have larger challenges. For India, a two-front conflict, with China and Pakistan simultaneously, would be daunting. New Delhi therefore needs to reduce the greater but more tractable threat, which is China, while building its capabilities to deal with a two-front war and with a powerful, modernizing Chinese military. For China, the much larger military worry is in the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. Beijing, also, does not want a two-front confrontation.

The third possible cause of the *détente* is quite a different strategic worry, namely, the United States. India is a strategic partner of the US, primarily because both countries look at China as a threat. Yet, New Delhi is going through a rocky phase with Washington—over American criticism of India's democratic backsliding, human rights and minority protections, and most recently, allegations that some Indian officials had a hand in an attempted assassination on American soil of a Sikh separatist activist. US intelligence apparently also shared information with Canada over the killing of a Sikh separatist in Vancouver which Ottawa claims was organized by elements of the Indian government. By making up with China, the Modi government may well be signalling the US that it has other strategic options.

For China, relations with the US have continued to slide under President Joe Biden—over trade and technology, internal issues such as Tibet and Xinjiang, Taiwan and the South China Sea, and the formation of the US-Japan-Australia-India coalition in the Indo-Pacific. It is in China's interest to destabilize that coalition, and nudging India towards neutrality is one way of doing so.

These three factors are significant, indicating that the *détente* could be sustained and eventually return both countries to the path of normalization. What further steps can India and China take to keep the military *détente* going to encourage the larger process of normalization?

The first step has already been taken, i.e. the actual resumption of patrolling by both militaries in Depsang and Demchok, with the attendant enabling protocols (smaller patrols, prior notification of patrolling, etc.). Ahead of the two militaries is the resumption of patrolling in Galwan, Pangong Tso, and other flashpoints. Here, the stabilizing measure thus far has been buffer zones to keep the troops apart.

The buffer zones have been helpful. However, both sides may fear secret intrusions into these areas that then become permanent deployments. Monitoring the zones is therefore vital. Patrolling is one means of monitoring. Other means include ground and satellite sensors as well as drones. Drones in turn can be destabilizing since they can “wander” beyond the buffer zones. And of course they can carry ordnance. So, talks will be necessary to determine if the buffer zones in Galwan, Pangong Tso, and elsewhere are enough. It is worth noting that China too has sought patrolling rights, in areas of Arunachal Pradesh where India is in military control. This also will have to be squarely faced.

A second step is to make a partial but real beginning on troop withdrawals. A long hard winter is ahead of the thousands of troops in Ladakh. While a complete pullback—so-called de-induction—cannot occur immediately, a positive move would be de-inducting a not-insignificant portion of the massive deployments. This would bring real and symbolic benefit. The phasing and sequencing of de-induction may not be strictly equal and reciprocal. De-induction is easier for the Chinese military given superior infrastructure and the flatter terrain in Tibet to which they would return. It is harder for the Indian military given poorer infrastructure and the twisting mountain roads that the retreating forces must traverse.

Finally, since there was probably an economic rationale for the *détente*, the normalization of economic relations needs to occur if both sides are to reap the full benefits of the agreement. Here, India needs to speed up permission for Chinese imports and investments that are not deemed a security risk. It also needs to ease visa restrictions on Chinese business executives and technical experts who service Chinese equipment in India. And China needs to do something about the huge trade imbalance with India which irks and worries New Delhi. It is simply not enough for Beijing to assert that the problem is with Indian businesses that are uncompetitive. If Xi Jinping can do an economic deal with Donald Trump, surely he can do one with Narendra Modi as well.

In short, even though China and India remain suspicious of each other, there is a real opportunity to steer this bilateral relationship back to a positive path.

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Conflict Management in Southeast and East Asia

China and Japan: Will They Ever Reconcile?



Tommy Koh

Let me begin my essay by telling you a story. In 1996, the then Singapore Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, was successful in convening the inaugural meeting of the leaders of Asia and Europe, in Bangkok. The leaders agreed to establish the Asia-Europe Meeting or ASEM, in short. They also agreed to establish the Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEF, to promote better mutual understanding between the peoples of the two regions.

Following the summit in Bangkok, Mr Goh and my boss at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr Kishore Mahbubani, requested me to be the founding executive director of the Asia-Europe Foundation. The three and a half years I spent in that job enabled me to learn, more deeply, the history of the post-war European integration project. I was particularly struck by the miracle of reconciliation, which had taken place between historic enemies, such as between France and Germany.

ASEF: China and Japan Say No

At ASEF, I proposed convening a seminar to consider how Asia can learn from the European experience of reconciling historic enemies. To my surprise, the governors of China and Japan objected to my proposal. When I pressed them to explain their objection, they said that their countries were not ready. In exasperation, I said that if they were not ready, more than 50 years after the Pacific War had ended, when will they be ready. In view of their objections, I had to abandon my proposal.

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There will be no peace in Asia unless there is peace between China and Japan. It is therefore important for us to help those two great countries to reconcile and to live at peace with each other. I co-chair the Japan-Singapore Symposium and the China-Singapore Forum. When misunderstandings occurred between them, I had tried to explain China to Japan and Japan to China.

Lee Kuan Yew and Kiichi Miyazawa

I once sought the advice of the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, on what I could do to help China and Japan achieve a historic reconciliation. He was quite pessimistic. He told me that he had once asked the Prime Minister of Japan, Mr Kiichi Miyazawa, whether the Chinese will ever forgive Japan for all the wicked things that Japan did in China, from 1931 to 1945. According to Mr Lee, Mr Miyazawa's reply was, "never".

I am an optimist. I am not prepared to accept, as inevitable, that China and Japan will never reconcile. Let us examine the three impediments to such a reconciliation: (a) the burden of history; (b) the competing ambition to lead Asia; and (c) the deficit of strategic trust.

The Burden of History

It is a historical fact that Japan invaded China in 1931 and waged a war, from 1931 to 1945, in a failed attempt to conquer that country. It is also a fact that during those 14 years, the Japanese army committed many atrocities against the Chinese people.

In Europe, Germany was the aggressor. The German government and army had committed many crimes against the French and other victims, especially the Jews. After the war, Germany repented for all the crimes it had committed against the French people. In return, France forgave Germany. There was repentance on one side and forgiveness on the other.

Why can't the same thing happen between China and Japan? China says that Japan has not repented for its wrongs. It says that all the apologies expressed by the leaders of Japan had been nuanced and had fallen short of a sincere apology. Japan denies this. It says that Japan's leaders have apologized on several occasions. Prime Ministers Hosokawa and Murayama had apologized without reservations. It states that the problem is on the Chinese side. It holds the view that China will never forgive Japan, no matter how many times it apologizes.

I have often wondered why Japan finds it so hard to apologize and China finds it so hard to forgive. Why can't they behave like the Germans and the French? Is there something in the character, culture and value systems of China and Japan which distinguish them from the Germans and the French? I don't know the answer to the question.

Competing Ambition to Lead Asia

The second obstacle is the competing ambition of China and Japan to be the leader of Asia. One of my previous Japanese co-chairman of the Japan-Singapore Symposium is Mr Shotaro Yachi. When he was the Deputy Foreign Minister of Japan, he said that China and Japan were struggling for leadership and locked in a rivalry that would last a long time.

Both the Chinese and the Japanese believe in the saying that there can only be one tiger on a hill. Both China and Japan want to be that tiger.

Why can't we see Asia as not a hill but a mountain range with several peaks? The Chinese tiger can be on top of one peak, the Japanese tiger on another and the Indian tiger on a third peak. This works as long as the Chinese tiger and the Japanese tiger are not competing to occupy the highest peak.

I would respectfully point out to both China and Japan that Asia cannot be dominated by any one country. There are three major powers on the continent, namely, China, Japan and India. An extra-regional power, the United States, claims to be a resident power of the region. It is more powerful than any of the three Asian powers. It will never allow the region to be dominated by a regional hegemon.

My advice to China and Japan is to compete but not to seek to put the other down. It should be a win-win and not a zero-sum competition. Asia is big enough to accommodate a rising China, a rising Japan and a rising India.

Deficit of Strategic Trust

The third impediment is the deficit of strategic trust. It is unfortunately true that China does not trust Japan and Japan does not trust China. Because they don't trust each other, they have tended to oppose each other's initiatives and to misread each other's intentions.

A few examples should suffice. China is opposed to Japan's quest to be a permanent member of the UN Secretary Council. Japan does not support the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Chinese suspected that the Japanese Government's decision to nationalize the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands was intended to change the status quo. I don't think this was the case. The Japanese government had nationalized those islands in order to prevent their private owners from causing trouble.

How to reduce the mistrust between China and Japan? How to promote better understanding and mutual trust between them?

I think the key question is whether the leaders of the two countries see each other as friends or as enemies. If they see each other as enemies, then the status quo will continue. However, if they see each other as friends, then many steps can be taken, at all levels, to improve understanding and to reduce distrust. At the moment, I think

they see each other as frenemies, part friend and part enemy. As long as this is the case, no historic reconciliation between them will occur.

Conclusion

Will there ever be a historic reconciliation between China and Japan? The pessimists say, never. As an optimist, I think it is possible, provided we can overcome the three obstacles I have described.

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Islamist terrorism in Indonesia: Roots and responses



Noor Huda Ismail

Indonesia has experienced a series of deadly terrorist attacks from jihadists seeking to establish an Islamic state since the early 2000s. The worst terror strikes were the Bali bombings in 2002 which killed 202 people. To deal with this problem, we must understand its deep roots and recent boosts. Fortunately, there are solutions within grasp, if we understand the problem well.

The roots are deep. The militant struggle for an Islamic state in Indonesia dates back to the 1940s when Darul Islam (House of Islam) fought for its establishment. At its height in the 1950s, Darul Islam was reputed to have control over vast swathes of territories in Aceh, South Sulawesi and West Java. Although Darul Islam was neutralised in the 1960s, its off-shoots and splinter groups which included the Jemaah Islamiyah, have continued the struggle to this day. The idea of establishing an Islamic state is still prevalent among some ordinary Indonesians. A Ministry of Defence study revealed that 23% of high school and university students in Indonesia agree with the idea of an Islamic state or caliphate for Indonesia.

These deep roots have been bolstered by the more recent arrival of hardline Salafi ideas from the Middle East. These ideas have challenged and undermined syncretic indigenous practices that have long contributed to the development of a pluralistic culture and religious tolerance in Indonesia. Radical ideas are being purveyed through home-based *pengajian* (religious classes) attended by small groups of 10–15 people. This appears to be the preferred mode among jihadists and their supporters as such *pengajian* classes are more difficult for the authorities to monitor or regulate, unlike *pesantrens* or schools. It is considered a safer way of forming cells

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and mobilising the ‘faithful’ as attendance is by invitation only via restricted chat groups on Telegram.

The internet has also made things worse. The speed, accessibility and decentralised nature of the Internet enlarges the potential audience of violent extremism (VE) propaganda. The intertwined online and offline elements of VE propaganda and recruitment enable the creation of a collective identity among potential recruits through what is termed as the “echo-chamber” phenomenon, helping to reinforce individual grievances and radical ideology, and providing the intent and capability to commit acts of terrorism.

While the internet has become a key part of the problem, it can also become a key part of the solution. As targeting and identification of potential at-risk individuals purely through online methods may prove difficult, any effort to track them must simultaneously target both online and offline domains. This can be done by encouraging “credible voices” as mentors to approach at risk individual, build communication, and helping them to leave their radical networks.

These mentoring activities should implement the three principles of *Heart, Hands, and Head* or “the Triple H Approach”. The “Heart” approach is aimed to secure the clients’ trust in their mentors. A “Hand” approach is designed to help clients channel their energies into new direction and activities as well as engaging new networks. The “Head” approach is designed to persuade the clients to consider different life-priorities and steer away from their old violent radical ways.

The “Triple H approach” has been implemented with success by reformed extremists. One good example is Arif Tuban—a reformed convicted terrorist—who helped Syahrul, a returned ISIS fighter from East Java, Indonesia to become disillusioned with ISIS’ lies and their “un-Islamic behaviours” (such as beheadings). Syahrul told the Indonesian court that an ISIS recruiter told him that as a good Muslim, he had to help his oppressed brothers and sisters. Moreover, he was promised that he would be paid. He was also told that he could come back home safely once the mission has been accomplished.

After his release from prison, Syahrul was helped by Arif to gradually integrate himself back into society. To implement the first principle of the mentoring, which is “Heart”, Arif introduced himself as a former convicted terrorist who managed to start a new life. This way, Arif could earn trust from Syahrul since they shared a similar life trajectory as a former convicted terrorist. Then, Arif embarked on the second steps of the mentoring with the “Hand” principle or giving the client social skills. In this context, Arif encouraged Syahrul to develop his business aspirations through making and selling a new candy.

Finally, after knowing that Syahrul had developed the social networks, practical skills and changed mindset to truly become a positive father, husband, community member and businessman, Arif then embarked on the last principle of the mentoring which is “Head” or revisiting the old ideology. In this regard, Arif asked Syahrul to participate in social activities such as involving him in P/CVE (preventive/counter violent extremism) discussions with various university campuses, local community service organisations (CSOs) engaged in P/CVE, and village organisations.

Through this public engagement, Arif encouraged and provided an opportunity for Syahrul to become a guest speaker in various prevention activities, including with the national counter-terrorism agency. Arif also helped Syahrul in restoring his community reputation by introducing him to the local police and involving him in joint assistance activities. This opened up opportunities for him to become acquainted with community leaders and to have new social networks and platforms to channel his aspirations in public engagement, both offline and online.

This is a story of two individuals, Arif and Syahrul. However, this is a story that can be replicated hundreds of times if there is a national programme to do so. There is a clear urgency to intensify the de-radicalisation efforts to stem the recruitment of vulnerable youths, women and children both in online space as well as offline areas such as religious classes. In the online space, it is not enough for the government and social media companies to adopt only 'negative supply-side measures' by removing (or suppressing) online violent extremism (VE) propaganda. These measures, while helpful, do nothing to address the continued demand for VE propaganda. This demand is driven by socio-political grievances and theological exhortations. Therefore, strong 'positive demand-side measures' are also needed to proactively engage individuals and communities flirting with VE ideology. The use of reformed convicted terrorists in Indonesia in 'positive demand-side measures' should be further developed in scope and sophistication as these former terrorists have a unique potential as "credible voices" in countering VE ideology.

A stronger national effort to profile the "credible voices" of former terrorists would help to persuade potential recruits to pause and think again before joining the cause. Making this a major national priority would help significantly reduce the threat of terrorist attacks in Indonesia.

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The Biden Era: Challenges and Opportunities for Southeast Asia



Michael Vatikiotis

Not a moment too soon, the Biden victory has generated a collective sigh of relief across Southeast Asia after 4 years of rollercoaster US policymaking in Asia that has heightened geo-political tensions and instilled unprecedented levels of uncertainty and some mistrust in the region's relationships with Washington.

It may be too soon to celebrate. The incoming Biden administration will be constrained by strong bipartisan consensus on the need to challenge China's growing power. Despite early indications of the new administration's foreign policy priorities with regards to climate change and supporting global efforts to manage the COVID19 pandemic, the Biden administration will regard Asia as the new frontline in a contest for primacy with America's closest superpower rival, China. There will be no letup in the strategy of countering China's power and influence, even though more nuanced diplomacy as well as military posturing will be employed.

The Biden administration's strategy could force governments in Southeast Asia to choose which side they are on, and make every bilateral meeting with American or Chinese officials about taking sides. And just as this mode of engagement impacted regional peace and security during the Cold War of the 1950s, so it could go the same way today.

Another, less obvious risk is that of potential proxy backing for the region's internal conflicts, a trend that has significantly complicated the landscape of conflict in the Middle East.

The primary arena for proxy conflict is emerging in the South China Sea, where China's expansive territorial claims and intrusive fishing forays are the focus of concern for littoral states from Southeast Asia—principally Brunei, Malaysia,

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Vietnam, and the Philippines. Already the dynamics of a slow-moving negotiation of a code of conduct between ASEAN states and China in the South China Sea have been roiled by American intervention. The US Navy has stepped up freedom of navigation patrols in the contested maritime area, emboldening some Southeast Asian states with regard to their posture on Chinese claims. The US State Department claims that the draft code of conduct, which is currently not legally binding, is biased towards Beijing's interest at the expense of ASEAN's.

The same problem appears to be evolving in the Mekong sub-region, where China's multilateral mechanisms for managing water resources in the Mekong River, known as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Forum (LMC) has gained momentum at the expense of older, Western funded organisations such as the Mekong River Commission. In the past 2 years, Washington has signaled it wants to put more weight behind these older organisations to counter China's rising influence in the Mekong sub-region.

Arenas of sub-national conflicts in Southeast Asia may also be affected by the emerging geo-political contest. Already, liminal and dormant conflicts in North East India, along Myanmar's border have been re-energised in recent months after the rising tensions between India and China in the Himalayas.

Meanwhile, efforts by Western countries including the United States to support the Myanmar government's efforts to negotiate an end to long-running conflicts with ethnic minorities such as the Shan, Kachin, and Karen have been steadily pushed back by China. Beijing regards the areas along the China-Myanmar border, where many of these ethnic armies are based and operate, as important for guarding China's strategic reach into the region. A scenario for proxy support of internal conflict in Myanmar might involve China using informal ties to ethnic armed groups as an insurance against Myanmar moving too far back into the Western orbit.

A third and perhaps less proximate risk is that the big powers may entangle themselves in democratic transitions to engineer domestic political outcomes that generate favourable alignments. In the earlier Cold War era, the United States was involved in toppling governments that were not aligned with its anti-communist policy. This generated political instability and upheaval in Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. This is less likely today. All the same, China has shown some inclination to comment on internal ructions in Cambodia and Thailand—usually arguing for stability and the status quo—despite a strong ideological adherence to the principle of non-interference.

One upside of more “intense competition”—as the Biden team likes to call it—with China could well be that Southeast Asia receives more investment and financial assistance. China has signaled its willingness to make its coronavirus vaccine, which is currently being trialed in Indonesia, available to every country in Southeast Asia. The US meanwhile, has started allocating more aid and development funding to countries such as Indonesia to help them tide over the sharp economic decline as a result of Covid-19.

Overall, increased and more strident US-China competition will put strains on ASEAN. As much as many Southeast Asian countries appreciate the US being tough on China to generate geo-political ballast or balance, they are unwilling to be

seen as actively countering China's power and influence. This is because China is the region's biggest trading partner and nearest neighbour.

So what should ASEAN aim to do in the Biden era? Engaging both the super-powers in a dialogue about replacing the quest for primacy with a shared common vision of security and prosperity for the Asia-Pacific region makes sense, though neither Beijing nor Washington are big fans of talking to each other in multilateral forums. Nonetheless, ASEAN's best hope to mitigate what might otherwise seem like an inevitable path to a conflict between the US and China, even if not intentional, is to re-assert and strengthen its own forms of neutrality and non-alignment. This strategy confirms to ASEAN's own ideology, as enshrined in the idea of a Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality and made implicit in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.

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The Oxygen of Asean



Kishore Mahbubani

I am 72 years old. Like most people of my age, I dreaded getting COVID-19. I could have died. However, as I investigated more, I discovered that even if I had survived COVID-19, I could have still suffered if I had got it because I could have been put on a ventilator. If insufficient oxygen had reached my lungs, they would have put in a tube to inject oxygen directly to my lungs. Ugh!

All this made me aware of how much we take for granted the most essential commodity for human life: oxygen. It's even more vital than water. We can go without water for a few days. We cannot go without oxygen beyond a few minutes.

Just as we take for granted oxygen in our daily lives, Singaporeans also take for granted the daily oxygen provided by one of our primary sources of oxygen, namely ASEAN. Without ASEAN, Singapore could have been put in an equivalent of a geopolitical ventilator. Since it's so critical to our existence, every Singaporean should understand how much oxygen ASEAN provides to us. This oxygen comes in two forms.

The first is the oxygen of peace. As a region, Southeast Asia was never pre-ordained for peace. It's by far the most diverse region of planet earth, with over 250 million Muslims, 150 million Christians, 150 million Buddhists, and millions of Confucianists, Taoists, Hindus and even communists in the mix. British historians accurately describe our region as the Balkans of Asia. Yet, when the Balkans of Europe went to war, the Balkans of Asia remained peaceful.

Why? The simple answer is ASEAN. As my co-author, Jeffrey Sng and I argue in our book, *The ASEAN Miracle*, it's truly amazing that our traditionally conflict-ridden region has developed a remarkable eco-system of peace and prosperity.

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Indeed, more than any other region in the world, it deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. But it won't happen. The Western ignorance of what ASEAN has achieved is stunning.

Exhibit A is a recent issue of *The Economist* (27 February–5 March 2021). It has an alarming map of Southeast Asia on its cover, with red brush strokes about to envelope all of Southeast Asia. The article correctly states that in the rivalry between the US and China, which has begun, the main bone of contention will be Southeast Asia. Yet, the underlying assumption of this article is that Southeast Asians can only be hapless victims. They have no power of agency to influence their own destiny.

It's true that ASEAN is a relatively weak organization. It has none of the robust rules that tie together the European Union. Yet, paradoxically, as we have documented in *The ASEAN Miracle*, the strength of ASEAN comes from its weakness. Because ASEAN is weak, everyone trusts it. Hence, under the weak umbrella of ASEAN, miracles happen!

One recent concrete example will help clarify this point. The three largest and most significant economies in East Asia are those of China (US\$ 14 trillion), Japan (US\$ 5 trillion) and South Korea (US\$ 1.7 trillion). If these three economies had tried to have trilateral meetings to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) among themselves, they would have failed. The room would have been filled with distrust and suspicion among these three parties (Note: as an aside, let me mention that a similar culture of distrust and suspicion was present among the five founding members of ASEAN when I attended ASEAN meetings in the 1970s).

Fortunately for China, Japan and South Korea, ASEAN proposed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Since the weak ASEAN proposed it, there was no distrust. Consequently, RCEP was concluded in November 2020. What was the most significant result of RCEP? The answer is the effective creation of an FTA among China, Japan and South Korea. In short, ASEAN pulled off another miracle.

The second oxygen ASEAN delivers to Singapore is prosperity. Most Singaporeans are unaware that ASEAN is one of the fast growing economic regions on planet earth. Indeed, apart from China (whose economy grew 12 times from 2000 to 2019) and India (6 times), ASEAN was the fastest growing region in the world, growing at 5 times. Here's one statistic that will probably surprise many Singaporeans. In 2000, Japan's economy was eight times the size of ASEAN. By 2019, it was only 1.6 times larger. By 2030, ASEAN's economy will become larger than Japan's. Why is all this important to Singapore? No other country in the world has international trade that is 3.1 times the size of its GNP. Our open economy needs to be surrounded by an ecosystem of peace and prosperity. ASEAN provides both.

Still, ASEAN is imperfect. It has setbacks from time to time. The recent coup in Myanmar was a huge setback. Clearly, it will be difficult for ASEAN to reverse the coup. Inevitably, we will see once again the re-surfacing of the usual *schadenfreude* in the Western media about the weakness and ineffectiveness of ASEAN. ASEAN will be condemned or criticised for not expelling Myanmar or imposing sanctions on it. Since many Singaporeans are prisoners of Western media perspectives, they

too will inherit this Western disrespect for ASEAN. And it would be an absolute tragedy for Singaporeans to spurn the oxygen they need so badly.

This is where some historical perspective is needed. The issue is not black and white. Western governments condemn military coups when they happen far away, as in Myanmar. They accept military coups when they happen in their backyard. For example, the European Union quietly accepted the military coup in Algeria in 1992 because it was happy to see the prevention of the establishment of an Islamist government. It did the same with Egypt in 2013. And when Western governments engaged in “humanitarian intervention” in Libya in 2011, they took no responsibility for the humanitarian disaster that followed in Libya. Barack Obama has admitted this. When asked what he considered to be his worst mistake during his presidency, Obama responded, “Probably failing to plan for the day after, what I think was the right thing to do, in intervening in Libya.” He added subsequently that given the Europeans’ proximity to Libya, he expected them to be more “invested in the follow-up”. Instead, the Europeans abandoned Libya after creating a mess there. ASEAN will never abandon Myanmar.

Hence, ASEAN should not be troubled by Western public moralizing on Myanmar. Indeed, it may be helpful, if it convinces the Myanmar generals that the coup will not work. However, ASEAN should stick to its own methods of avoiding public moralizing about coups while delivering strong messages in private. This is what the Indonesian Foreign Minister did when she met Mr Wunna Maung Lwin, the designated representative of the Myanmar Generals. And it was good she also met representatives of Aung San Suu Kyi. Certainly, ASEAN should unreservedly condemn the use of live ammunition against peaceful protestors. Minister Vivian Balakrishnan was right in saying “We strongly reiterate that the use of lethal weapons against unarmed civilians is inexcusable in all circumstances... We call on the Myanmar military authorities to exercise utmost restraint, to desist from the use of lethal force, and to take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation in order to prevent further bloodshed, violence and death.”

ASEAN should also use this opportunity to send a clear message to both Beijing and Washington DC that ASEAN will be unhappy if either party uses the Myanmar coup to embarrass the other party. Instead of scoring points on Myanmar, both sides should work quietly with ASEAN to slowly and steadily persuade the Myanmar Generals to reverse course and go back to status quo ante. Both sides will have to compromise. Aung San Suu Kyi will have to give a five-year extension to General Min Aung Hliang. General Min will have to allow Aung San Suu Kyi to go back to her post as State Councillor. If ASEAN didn’t exist, such a turnaround may be almost impossible. With ASEAN, we have a hope that Myanmar will gradually return to status quo ante, even though it will take time.

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An Antidote Against Narrow Nationalism? Why Regional History Matters



Farish A. Noor

One of the courses that I teach at my university is the course on states, society and history of Southeast Asia. Every time I begin teaching this course I have an exercise for all my students—most of whom happen to come from the various countries of Southeast Asia. I ask them to turn off their laptops and phones, then take out a blank sheet of paper. When they are ready I ask them all to draw me a map of Southeast Asia—from Myanmar all the way to Vietnam and also all of maritime Southeast Asia. After 12 years of teaching the same course, not once has any student been able to draw me a map of Southeast Asia that can pass as a map of the region that is reasonably accurate. And yet it has to be remembered that most of my students happen to be Southeast Asians too. So the question inevitably arises: How can we claim to be Southeast Asians when we don't even know what our region looks like, and where we are in the world?

This is a question that has troubled me for decades. I live and work in Singapore, but have also lectured in other ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. In the course of my work as a roving academic and historian of colonial Southeast Asia, I have marvelled at how so many young Southeast Asians today know so very little about the region they live in, and assume that they know their neighbouring countries simply because they share a common border. This assumption is a dangerous one for it is premised upon the notion that proximity equals knowledge, and nothing could be more distant from the truth at ground level.

Over the past two decades we have witnessed instances of hyper-nationalism across the region, with some vocal elements in some countries going as far as suggesting that ASEAN has outlived its usefulness or that their country no longer needs to be part of ASEAN. And yet these strident calls for a politics of exclusion and

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difference are being made by a generation of ASEAN citizens who have no idea of how much they owe to ASEAN: Without doubt, ASEAN's greatest success to date has been its ability to ensure peace, stability and cooperation between the states of the region. We owe so much to the work of thousands of unseen ASEAN bureaucrats and technocrats who have been labouring for years, to bring about an ASEAN community where there is now freedom of movement for all ASEAN citizens, and for preventing conflict between the member states. Few parts of the world have experienced such a long period of peace and continuity, yet this peace dividend is something that we are rarely thankful for.

To make things worse we now live in a world that is marked by the workings of social media, shallow populism and sectarian identity politics that multiplies the power of centrifugal forces within us. Despite our long and common shared history, ASEAN states and societies can still bicker and feud over things such as material culture, songs, cuisine, etc.—notwithstanding the fact that all forms of social phenomena in Southeast Asia—from the food we eat to the clothes that we wear to the songs we listen to—emerged from a fluid region where social mobility was the norm and where ideas, values, lifestyles and material culture were in constant common circulation.

Why do we still not understand this? The answer perhaps lies in something that has yet to emerge: A common understanding of our shared Southeast Asian history. Across the ASEAN region school children are taught the respective national histories of their own countries, but rarely the longer, older and broader history of Southeast Asia as a whole. This anomaly is the result of the manner in which post-colonial history in and across Southeast Asia was first written by nationalist historians who privileged their national histories first, but in the course of doing so neglected the wider regional context from which our present-day nation-states have emerged. Singapore is a child of Southeast Asia, as is Malaysia, as is Indonesia, as is the Philippines, and Thailand, and Vietnam, and so on. It was the longer and older history of commercial and cultural interaction between the precolonial polities of Southeast Asia that laid the linguistic, cultural and economic framework upon which our present-day societies are based; and yet we have forgotten all this. Our failure to connect with our wider Southeast Asian history also repeats the act of colonial separation that divided the region during the colonial era, where almost all of Southeast Asia was colonised and subsequently broken up and parcelled into different (and competing) European empires. That colonial divorce has not been mended until today, and we remain as disconnected a region as we were in the nineteenth century.

All things being equal, Southeast Asia will undoubtedly face a myriad of challenges in the decade to come. At a time when the region is once again being imposed upon by external variable factors—not least of which is the constant power-play between larger and more powerful states beyond the region's borders—there is an even greater need for Southeast Asians to see themselves, know themselves and feel themselves to be Southeast Asians. This can only happen if Southeast Asians are taught from an early age that they are all part of a wider fluid continuum, and that Southeast Asia is the common home for all of them. But how are we ever to foster a

sense of Southeast Asian identity among our young if we do not even have a common Southeast Asian history textbook for them to draw their inspiration from? This is why I have been calling for such a pan-ASEAN effort to get off the ground over the past few years.

Knowledge of a common shared history may not be the balm of Gilead that will soothe all our anxieties or prevent instances of conflict in the future. But if such a common knowledge and awareness can be generated in time it would at least lay the groundwork for an authentic politics of inclusiveness and accommodation among Southeast Asians in the years to come, and that may well be the best antidote for the wave of hyper-nationalism that we are seeing on the rise today.

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Can Biden Bring Peace to Southeast Asia?



Dino Patti Djalal

“America is back,” U.S. President Joe Biden has announced to the world—but in Southeast Asia, the United States is playing catch-up again. And it has much to recover. The last 4 years witnessed Washington’s dwindling diplomatic and political capital in the region.

The United States has no regional initiative of significance. It has excluded itself from two economic groupings: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans Pacific Partnership. In 2017, then-President Donald Trump did attend the ASEAN–U.S. summit in the Philippines, but missed out on all four East Asia summits during his term. U.S. embassies in four ASEAN countries (Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, and the Philippines) have been operating without ambassadors, and the United States is the only major country that does not have a permanent representative to the ASEAN Secretariat. In the Philippines and Indonesia, getting too close to Trump was seen as a political liability—which explains why Indonesian President Joko Widodo, the leader of Southeast Asia’s biggest economy, never visited Trump at the White House. U.S. support for the region during the COVID-19 crisis has been modest at best.

The Biden administration is now undertaking steps to reverse course, repair the damage, and restore U.S. credibility. His first step in foreign policy, Biden has said, is to win back allies and partners while pushing back adversaries. Policies are being recalibrated across the board.

ASEAN countries would certainly welcome a robust U.S. engagement in the region—but in the right way.

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First, they do not want to see a heightened U.S.-Chinese rivalry in Southeast Asia, a region that has been a cockpit of conflict between major powers in the past and could well become that again. ASEAN countries do not want to be polarized, pulled in different directions by different powers, and see the cohesion of the ASEAN community undermined. ASEAN countries are hoping that the Biden administration will lower the temperature, tone, and tension of U.S.-Chinese relations and keep the rivalry manageable.

Second, it is in the national interest of ASEAN countries to maintain good relations with both the United States and China. They all want to extract benefits from both powers. They believe that Southeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, have ample space for engagement for both superpowers. As such, ASEAN countries would not like to see a repeat of the aggressive anti-China rants that former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo uttered in his final months in office.

Indeed, Southeast Asia's perspective on China is different from that of the United States. While ASEAN members remain rightly anxious about China's moves in the South China Sea, they have also recognized that China will be a big part of their future—bilaterally and regionally. Of course, they have no illusions about their relationships with China, which will be complex and challenging. Still, while the bipartisan view in Washington sees China as a threat to the United States' long-standing supremacy, Southeast Asians generally accept China as an important partner for their development plans.

Southeast Asians hear the alarm sounded by the Biden administration on the danger democracy is facing from autocracy, explicitly referring to China. Yet the reality on the ground is that no Southeast Asian country particularly minds China's political system, mainly due to the principle of non-interference, but also because they simply have no interest in China's domestic politics.

Not a single ASEAN country has echoed the U.S. State Department's claim that China is committing "genocide" against Muslims in Xinjiang. Not one Southeast Asian country—not even Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country—considers China an ideological foe.

In fact, ASEAN's leaders would sympathize with Chinese President Xi Jinping's statement that every country has a right to choose its own path of development, because this is being practiced in ASEAN itself.

Third, Southeast Asian countries do not want to see the erosion of ASEAN centrality—the principle that ASEAN, which unites an increasingly cohesive group of nations, should take charge of affairs in the region. ASEAN centrality presumes that the major powers have a strategic trust in ASEAN and are willing to let the organization lead on some aspects of regional affairs. ASEAN's credibility depends on its ability to maintain good relations with all the major powers: the United States, China, Russia, Japan, the European Union, and India. This is why ASEAN does not want to choose sides and does not want to be pressured to do so. Choosing one side will automatically mean alienating the other. Doing so will reposition ASEAN away from the center of complex relationships.

The ASEAN countries noticed with curiosity that Biden's first foreign policy move in Asia was to convene the Quadrilateral meeting of the United States,

Australia, Japan, and India—and elevate it to a leader-level summit. While the Quad leaders strongly endorsed ASEAN centrality, questions are being asked within ASEAN regarding the Quad’s strategic objective and whether it will undertake measures that may be incompatible with ASEAN’s goals. To date, the relationship between ASEAN and the Quad remains fluid, unclear, and uncertain.

The Quad also inevitably invites questions whether Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy will be any different from Trump’s. Beijing was not entirely wrong to suspect that the Trump administration’s version of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific contained an anti-China bias.

The Biden administration should convincingly demonstrate that its Indo-Pacific vision—indeed its strategy for Asia—is not intended to marginalize, let alone contain, any resident power. It is a good sign that U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has increasingly used the phrase “free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific”—“inclusive” is a code word in the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific for keeping the door open for China to come in.

Finally, Southeast Asians want to see the United States and China cooperate in their region. A few years ago, Xi called for a “new type of great power relationship” with the United States based on “win-win solutions.” Biden has confirmed that his administration wants “competition, not conflict” with China and “is ready to work with Beijing when it is in America’s interest to do so.” Blinken also said that the U.S. “relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be.”

Given these encouraging words, can either side overcome its strategic ego and start exploring avenues for cooperation? Can Southeast Asia be the place where some form of concrete U.S.-China cooperation takes place? This is, after all, a region that has seen a long list of seemingly intractable conflicts turn into lasting cooperation: between Indonesia and Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, Malaysia and Singapore, Indonesia and Timor Leste, Malaysia and the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia—the list goes on. Countries in this region have demonstrated that enmity can be turned to amity.

There is no shortage of issues for Washington and Beijing to explore cooperation on: industry, infrastructure, maritime security, piracy, climate, environment, green energy, natural disasters, COVID-19, youth exchanges, and so on. While this will not change their rivalry on a global scale, it might just change the texture of U.S.-Chinese relations in Southeast Asia. That would be good enough for ASEAN. It really comes down to whether there is political will and diplomatic guile to do so.

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Countering the Threat of Islamist Extremism in Southeast Asia



Kumar Ramakrishna

In spite of the apparent defeat and decline in Al Qaeda and ISIS in the Middle East, violent extremism linked to the two terrorist organisations continues to pose an ideological and security threat to Southeast Asia. As the recent Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report compiled by Singapore government indicates, following the “demise of its so-called caliphate”, ISIS has “re-envisioned the caliphate as an overarching global state rather than one territorially confined to Iraq and Syria”. Southeast Asia remains a key part of ‘the global state’ in ISIS’ re-envisioning of the caliphate. Unless efficiently tackled by the ASEAN governments, the repercussions can be extremely volatile for the region.

While the imposition of border controls and lockdowns measures, as part of COVID-19 measures, have helped reduce terrorist activity and recruitment, extremist groups and ideologues in Southeast Asia also took advantage of the pandemic to ramp up their activities. During the holy month of Ramadan in 2020, Ali Kalora, the leader of the East Indonesian Mujahidin (MIT), called the virus a “curse” for the Indonesian authorities. In the past 2 years, MIT’s terrorist activities in Sulawesi have resulted in the killing of several policemen and civilians.

There is also an additional fear that the impending withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in September 2021 risks turning that region once again into a safe haven for terrorists. This could also mean a potential resurgence of Al Qaeda-inspired and affiliated extremism in Southeast Asia.

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Contours of the Extremist Threat in Southeast Asia

ISIS' growing footprint in this region can increasingly be discerned through four key indicators. The first is the significant growth in terrorist attacks by ISIS-inspired, self-radicalized individuals. Indonesia witnessed at least 29 terrorist attacks and 25 foiled plots since 2019, most of them carried out by small ISIS-inspired cells and lone militants. This was exemplified by the March 2021 'lone wolf' attack on the Indonesian National Police Headquarters by a young female college drop-out. She was reportedly radicalized online by ISIS propaganda.

A second indicator is the steady growth of women, youth and family networks in active combatant roles. In October 2020, an Indonesian woman was arrested in Jolo, the Philippines, on charges of plotting a terror attack. Both her husband and parents were found to have been involved in terrorist activities in Jolo. Her parents had, in January 2019, carried out a suicide bombing attack on a church in Jolo, for which ISIS claimed responsibility. The attack killed at least 23 civilians. In March 2021, a newly-married couple, linked to the pro-ISIS Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD), conducted a suicide bombing attack on a church in Makassar, South Sulawesi, injuring 19 parishioners.

A third indicator is a possible uptick in the return of Southeast Asia-based foreign fighters back to the region. More than 50 Malaysians could reportedly be returning home from Syria in the coming months. These potential returnees are expected to include trained extremists who, as the Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report states, are "more ideologically hardened, skilled in attack tactics and connected to terror networks".

The fourth indicator is the continued role of ideological ecosystems, such as educational and religious spaces, as well as individual online influencers and social media networks in propagating extremist narratives. In Indonesia for instance, despite pandemic restrictions, members of the JAD have continued to conduct closed-door sessions. Despite multiple arrests of members and senior leaders since 2019, the older Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network remains active in Indonesia through its established network of schools and charitable foundations.

A Two-Track Strategy to Counter the Extremist Threat

The ASEAN governments require sustained mutual engagement to identify and implement actionable solutions to counter the threat of Islamist extremism in the region. Such a strategy should involve two tracks: a 'hard', shorter-term counter-terrorist track and a 'soft', medium to longer-term counter-terrorism track.

The counter-terrorist track involves a range of customized military and enforcement measures to address the evolving threat within and across ASEAN jurisdictions. This has certainly been ongoing. In 2020, the Philippines passed a more potent, albeit controversial anti-terrorism act. The act considerably expanded the

definition of terrorism to include activities that incite terror and extremism, such as provocative speeches and proclamations. It also accorded sweeping powers to the government to arrest those suspected of engaging in terror activities. Malaysia unveiled a new cyber security strategy in 2020, which seeks to counter the online presence of extremist networks.

ASEAN governments have also increased international and inter-agency collaboration. In 2020, an Interpol-led operation involving Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, was conducted to secure maritime travel routes against exploitation by terrorist groups. Likewise, since October 2020, Malaysia's police and armed forces have been conducting joint exercises aimed at securing the waters off East Malaysia against possible terrorist activities.

Nevertheless, a complementary counter-*terrorism* track is needed to better address the underlying political and socioeconomic factors that fuel extremism. The conflict in Marawi, Mindanao in 2017 between Islamist separatist insurgents and the Philippine military led to the displacement of over a million civilians. Without active and continuous intervention by the Philippine government, in the form of social stability, economic development and security, disgruntled Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) may radicalize, replenishing the ranks of pro-ISIS extremist networks.

A promising recent development has been increasing consultations between UN agencies and ASEAN governments on rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters and their families. Effective returnee rehabilitation and reintegration programs must include post-release employment opportunities, programs to facilitate the re-integration of returnees with their families and communities, as well as the provision of sound religious counselling. ASEAN governments should also engage local communities, particularly the youth and women, in projects that can generate impactful counter-narratives to the appeal of violent Islamist ideology.

Finally, there is a need to systematically map out the ideological ecosystems that sustain regional extremist networks. As mentioned, a considerable diversity of interlocking extremist ideological 'transmission nodes' exist, ranging from charismatic individual influencers, educational and religious entities, to social media platforms and physical closed-door study sessions, amongst others. Grasping how extremist ideas actually spread regionally can help governments and other stakeholders design targeted countermeasures to stem such flows, and ultimately undermine the resilience and regenerative capacity of extremist networks.

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HADR as a Diplomatic Tool in Southeast Asia-China Relations amid Changing Security Dynamics



Lina Gong

The South China Sea disputes between China and the Southeast Asian claimant states continue to remain a thorn in China-ASEAN relations. How can ASEAN and China transform their existing diplomatic tools and cooperative mechanisms to ensure that, notwithstanding the existing territorial and maritime disputes, the bilateral relationship remains strong? One way of strengthening the existing bilateral relationship is to increase ASEAN-China cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

Southeast Asia is highly prone to natural hazards, including large-scale flooding, typhoons, earthquakes and tsunamis. ASEAN's resources in dealing with such large-scale disasters are limited, despite substantive improvement in regional disaster management. Therefore, international assistance is often necessary to supplement the capacity constraints of Southeast Asian nation-states in dealing with the aftermath of large-scale natural disasters.

China's responses to natural disasters in Southeast Asia and its overall impact has been mixed. In the wake of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, which devastated the Philippines, China's initial aid of US\$ 200,000 was perceived as being inadequate and subject to strong criticism. In response, Beijing sent additional aid, including a military hospital ship and a non-governmental search and rescue team. In the aftermath of the deadly floods in Myanmar in 2015, the PLA deployed military aircraft to deliver emergency relief aid, which was facilitated by the long-standing working relations between the armies of China and Myanmar. After the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia in 2018, China did not dispatch its military assets

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to assist with emergency operations, as the presence of the Chinese military on Indonesian soil is deemed a sensitive issue in Indonesia.

As demonstrated, cooperation between China and individual Southeast Asian states in HADR is influenced by various factors, including domestic politics and the extent of bilateral trust. The mixed results of China's official response to natural hazards in Southeast Asia indicate that efforts for confidence-building through HADR need to be further strengthened between China and ASEAN.

One clear way in which the China-ASEAN cooperation in HADR can be further bolstered is through formal agreements, along with the incorporation of an effective dialogue mechanism, on disaster relief cooperation. When ASEAN strengthened its own disaster relief mechanisms in the 1990s and 2000s through regional fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), China was a key dialogue partner. China and ASEAN are also signatories to several bilateral agreements, which emphasise cooperation, such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the Joint Declaration of China and ASEAN on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues, both signed in 2002, as well as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003. However, there is a need to strengthen the dialogue mechanism to ensure that the trust deficit between China and ASEAN member states is reduced. There is also a need to strengthen formal agreements on HADR. The ASEAN-China Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Disaster Management expired in 2017. It is time to consider another agreement of this kind to ensure more effective cooperation between the government, military and civilian facets of China and ASEAN in the event of a disaster.

Traditionally, the focus of HADR in Southeast Asia has been on natural hazards. The COVID-19 pandemic points to the need to increase cooperation on other types of disasters. In the mid-2020, during the initial months of the COVID outbreak in Southeast Asia, China acted early to engage ASEAN on collective pandemic response and to offer extensive bilateral support. China's government and military provided medical equipment, including hundreds of thousands of surgical masks, protective equipment and test kits. As of September 2021, China has delivered nearly 200 million vaccine doses to the region. In comparison, other dialogue partners of ASEAN were relatively slow, largely due to high numbers of domestic COVID-19 cases. Australia, India, Japan, and the United States agreed in March 2021 to collaborate in providing one billion vaccine doses to the Indo-Pacific region, including Southeast Asia. This plan however has been delayed due to the outbreak of the Delta variant in India. Though not without issues and controversies, China's assistance proved to be crucial in combating new waves of COVID in Southeast Asia, particularly in the absence of a comparable Western response, be it in terms of providing vaccines or medical equipment.

HADR operations can potentially help cement the partnership between China and Southeast Asia. However, it is idealistic to assume cooperation in HADR, on its own, can significantly reduce distrust between the two sides, which is rooted in historical, geopolitical and territorial issues. On the contrary, it is necessary to recognise the complexity of the two-way relations. Tensions arising from power

politics and the maritime disputes have indeed alienated China and Southeast Asia at bilateral and multilateral levels on several occasions, such as the ASEAN meeting in July 2012 and the South China Sea arbitration ruling in 2016. As some of the security issues are complicated and deeply rooted, it is more realistic to explore ways to manage rather than to resolve them. Cooperation in HADR can thereby help manage tensions in China-ASEAN relations.

To move forward, instead of seeing HADR merely as a tool for confidence-building, China and Southeast Asia can use it as a tool to solve new security challenges. The pandemic highlights the fact that public health emergencies can lead to extensive humanitarian needs that exceed the resources of the affected country. In addition, the imminent threat posed by climate change has been raised again by the recent COP-26 conference in Glasgow, and Southeast Asia is among the most vulnerable. The growing risks of these disasters and their concurrence point to the need to transform HADR to adapt to the changing regional security environment, featuring greater challenges of complex or concurring disasters, in addition to great power rivalry.

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Can the Belt and Road Initiative Bring Peace to China and Asean?



Selina Ho

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to create land and sea connectivity via a web of infrastructure that facilitates the flow of people and goods. This vision of connectivity is shared by the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) states. It did not come from China alone. ASEAN countries themselves have ideas about connectivity. For instance, the idea of a pan-Asia railway did not originate from China but from Malaysia and ASEAN itself. ASEAN also has a Masterplan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. The BRI was launched at a time when long-standing regional aspirations for connectivity converged with China's desire to play a larger role on the international stage facilitated by its expanded financial and technological capacity.

This happy convergence of aspirations and interests does not however guarantee that the BRI would ensure peace between China and the ASEAN states. Almost 9 years after the launch of the BRI, relations between China and ASEAN, while largely stable, have not markedly improved. Rather, suspicions of China have grown as China's foreign policy under President Xi Jinping took on a posture that is nationalistic and confrontational. The South China Sea dispute looms large in China-ASEAN relations as China's display of military muscle and establishment of outposts on artificial islands increase the threat perceptions of Southeast Asian claimant states. While Beijing would prefer to keep its territorial disputes separate from its overall ties with ASEAN countries, in the eyes of ASEAN states, Beijing's economic might is linked to its military might. As a result of China's more strident foreign policy, suspicions of China's intentions and the political and economic leverage it could exert through the BRI have increased. An annual survey by the

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ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute showed that trust in China among Southeast Asian countries has fallen over the years.

Moreover, while infrastructure could be a boon to developing countries, it could also be a source of dependency. Infrastructure is a source of power, both in material and non-material terms. Materially, infrastructure, such as roads and railways, plays a significant role in power projection and war-making. In the non-material dimension, infrastructure has the effect of constructing identities through discourse and structural power. It can entrench asymmetrical power relations and weaker states may identify as subordinate states and subsume their interests to those of a stronger state. Infrastructure is thus a vehicle of Chinese power projection, further worrying ASEAN states. While desiring to reap the benefits of China's growth, ASEAN countries are simultaneously fearful of over-reliance on Beijing leading to compromises on their sovereignty.

In addition, the BRI projects have entailed societal and environmental costs for host countries. Beijing's efforts to reach out to and incorporate ethnic Chinese living in ASEAN countries as part of its plans for the BRI have led to rising ethnic tensions. Local populations also chafe at the influx of Chinese workers. Questions have arisen over whether local populations benefited in terms of jobs, training, and technological transfers. There are also environmental costs on host countries as construction has led to landslides, floods, and contamination of water supplies. The credibility of environmental impact studies is often questioned as they are usually conducted by the Chinese. These societal and environmental costs have dampened some of the enthusiasm for the BRI although on balance, the thirst for infrastructure in ASEAN countries would likely win out.

The BRI's development is also occurring against the background of US-China rivalry. While the United States has yet to offer any infrastructure deals or package that could rival the BRI, it has stressed quality infrastructure and has worked with Australia and Japan to launch the Blue Dot Network to compete with the BRI. Regional countries do not want to be caught between the two superpowers. Hence, despite China's economic largesse demonstrated through the BRI, ASEAN countries are wary of appearing to take China's side on political and strategic matters.

How then can the BRI help improve China-ASEAN relations?

First, Beijing needs to pay more attention to what is happening on the ground. The BRI comprises a hodgepodge of projects. Beijing does not oversee all the projects, as a result of which undesirable behavior has gone unchecked. The best example is the effect of Chinese investments in Sihanoukville, where Cambodia's only deep-water seaport is situated. The influx of Chinese money, workers, and tourists has transformed Sihanoukville into an enclave of vices, corruption and crime, leading to widespread resentment among Cambodians. Following years of failing to respond to these ground sentiments, Beijing and Phnom Penh finally made efforts in 2020 to curb some of the excesses. At the request of the Chinese government, the Cambodian government closed the online gambling operations in Sihanoukville. Being sensitive and responsive to local context and developments on the ground,

and working with host country governments to mitigate the societal and environmental impact of the BRI would help ameliorate local concerns about the BRI.

Second, China needs to better manage the BRI. It needs to ensure that the procedures for environmental impact assessments are being properly conducted by independent experts and according to international standards. The quality of infrastructure projects should also be upheld and should not be sacrificed in the name of speed. China should also be more transparent with data to counter accusations of “debt trap diplomacy” resulting from the BRI.

Third, China should reduce the inconsistencies in its foreign policy. While the more aggressive aspects of Chinese foreign policy are meant for domestic consumption and are related to its rivalry with the United States, China needs to be mindful of the impact of these moves on perceptions in Southeast Asia in order to maximize the potential of the BRI. After all, Chinese leadership aspirations cannot be fulfilled without followers willing to support its rise and accept its leadership role. The BRI plugs a great need in Southeast Asia’s infrastructure development and the resources China has poured into it should not be squandered. China needs to do more to reassure the region, not through words alone but by its actions. It needs to build trust by toning down its strident policies in the South China Sea, ensure ASEAN centrality, and engage in more productive competition with the United States.

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Countering Moro Youth Extremism in the Philippines



Joseph Franco

In 2017, there was protracted conflict between Islamic State-linked violent extremist organisations (IS-linked VEOs) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). IS-linked VEOs captured the Southern Philippine city of Marawi, with the intent to establish a *wilayah* in the Bangsamoro region. Bangsamoro is home to the Muslim-majority Moro community. In response, the AFP laid siege to the city. After a five-month long siege, between May and October 2017, the AFP managed to recapture the centre of Marawi. Over a thousand people died in the siege. Over a million people were displaced from their homes. Could such a clash happen again? This is the key security question that the new government under President-elect Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will have to grapple with.

Many people believe that the next phase of violent extremism in Southern Philippines may emerge due to developments in the Middle East and Central Asia, especially the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. This fear is misplaced. Jihadist ideology is not the main driving force of extremist recruitment in the Bangsamoro. In fact, studies (such as those conducted by The Asia Foundation, as well as the author's fieldwork) have shown that the main driving forces are rising poverty and a lack of local socio-economic opportunities for Moro youth.

Five years after the battle for Marawi in 2017, the underlying socio-economic issues that triggered the siege remain unresolved. A new phase of violent extremism may emerge in the region if the incoming government does not urgently address critical socio-economic concerns in the Bangsamoro region.

Large portions of Marawi's centre lie in ruins. Thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to languish in refugee camps. Government reconstruction

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funding has prioritised showcase projects such as sporting and government complexes. Residential areas in the so-called ‘most-affected area’ (MAA) of Marawi remain conspicuously empty and desolate. The limited number of housing units are built in inaccessible suburbs of the city, complicating efforts for IDPs to restart their pre-conflict livelihoods and to seek gainful employment.

In late April 2022, the Duterte administration after much delay, finally ratified the Republic Act 11696 (RA 11696) or the ‘Marawi Siege Compensation Act’. RA 11696 is however just the start of a long, likely litigious process to compensate private property owners. The incoming administration of President-elect Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has yet to articulate how he intends to fast-track the rebuilding of Marawi or to expedite compensation as promised by RA 11696. In the run up to the May 2022 polls, Marcos Jr. instead stated that the reconstruction was almost complete, without offering details.

Beyond the issues facing the rehabilitation of Marawi, the incumbent legislators and executives of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) face challenges in translating promised improvements to quality-of-life into reality for their constituents. The Bangsamoro Transition Authority’s (BTA) term was extended until 2025 from its original 2019–2022 transition period. The critical task for the BTA was the enactment of several laws that would enable the BARMM to run the region.

To date, only three of the six critical Bangsamoro codes have been enacted: the Administrative Code (October 2020), the Civil Service Code (February 2021), and the Education Code (May 2021). However, important codes covering elections, local government, and revenue are still being worked out by the Bangsamoro Parliament. On top of these organisational issues, the Bangsamoro’s Chief Minister has repeatedly called for the national government to fulfil its promise to fund post-conflict normalisation as well as buy back weapons from demobilised Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters.

These unresolved socio-economic concerns may well drive a resurgence in extremist recruitment among Moro youth, more so than the influence of foreign ideologies. Overemphasis on the impact of foreign ideologies and overinvestment in counter-ideological solutions, as seen in the National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, could lead to suboptimal results.

First, the incoming President should immediately articulate his vision for the reconstruction of Marawi and particularly the MAA, beyond merely citing the initiatives purportedly completed by the outgoing Administration. There should be priority on alleviating the conditions of IDPs. Refugee camps are potential areas for VEO recruitment. Unemployed and destitute Moro youths have reported being approached by VEO members, the latter promising cash payments in exchange for membership.

At the same time, further delays to the reconstruction of Marawi may provide propaganda fodder for IS-linked VEOs. Jihadist narratives in the Philippines would often paint Philippine security forces as occupiers and destroyers of the rich religious heritage of Marawi, the country’s first and only Islamic city. The sight of

Marawi in ruins are likely to make individuals vulnerable to VEO recruitment even more receptive to jihadist propaganda.

Second, Manila should reiterate its commitment to supporting the BARMM in providing resources for the process of normalisation. Delays in demobilising MILF fighters and reducing the supply of illicit firearms in Mindanao could provide an opening for VEOs to recruit and replenish manpower lost during the 2017 Marawi siege.

If the normalisation track falters, former MILF fighters may end up using their weapons and know-how to engage in illicit activities such as extortion and kidnapping-for-ransom activities. Previous peace agreements with other secessionist and communist groups in the Philippines have seen similar dynamics play out. Former armed cadres and cells could either fold into existing organised criminal groups or become 'private armies' operated by local politicians for electoral intimidation.

At the same time, Marcos Jr.'s administration should extend a conciliatory hand to the BARMM. During the May 2022 polls, the BARMM's ruling party opted to endorse the candidacy of Vice President Leonor Robredo, and concurrently hinted that the Bangsamoro people should not vote for candidates that would bring back abuses of the past. It was a veiled reference to the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., whose declaration of martial law in 1972, led to abuses against Filipino Muslims. One way for the national government to regain the trust of the BARMM constituency is to support capacity-building initiatives, such as providing legislative and administrative support to ensure the prompt passage of the three remaining codes (covering elections, local government, and revenue) essential to the functioning of the BARMM.

Ultimately, focusing on rebuilding Marawi and enabling the BARMM to govern effectively could bring about meaningful changes to the region's socio-economic conditions. In turn, better life outcomes for Bangsamoro youth will make them more resilient against VEO recruitment and mobilisation efforts.

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The EU and ASEAN: Partners to Manage Great Power Rivalry?



Tan York Chor

Can the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) work together to maintain the 1945 rules-based, multilateral order, that was shaped and built largely by the West? With the rise of great power rivalry between the US and China, the future of this order, together with its core institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and international law, will be put under severe strain. The forces of competition and rivalry may well displace the forces of cooperation.

The centrifugal forces of the US-China rivalry risk turning the two most successful regional organisations of the twenty-first century, the EU and ASEAN, into the spokes of two competing global hubs led by the US and China. Such forces may even tear apart both regional groupings. Hence, both have a common interest in preserving the global multilateral structure. This deep common interest calls for greater cooperation between the EU and ASEAN.

The Endangered Multilateral Order

The current rules-based multilateral order emerged out of the two highly destructive world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. With a strong desire to reinstate peace in global affairs, even before World War Two ended, representatives of 50 countries drafted and signed the Charter for the UN, forming the framework of the global multilateral rules-based order that exists till today. This order has made significant contributions towards peace. Resourceful UN Secretaries-General, like U

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Thant, Perez de Cuellar and Kofi Annan, played a critical role in mediating the end of several wars and conflicts. For a few years after the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s, the UN Security Council Permanent Five members converged and seemed to fulfil their primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security. They endorsed the ousting of Saddam Hussein's Iraq from Kuwait in 1990, and forged the peace accord to end the Cambodian conflict in 1991. The 1992 Rio Convention and the Uruguay Round created a framework for global cooperation in the fields of the environment and international trade, two areas where the interests of humanity converge.

Sadly, this cooperative spirit has not endured. Instead, we are now back to a divided world, reminding us of the days when the UN was hobbled and overshadowed by the great power rivalry of the Cold War. In trade and technology, there have been ups and downs too. Together with advances in technology and logistics, the rules-based international framework boosted global connectivity and productivity, creating jobs to lift hundreds of millions out of poverty. The world enjoyed great progress and prosperity in the last few decades of the twentieth century. But as key sectors and industries became obsolete or unproductive, governments that failed to cushion the impacts of free trade and globalisation on workers instead blamed 'unfair trade', and fuelled nationalist sentiments.

As a result, this has led to a general disillusionment with globalisation in many parts of the world, including the US. In particular, the WTO has floundered, its Appellate Body (AB) for dispute settlement hamstrung due to the blocking of new appointments, primarily by the US. Moreover, the US-China contest threatens to rip apart supply chains and technology standards. If decoupling results from the US-China contest, the interdependence constraining the two powers from rash actions may unravel. This would lead to sharper geopolitical risks, higher inefficiencies, and rising business costs.

Bringing Back Enlightened Collaboration

To protect our endangered multilateral order, the EU and ASEAN have a critical role to play in reviving the prospects of peace and cooperation in international affairs. If the two great powers are too fixated on their geopolitical contest to maintain the rules-based multilateral order, the EU and ASEAN should rise to the occasion and work together to steer the ship and work jointly to manage global affairs. It would be a worthy cause to build on from their ASEAN-EU strategic partnership launched in December 2020. Indeed, attesting to the importance of this strategic partnership, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell called on ASEAN and the EU to "pull together" to "safeguard our respective 'strategic autonomy'". To do so, they can take a few key steps.

First, they can encourage the Great Powers to compete, not based on short-term, zero-sum calculations or their power, but based on the example on how well they manage their domestic challenges and contribute to global good.

Second, they should persuade the Great Powers to return to the centrality of the UN, international law and the rules-based multilateral framework. This would help to rekindle a spirit of global cooperation based on dialogue, diplomacy, statesmanship, and win-win partnership. ASEAN and EU could then be pathfinders in resolving the WTO and AB impasses.

Third, they can help to build communication channels between the US and China to avoid miscalculations and dispel misunderstandings which increase the levels of mistrust. This will help to foster a *modus vivendi* between US and China. Being closer to China, ASEAN could act as half the bridge to engage China behind-the-scenes through quiet diplomacy. Accordingly, the EU could do the same with the US.

Fourth, they must continue to make use of science and technology to solve global challenges and achieve socio-economic progress in areas such as health, education and sustainable development. As pandemics, nuclear proliferation and global warming pose existential risks to everyone, ASEAN and EU could persuade the Great Powers to enhance cooperation in these areas.

As Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted in an interview with Nikkei on 23 May 2022, “frameworks... like the UN as well as the WTO, IMF, World Bank... enable all countries to work together even if we have differences, disagreements and even conflicts with one another. If you remove ... or... undermine that, then you are in the law of the jungle (where) it’s not only the weak who will suffer. Even the strong will have a rough time... fighting one another and dissipating valuable energies.” If ASEAN and the EU can join voices and act jointly as a bridge to systematically address global problems, they would help revive a more cooperative relationship among the Great Powers, and strengthen the wider rules-based framework. Such an endeavour for a better world for future generations will take time to bear fruit. Nonetheless, the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership could start taking small steps towards strengthening global multilateral frameworks and institutions.

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Caught in the Middle? Not Necessarily. Non-alignment Could Help Southeast Asian Regional Integration



Xue Gong

Southeast Asian states must resuscitate ‘non-alignment’ foreign policy as a middle path in great power competition.

Political elites across Southeast Asia see the United States and China as two poles, pulling their countries in opposite directions. In Washington, the bipartisan consensus is that China is a rival that is intent on chipping away at the US’ global leadership. China has indeed been steadily expanding its economic influence in Southeast Asia. It is ASEAN’s biggest trading partner, and has visibly entrenched itself in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China also strongly supported ASEAN’s Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative and played a key role in stitching it together. This has further motivated Asian economies to embrace China’s leadership in regional integration. To counter China’s regional influence, the US has been setting up a variety of geo-economic tools. For instance, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) while pursuing decoupling from China.

ASEAN has long-standing economic and security ties with both China and the US that may seem to be at odds with each other. For instance, even as they seek to enhance economic ties with China, a few key ASEAN member states such as Thailand and the Philippines remain part of the US security structure in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the region has many potential flashpoints—such as the territorial disputes in the South China Sea—that may intensify conflict between the two great powers.

Under such circumstances, how can ASEAN achieve greater economic integration at a time when China-US economic competition is heating up? What possible

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steps can ASEAN take to reap economic benefits and bridge the growing gap between the US and China?

In Search of a Middle Way

For ASEAN to re-assert its centrality and unity, a more pragmatic and issue-based approach to regional integration is required. One way is for the region to consider spearheading a new movement supporting a 'non-alignment' foreign policy.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of the Cold War era was pursued by mostly Global South countries seeking independence in the event of a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Similarly, in today's context of great power competition, non-alignment will enable Southeast Asian countries to advance their interests without tying themselves unconditionally to the preferences of great powers.

The prospect of such a movement should instinctively appeal to small and middle powers in the region, which have been searching for ways to defend their interests together in the face of great power competition. Singapore has already explicitly expressed its interest in taking a nuanced approach of non-alignment. Indonesia—with its legacy of leading the NAM in the 1955 Bandung Conference—has taken the lead in crafting regional policies such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which reasserts ASEAN's centrality and preference for dialogue and cooperation over rivalry.

The first tenet of non-alignment foreign policy is diversification. Individual Southeast Asian states have taken steps to diversify their stakes to secure their interests. In the area of regional connectivity, for example, Southeast Asia has been seeking out more partners to help fulfil its need for regional infrastructure. Besides China's BRI and Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, Southeast Asia has also explored multiple platforms to enhance regional integration, such as the ASEAN-Europe agenda on Connectivity and ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU (ARISE) Programme. Indonesia has even secured better deals on developmental projects (such as the Jakarta-Bandung Railway) due to China and Japan's competition for influence.

The second tenet of non-alignment foreign policy is pursuing regional integration independent of external influences. By keeping regional dialogues open and by leveraging their strategic value for economic gains, ASEAN member states have been able to work together with various regional stakeholders in strengthening regional economic integration. One prominent example is the ASEAN-centred RCEP.

ASEAN member states have also contributed individually towards regional integration. For example, Singapore, together with various Southeast Asian fellows, has participated in economic governance standard-setting on multiple platforms, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Although not all ASEAN members joined the US-led IPEF (which is not a free trade agreement), the participation of these ASEAN member states indicates

the presence of opportunities for small and middle powers to co-write regional economic rules and improve their political economy to attract foreign investment.

The final tenet of non-alignment foreign policy is carving out a resilient development plan. Its Cold War forerunner originated from a clear ideological confrontation between the East and West. Today, the ideological rift is not so obvious. Instead, the new non-alignment foreign policy is rooted in globalisation, a market-driven principle that keeps the regional economy thriving.

As a result of globalization and regional integration, regional states benefit from increasing interconnectedness. Compared to the Cold War period, today's non-alignment foreign policy will enjoy greater resources from such interconnectedness. After the Cold War, the region reaped benefits from the free-market principles that enable the growth of an efficient regional market which is supported by interconnected logistics, supply chain and vibrant capital flows. Because they prospered from regional integration, Southeast Asian elites understand more than anyone else the importance of an open regional economy that attracts private investment and mutually beneficial trade relations.

With its commodities, diverse markets and 680 million consumers, Southeast Asia is increasingly attractive to foreign investors. For example, the Southeast Asian digital consumer population is growing steadily and is forecast to reach 370 million by the end of 2022. Regional digitalisation presents investment opportunities in areas such as education, fintech, healthcare, logistics and more, resulting in a greater flow of foreign direct investment into the region. The huge market potential further empowers the regional non-alignment stance. Due to the economic gains they have made through regional integration, Southeast Asian states have become less vulnerable.

Regional integration is not merely about the economy but also about security. The economic disruptions arising from the global health crisis and from geopolitical tensions in the Russia-Ukraine war are a strong signal that states should strengthen their capacity to absorb shocks. While pursuing a non-alignment foreign policy, ASEAN members should eschew self-isolation and protectionism, and instead continue to enhance economic openness and interconnectedness as well as multilateralism. A strong, attractive and densely-connected Southeast Asian market would increase other countries' stake in the region—including that of the great powers.

In the far more globalised world of the twenty-first century, a new non-alignment foreign policy can allow Southeast Asia to facilitate interaction between the rival blocs. Of course, mediating between the two powers would be challenging for any country. But by taking the lead to set regional standards, ASEAN member states could gain more leverage amid geopolitical tensions.

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Managing Expectations: Indonesia Navigating Its International Roles



Shafiah F. Muhibat

“Indonesia, as Chair of the G20, will surely take advantage of the G20 achievements and follow up priority issues as Chair of ASEAN,” the spokesperson of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated to the media shortly before the start of the G20 Summit. Given the success of the G20 Summit, it is understandable that there were immediate calls for Indonesia to repeat the success ‘formula’ at ASEAN too.

G20 and ASEAN are different organisations, that is for sure. But they face the same challenges with regards to the current geopolitical dynamics. Southeast Asia is no stranger to strategic competition, but Russia’s war in Ukraine and the rising tensions between the United States and China have exposed divisions in the region.

As the US-China rivalry is set to heat up further, ASEAN remains in danger of getting caught in the crossfire or being made to “choose” between the two great powers. ASEAN, therefore, faces the challenge of maintaining mutually beneficial relations with both the powers, even as it continues to uphold ASEAN centrality. Indonesia, as the largest country in the region, has been loyal to its “independent and active” foreign policy doctrine, which means that it has stayed away from choosing a side between the major powers. So what can we expect of Indonesia’s ASEAN Chairmanship, especially with regards to great power rivalry?

During the Cold War, when smaller countries were forced to join the ideological camps led by either the United States or the Soviet Union, Indonesia’s founding fathers perceived that the newly independent country should not side with either bloc. In terms of foreign policy, this translated into working together with fellow smaller countries in a regional grouping instead of voluntarily complying with the

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great powers' leadership. ASEAN is one concrete example. Indonesia initiated the establishment of ASEAN together with its Southeast Asian counterparts, and was a strong advocate for the first ASEAN Summit in 1976 and the ASEAN Political Security Community in 2003.

Now, as Indonesia begins its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2023, it is clear that great power rivalry is once again the predominant challenge in Southeast Asia. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the issue.

At the 16th East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2021, Indonesian President Joko Widodo called for an immediate end to rivalry among major powers in East Asia in order to create security and stability. It was then the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and he was concerned that such rivalry made it difficult for the major powers to take united action against global challenges like the pandemic. He said that the "more effective handling of the pandemic needs a conducive situation, specifically through stability, security, and peace", but lamented that "there have been no signs of concrete action to put a halt to the rivalry."

Indonesia has always sought to balance its interests while navigating the uncertainties of great power rivalry. Indonesia has had complex relations with both the US and China, and both countries have in the past been partners and threats. Some experts have questioned whether Indonesia is really remaining neutral, arguing that Indonesia is seemingly moving closer to China. Nonetheless, for Indonesia, it has long been a priority to ensure that Southeast Asia remains free from the negative impacts of great power rivalry. In 2018, it called for a collective ASEAN response to great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. At the handover of the ASEAN chairmanship in November 2022, President Widodo again emphasised his concern over the rapid deterioration in Sino-U.S. ties, which has led the two powers to vie for influence in the fast-growing region. He affirmed that ASEAN must become "a peaceful region and anchor for global stability, consistently uphold international law and not be a proxy (for) any powers... ASEAN nations should not let the current geopolitical dynamic turn into a new Cold War in our region."

The theme of Indonesia's chairmanship is 'ASEAN matters: epicentrum of growth'. The first part of the theme represents a pushback against the challenge to ASEAN centrality posed by the heightening tensions among the major powers. ASEAN faces the threat of its global and regional role declining in the coming era of great-power competition, and of fading relevance to the development and future of its members. Also, while ASEAN supports open, inclusive multilateral initiatives, the trend towards mini-lateralism has raised concerns. Such developments might undermine the existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, which rely on ASEAN's convening power to bring competing powers to sit together and work through tough issues.

The theme and Widodo's statements suggest that Indonesia's focus during its chairmanship will be on maintaining geopolitical balance in the region, economic growth and building ASEAN's institutional capacity and effectiveness. While these goals are a continuation of existing ASEAN efforts, expectations of Indonesia are—as always—running high.

Indonesia's success as ASEAN chair will be assessed partly based on how it manages the strategic implications of the US-China rivalry on Southeast Asia, and partly based on how it manages internal turmoil, including Myanmar and ASEAN reform. However, as Indonesia is itself walking a fine line in maintaining mutually beneficial relations with both the powers, there is very little that it can do to ensure that the other nine ASEAN countries will 'succeed' in the same struggle. The ten Southeast Asian countries have different relations with the two major powers and different approaches to the geopolitical situation. Navigating their relationships with China is especially complex as there are competing geostrategic and geo-economic priorities.

Despite these difficulties, Indonesia and its ASEAN partners should not be passive in response to growing and subtle pressures from both the US and China. It should begin to proactively deflect these pressures. One way of doing so is for Indonesia to draft a short statement declaring that ASEAN would like to work simultaneously with both the US and China to handle pressing global and regional challenges, like climate change, pandemics, and global financial crises. This statement could be issued at the East Asia Summit (EAS), which will feature the participation of both US and Chinese leaders, as well as the leaders of ASEAN countries.

In theory, the US may not be comfortable with such a trilateral statement. In practice, it may welcome it. It is well-known that the Biden Administration would like to cooperate more with China on major global challenges but is constrained by the strong anti-China sentiment domestically within the US. At the same time, China has also indicated that it favours greater cooperation with the United States. Hence, if ASEAN were to propose a three-way partnership between ASEAN-US-China to solve global challenges, this will give the US and China a face-saving way of participating in common endeavours to handle global challenges.

Such a proposal would also foster greater unity among the ASEAN countries. If successful, it would demonstrate ASEAN's ability to set the agenda, achieve consensus on solutions, and bring countries together. Doing so would demonstrate that ASEAN centrality remains and ASEAN continues to be the essential key element in the broader regional architecture of Southeast Asia.

Can Indonesia see this through as chair? It's a tall order. If Indonesia were to push for it, it will have to get the support of the nine other ASEAN countries and US and China. This can be done.

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US-China Rivalry Will Be a Stern Test for Vietnam's Diplomatic Juggle



Nguyen Cong Tung

The increasing tensions between the United States and China are reshaping the geopolitical and security landscapes in regions where these two major powers compete for greater influence.

Recent analyses by international relations scholars have contended that the hedging ability of many small and middle powers is eroding, since Washington and Beijing expect these states to make a decisive move to secure economic benefits or security assurances from one major power or the other.

Vietnam has long been seen as a typical hedger in Southeast Asia, given the multidirectional foreign policy it adopted following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite facing mounting pressure to take sides, Vietnam has managed its relations with Washington and Beijing relatively well.

The 'Four-Nos' Defense Policy

The first pillar of Vietnam's approach is to stick to its long-standing policy of having no military alliances, while being more flexible and pragmatic in its diplomatic tactics. The 'four-nos' defence policy highlighted in the 2019 Vietnam National Defence White Paper forms the basis of the policy: 'no military alliances,' 'no siding with one country against another,' 'no foreign military bases,' and 'no using force or threatening to use force in international relations.'

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This policy essentially rationalises Vietnam's official position vis-à-vis both superpowers. Thus, in official diplomatic discourse, Vietnamese leaders have reiterated that Vietnam does not and will not take sides.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric has subtly changed over time. Since 2021, Vietnamese leaders, including Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, have begun stating that Vietnam "chooses what is right and just, and does not take sides." While this might not be the US or China's preferred stance, it does represent a form of compromise for Hanoi.

Significantly, terms such as 'right and just' (lẽ phải, công lý) are remarkably flexible, offering ample room for interpretation. This signals to Washington and Beijing that, while adhering to the 'four-nos' policy, Vietnam remains open to the possibility of advancing security cooperation with one external power in cases where its 'rightness and justness' and national interests are violated by the other. Similar rhetoric can also be found in the 2019 Defence White Paper.

Vietnam's responses to recent incidents in the South China Sea (SCS) disputes can attest to this. More specifically, Vietnam selectively bolsters cooperation with the US to promote its maritime capabilities. It hosts US aircraft carriers and supports US freedom of navigation operations in the Paracel Islands, particularly when China pressures Vietnam extensively in SCS disputes. These actions do not inherently contravene the 'four-nos' policy.

A second critical tenet of Vietnam's strategy is to remain autonomous in foreign policymaking, by any means. The Political Report of the Communist Party of Vietnam's 13th National Congress in 2021 reaffirmed Hanoi's pursuit of an independent, self-reliant, and multilateral foreign policy.

Guided by this principle, Vietnam constantly asserts that its development of its relationships with the US, China, or any other country is a sovereign matter, and should not be interpreted as aligning with one against the other. Thus, neither China nor the US can intervene in Vietnam's relations with the other power.

History teaches Vietnam that it is too risky to rely on a great power against another, as its national interests are often sacrificed once two great powers reach a rapprochement. Cognizant that Washington and Beijing have their own strategic calculations, Vietnam seeks to convey to both sides that its autonomy serves the interests of both powers and contributes to the regional balance of power.

A non-autonomous and dependent Vietnam would only increase the burden on whomever it chooses as an ally and heighten the risk of conflict between the two major powers.

'China First, America Later'

Geography also plays a part in Vietnam's approach to foreign policy. Vietnam is situated adjacent to China which had colonised it for over 1000 years. This makes it an imperative for Vietnam to take China's reactions and interests into consideration before engaging with the US or other external powers. For example, Vietnam has

been reluctant to upgrade its relationship with the US to a strategic level, primarily due to concerns that such a move might be perceived by China as a signal of strengthened defence and security cooperation between Vietnam and the US directed against Beijing.

History once again guides Vietnam. It knows that if it displays sufficient deference and skilfully acknowledges China's (superior) power, Beijing will then give room for Hanoi to manoeuvre. Vietnam understands this quite well.

The prerequisite to any Vietnamese attempt to strengthen cooperation or elevate relations with the US is to stabilise relations with China first. A very simple logic here is: "China first, America later." That is why many Vietnamese leaders, in their dealings with their Chinese counterparts, have sought to demonstrate that China holds the 'top priority' in Vietnam's foreign policy.

Actions speak louder than words. Ahead of the expected upgrade of ties between Vietnam and the US to a 'strategic partnership', several high-ranking Vietnamese leaders made strategic visits to China. For example, General-Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong visited Beijing in October 2022 and Permanent Member of the Secretariat Truong Thi Mai visited Beijing in April 2023.

Through these diplomatic overtures, Vietnam sought to convey to China its enduring commitment, assuring Beijing that while it may forge closer bonds with the United States down the road, China will remain Vietnam's top priority.

Hanoi's strategic manoeuvre is geared towards preserving China's prestige and honour, thereby casting Beijing in an unfavourable light should it choose to obstruct the advancement of Vietnam's relationship with the United States.

Simultaneously, Vietnam extends reassurance to the US by constantly referring to it as a 'leading important partner' and by expressing a willingness to deepen their partnership. In a meeting with U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in Hanoi on July 20, 2023, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh stated that Vietnam has always considered the United States as one of its most important partners. As a result, Washington has become more patient in its dealings with Hanoi, as its long-term significance to Vietnam is highlighted and assured.

Interestingly, Vietnamese party leaders often remind China of their fraternal party-to-party ties while, at the same time, state leaders take charge of expressing positive statements on the growth of Vietnam-US relations. This balanced approach aims to convey to the two superpowers that Vietnam's development of the relationship with one side will not jeopardise its existing relationship with the other.

The Potential Hurdles

Vietnam's intricate diplomatic juggling act is not devoid of complexities.

Among them is the potential to irk one superpower while strengthening ties with the other, consequently facing heightened pressures from both quarters. In the face of increasing tensions between the two powers, both Washington and Beijing might

find themselves somewhat discomfited, perceiving that Hanoi is leveraging their influence without much in return.

The US constantly expresses concerns about trade imbalances with Vietnam, even labelling it on its monitoring list for currency manipulation in 2020 and 2021.

Additionally, US officials have hinted at potential tariffs on imported goods from Vietnam if the latter does not strictly crack down on the rebranding and rerouting of Chinese goods. On the other hand, Chinese leaders, in their dealings with their Vietnamese counterparts, have urged Vietnam to adhere to the socialist path amidst Hanoi's strengthened relations with the US.

Vietnam's multidirectional approach also faces a potential challenge. In its endeavours to establish friendly ties with a multitude of nations, and to maintain an equal distance from all major powers, Vietnam runs the risk of not developing meaningful relationships with any single nation.

Consequently, in scenarios where its interests in the South China Sea are threatened, no country, including the United States, may feel an obligation to stand up for Hanoi. Lacking formal alliances with Vietnam, no nation desires to antagonise the US or China or to be inadvertently drawn into conflicts between Vietnam and either superpower.

However, these challenges can still be managed smartly and effectively.

Vietnam's continued engagement with both superpowers through dialogue is critical. This needs to take place as it bolsters its own capabilities and strategic values. As long as Vietnam maintains its independence and autonomy, its strategic values remain apparent in the eyes of both superpowers.

At the same time, Vietnam can align its balancing efforts with those of other ASEAN countries. It should tailor its policies and responses toward the US and China to be in tandem with the broader ASEAN consensus, which highlights the significance of ASEAN Centrality in promoting regional peace and cooperation.

Within this framework, Vietnam, along with the regional grouping, can send a concerted message to both superpowers that they should not pressure ASEAN into picking sides. Only a unified ASEAN, rather than a divided one, can truly serve the long-term interests of the two superpowers and their reputation in the region.

While Vietnam's strategy to navigate the US-China rivalry has proven effective so far, it is still too early to assess whether this approach can be sustained. Its success is contingent upon how far the rivalry between the US and China will go. It is equally contingent on the US and China adopting a wiser approach in managing middle powers like Vietnam, who want to chart an independent path.

Instead of trying to force Hanoi to choose a side, they should acknowledge that a Vietnam that respects their respective core interests and does not take negative actions against both is a reasonably happy outcome.

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Civilisational Futures and the Role of Southeast Asia



Tim Winter

Civilisation has once again become a key term of international affairs. China, India, and Turkey are among those that have invoked the idea of the civilisational state to proclaim they hold the values required for twenty-first century internationalism, and its leadership. US-China rivalry and the expansion of BRICS also speak of an emerging East-West divide, one that is, in large part, cast in civilisational terms. Civilisation is now becoming a key marker of difference at a time of increasing geoeconomic competition and political tension.

Broadly speaking, civilisations are most commonly imagined as historical-cultural zones that can be depicted as regions on maps with historical borders, capitals and frontiers. In the modern era, states have often claimed a civilisational legacy by identifying a spatial continuity between past and present, often in nationalistic and jingoistic ways. But in South-east Asia, ideas about civilisational pasts and kingdoms have primarily formed around a language of flows, connections, and those historical exchanges that have occurred between and across regions. Significantly, China and India are now increasingly framing their civilisational legacies in such terms as they attempt to build alliances and partnerships across the region.

The most notable example of this is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched in 2013. Using the concept of the Silk Road to evoke a narrative of shared pasts and shared futures, China has proclaimed that it is "reviving" historical cultural, religious, and trade ties across Asia, Africa, and southern Europe. It has extended the Silk Road concept beyond trade to include the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road. As part of the BRI, China also promoted a "Dialogue of

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Civilisations” via several high-level multilateral meetings and a multitude of cultural sector initiatives. In March 2023, China’s President Xi Jinping expanded this concept into the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), calling for “tolerance, coexistence, exchanges and mutual learning among different civilisations”. The new, re-imagined Silk Road has quickly become one of the key geocultural and geostrategic imaginaries of the twenty-first century.

The BRI’s Silk Road imaginary recasts civilisation in two notable ways. First, rather than viewing civilisational pasts in terms of regions on maps, the Silk Road narrative of history places emphasis on “civilisational interactions” along certain routes, or through the connections and flow of ideas, goods, and people across continents and oceans. Second, distinctions between a “unique” Chinese and singular civilisation—that is, humanity—are intentionally blurred. For instance, the GCI is designed to promote the “universal values” of tolerance, peace and harmony required to deal with the global challenges of today.

Not to be outdone, Asia’s other pre-eminent civilisational state, India, has invoked its own civilisational narratives to strengthen ties with strategic partners across the Indian Ocean Region. Project Mausam, which India launched in 2014, is a multilateral strategic alliance for the Indian Ocean which aims to revive a deep history of trade based around monsoon winds, as well as a sensibility about the natural environment. Through such initiatives, India is signalling pre-colonial connections and forms of development as the rationale for twenty-first century forms of South-South cooperation. Through their Maritime Silk Road and Project Mausam initiatives, China and India have signalled their eco-civilisational credentials in an attempt to build important platforms of international cooperation around oceans and maritime affairs.

‘Shared Heritage’

This insertion of civilisational legacies as a “shared heritage” of trans-regional connections into foreign policy architectures opens up opportunities for imagining new narratives about past and future. But while both countries proclaim inclusivity and openness in this language of connectivity, China and India continue to view themselves as civilisational “centres”. This raises questions about how smaller countries bordering these “civilisational states” should respond and engage, given the implication that they are often viewed as “lesser”, peripheral regions.

Here, though, South-east Asia has some distinct advantages that enable it to contribute internationally. Connection and exchange lie at the core of the region’s history. Understanding South-east Asia in civilisational terms reveals how a history of flows and connections can be harnessed for peaceful inter-polity relations. The region offers important insights into how different cultural groups can peacefully co-exist, regardless of where political borders might be drawn. Hence, as both China and India proclaim their past offers guidance for addressing global challenges, an understanding of South-east Asia’s distinct cultural, religious, and maritime

histories also needs to be mobilised. In a region where hierarchies of core and periphery are far less pronounced, insights can be made into the ways in which these buzzwords of contemporary foreign policy, “mutual respect” or “people to people dialogue” can be historically substantiated.

South-east Asia’s deep cultural and historical interconnections with China and India have created a cultural infrastructure upon which peaceful, mutually beneficial relations can be built across institutions and societal groups. In East Asia, governments, foundations, and universities have long invested in forms of heritage diplomacy that successfully build ties between countries and regions. In South-east Asia, there is significant scope for greater institutional representation and collaboration, such that Asean and government ministries help provide the diplomatic and funding platforms required for meaningful cooperation.

South-east Asia has a distinct contribution to make in shaping how we understand civilisational legacies and their role in the affairs of the twenty-first century. It is a region where the past reveals the all-important social and political benefits that arise from defining abstract terms like culture and civilisation in terms of commonalities, rather than differences. The catastrophic events of this century testify to the dangers of defining civilisations as bounded regions or cultures, whereby lines of division constructed in ideological or religious terms emerge as the contours of violent conflict. Undoubtedly, new civilisational imaginaries are required for a peaceful century, especially since peaceful internationalism and international cooperation are fundamentally important if we are to address the key challenges of today. In this regard, South-east Asia has much to offer, especially if relations between China and India remain difficult.

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The US, China, and the Philippines in Between



Andrea Chloe Wong

As the US-China rivalry intensifies, countries in Southeast Asia continue to balance their relations with the two great powers. Most middle powers seek good relations with both, and avoid explicitly aligning themselves with either the US or China. This allows them to pursue trade, investment and security relations with the two great powers to better serve their national interests. The Philippines, however, presents an interesting case of a country that finds it difficult to balance relations with both as it has oscillated either closer to China or to the US, depending on the governing administration. This oscillating tendency exposes the Philippines to a hostile powerplay between the two hegemons. Thus, what is incumbent upon the Philippines is to implement a foreign policy that maintains positive bilateral engagements with both countries, with the aim of minimising tensions in the region.

During former president Benigno Aquino III's term (2010–2016), the Philippines was involved in a series of maritime disputes with China, culminating in the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012. These incidents propelled the Philippines to “resolve to do exactly what China asks it not to do—internationalize the South China Sea disputes and invite a greater role for the US”. During this period, the Philippines relied on the US to counterbalance what it perceived as China's maritime provocations. The Aquino administration signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014, which allows American forces to have strategic rotational presence in the Philippines and grants extensive access to its military facilities.

President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), however, reversed Aquino's foreign policy. Duterte declared that the Philippines would pursue “separation from the US and... alignment with China”. Yet, despite his policy of moving closer to China,

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maritime disputes continued; while several of China's promised investments and infrastructure projects in the Philippines were either delayed or shelved.

The current administration, under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. which commenced in 2022, likewise overturned the preceding Duterte administration's foreign policy. In 2023, President Marcos expanded EDCA, which the Aquino administration signed with the US, by including four military access sites in addition to the existing five locations that included those facing the South China Sea and Taiwan. In September 2023, the Philippine Coast Guard undertook a "special operation" in the Scarborough Shoal, cutting the anchor of a floating barrier installed by China in the disputed region. Meanwhile, President Biden reaffirmed that "the United States' defence commitment to the Philippines is ironclad," in response to collisions between Filipino and Chinese vessels in the South China Sea in October 2023. Aside from its actions in the South China Sea, the Philippines also terminated several Chinese-led infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reflecting an assertive turn by the Philippines towards China under Marcos.

Despite the Marcos administration's assertive approach towards China and its cultivation of deeper security ties with the US, the Philippines continues to tread more carefully in balancing its bilateral relationships. It takes into account the growing economic interdependence with China despite its maritime conflicts. And because of its alliance with the US, the Philippines is wary of being dragged into a possible US-China war in the region, particular over Taiwan. Thus, it is cautiously contemplating on the extent and depth it is willing to engage militarily with the US.

Given these complexities, it behooves the Philippines to promote a calculated yet principled foreign policy amidst the escalating great power rivalry. Such policy requires prioritizing not only its security interests, but also its larger economic interests. It entails going beyond short-term reactions towards a more long-term course of action for the Philippines. The goal is to abstain from oscillating closer to either China or the US, and to maintain a balanced approach with both powers.

To achieve such goal requires the Philippines to cultivate a more positive engagement with China. The Philippine government can revise operational policies for its military and coast guard to avoid maritime incidents from escalating. It can also reinforce collaborative opportunities to prevent bilateral disputes from adversely affecting what is supposed to be a multidimensional partnership of growing economic interdependence and deep cultural affinity. It can encourage more trade, cultural, and media exchanges with China that will ease tensions, not necessarily to place maritime conflicts at the back burner, but to provide more leeway and flexibility to focus on productive areas in the bilateral relationship.

It is likewise necessary for the Philippines to review its security alliance with the US. The Philippine government can advocate to expand trainings of its armed forces with its American counterparts that go beyond joint military exercises and live-fire demonstrations. It can propose with the US to focus more on delivering effective humanitarian and relief operations in case of natural disasters, which frequently plague the country. The new EDCA sites, which are primarily intended for disaster relief and not for greater militarization, point to a more salutary direction in the US-Philippines relationship.

As the old saying goes, one can choose one's friend but one cannot choose one's neighbor. This is particularly true in international relations. While the Philippines can choose how far its alliance with the US can go, it has no choice but to engage with China, a close neighbour. As with other countries in Southeast Asia, the long-standing challenge for the Philippines is to develop a foreign policy that can protect its national interests while striving to avoid being caught in the middle of a tug-of-war between the US and China.

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Singapore's Role as a Neutral Interpreter of China to the West



Walter Woon

On February 15, 1898, the battleship USS Maine blew up in Havana harbor. At the time, Cuba was part of the Spanish Empire and tensions between Spain and the United States had been brewing for some time, principally over Cuba's struggle for independence. There was no evidence that Spain was responsible for the destruction of the USS Maine; however, lack of evidence did not inhibit American newspapers in their competition for eyeballs. Sensationalized and biased reporting by the New York Journal and the New York World stoked the flames of wild nationalism, giving rise to the popular slogan "Remember the Maine."

War followed. The United States took Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam from Spain. The aftermath of the Maine incident is a cautionary tale of how biased and sensationalist reportage can lead to a breakdown in bilateral relations between states.

Western reportage of China has long suffered from an inherent bias against China. The Chinese government is perceived as an authoritarian, communist regime. These biases came to the fore in the accusations of "genocide" in Xinjiang, allegations of China's unfair trade practices that necessitated U.S. trade tariffs, and most egregiously, the baseless theory that COVID-19 originated from a "lab leak" in Wuhan. If the growing West-China division is to be bridged, the Western world needs a more nuanced interpretation of China.

Singapore's close relationship with both the West and China gives it a unique advantage as a more neutral interpreter of China for the Western world.

Singapore's relationship with China is complex. The ancestors of most of Singapore's population originated from China, principally the provinces of Fujian

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and Guangdong. These Chinese Singaporeans have a long history of aiding China against foreign aggression. Singapore-born philanthropist Cheang Hong Lim donated significant sums to the defense of Fuzhou against the French at the height of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century. After the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, Tan Kah Kee chaired the China Relief Fund, which raised money to defend China against the Japanese. During World War II, resistance hero Lim Bo Seng parachuted into occupied Malaya as part of Force 136. He was caught and executed; the Nationalist government of China posthumously awarded him the rank of major general. Xian Xinghai composed “Defend the Yellow River” at the height of the Sino-Japanese War. He was educated at Yeung Ching School (now Yangzheng Primary School) in Singapore. The song is still taught to schoolchildren in China and was played by Lang Lang at the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

However, this history does not mean Singapore instinctively aligns with China. Indeed, China supported communist insurrections in Singapore and Malaya from the 1950s up to the 1970s. As a result, groups perceived to be supported by the Chinese Communist Party were viewed with suspicion and hostility by the People’s Action Party (PAP)-led Singapore government. During this period, and especially after Singapore’s separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore relied on the West, particularly Britain and the United States, for its military security and economic growth. Relations between Singapore and China eventually normalized when China opened up in the late 1970s and stopped supporting communist movements in the region.

Singapore’s perspective of China is primarily informed by its need to balance its relationship with both the China and the West. As a result, Singapore’s reportage of China does not suffer from the biases of seeing China as a competitor or an ally.

Lianhe Zaobao, Singapore’s largest Chinese language newspaper, has Chinese-speaking correspondents based in different parts of China as well as in Taipei and Hong Kong. By featuring commentaries in both Chinese and English from various parts of China—but also from Hong Kong and Taiwan—Zaobao provides a diversity of perspectives on China. Zaobao’s reporting has been criticized from both the West and China—a testament to its relative neutrality. In July 2023, the Washington Post ran a story accusing Zaobao of echoing Chinese propaganda. Chinese media commentators, on the other hand, have accused Zaobao of “learning from American teachers and teaching China how to do things.” Likewise, Singapore’s public intellectuals do not necessarily hew to the received (Western) interpretation of the Chinese threat prevalent in the United States and its allies.

Notwithstanding Singapore’s growing relations with China, Singapore continues to retain close, albeit unofficial, relations with Taiwan. Singapore could therefore play a constructive role in managing relations across the Taiwan Strait. If there is to be rapprochement between China and Taiwan, Singapore is an ideal place to start the negotiations.

Singapore already acts as a neutral venue for meetings of officials and politicians on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. A notable instance was the meeting between then-Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou and Chinese President Xi Jinping on November 7, 2015. Singapore can serve as a neutral venue for meetings and

negotiations among officials from China, Taiwan, and the United States. The polemical rhetoric that accompanies any discussion on Taiwan in the U.S., as seen during then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's ill-conceived visit to Taipei, would be absent in Singapore.

The dangers of passive neutrality by small powers during great power competition are exemplified by the fate of Melos during the Peloponnesian War. Melos' refusal to give up its neutrality in favor of Athens led to a general massacre of its population, following a siege by the Athenian army. There is no real danger of Singapore suffering the fate of Melos. One hopes that saner politicians and military men on all sides will not push matters over the brink. However, small states that are caught in the crosshairs of great power competition continue to remain vulnerable to trade embargos, cyber attacks, and threats from non-state actors.

Singapore wants good relations with both China and the United States. Singapore can quietly offer private and confidential advice to both sides to enhance mutual understanding between these two powers, without public grandstanding. At the same time, Singaporeans should not be afraid to speak out in order to counter dangerous ignorance and rising anti-Asian prejudice in Western societies.

A neutral, nuanced voice, like that of Singapore, could help to reduce tensions between the United States and China. In law there is a wise maxim: *audi alterem partem*, hear the other side. In the great echoing caverns of the Western media and public intellectual space, such a nuanced voice is vital. Singapore is well-placed to provide that neutral voice, privately and publicly.

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Securing China-US Relations within the Wider Asia-Pacific



Sourabh Gupta

“Every ‘world order’ expresses an aspiration to permanence,” wrote the late and great Henry Kissinger in his 1994 masterpiece “Diplomacy,” “yet the elements that comprise it are in constant flux.” The current U.S.-dominated global order is no exception. Its hub-and-spoke deterrence architecture in the Asia-Pacific and, for that matter, the foundation and framework of China-U.S. ties, are not set in stone.

One might also add to Kissinger’s maxim that every world order contains the seeds of its own dissolution. The present global order is facing multiple threats. While these threats are not inescapable, they must be handled with flexibility and sensitivity.

Looming Threats

The first threat is that the incumbent Western powers will be unable, or unwilling, to underwrite the global system’s requirements and the major rising powers will be incapable of offsetting this deficiency in providing global public goods. This is not inevitable. If the major states discharge their global responsibilities credibly and cooperatively, we will not see a repeat of the breakdown of order in the 1930s.

However, the West’s semi-privatization of the international economic architecture—a public good once premised on openness and universalism—within “like-minded” minilateral clubs today and its weaponization of this architecture against adversaries and bystanders, bodes poorly. Rising political populism and economic

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nationalism in the West also threaten the bloc's ability to sustain the present global order.

Second, the "networking" of the United States' hub-and-spoke regional architecture could lead to arms races and periodic tests of strength that eventually culminate in a full-blown crisis. It is not self-evident that this will happen. The Indo-Pacific region is not a single organic continuum. Akin to the localized equilibriums of pre-eighteenth century Europe, the Indo-Pacific reflects a set of regional balances where the core security interests of its "flanking powers," Japan and India (neither of which has historically balanced Chinese power), is highly disaggregated.

However, minilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific, such as AUKUS, are ceasing to serve as building blocks of peace and stability, unlike ASEAN. Contrary to the role and purpose of regional architecture, they are becoming a tool of containment and division. Close-ended arrangements may furnish a raw balance of power but cannot distil unity out of diversity.

Third, the United States and China could succumb to rivalry now that the era of strategic engagement that Kissinger had conceived has drawn to a close. This is not axiomatic. An intermediate equilibrium based on self-restraint and new legitimizing guiding principles is realizable, but its tailoring will require exquisite skill in diplomatic embroidery.

That being said, it is implausible to expect that 200 years of Anglo-American dominance and a half-millennium of Western ascendancy will be ceded graciously to a culturally alien great power protagonist, and one with a Leninist system to boot. In China, though, Washington faces a peer that will in time defeat the core strategic proposition on which U.S. superiority has heretofore rested: that America will always be able to meet the strategic challenge of the day from a position of national strength.

Securing Peace and Stability

How then can these thorny issues be resolved? Going forward, the United States and China must craft a durable consensus that prioritizes regional stability and coexistence, keeps tensions within a manageable range, encourages communication, and privileges a constructive working relationship in areas of common interest without trampling on the other party's system, values, and regional commitments.

The "guardrails"-building process that U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping inaugurated in Bali in November 2022 was a good starting point. Should Biden secure re-election in 2024, Washington and Beijing should seize the opportunity to memorialize the guiding principles of their revamped relationship in a joint communiqué or "basic principles" agreement. The aim should be to place divergent policy positions within a steadying framework that strikes a balance between the U.S. and China's respective interests and the requirements of the Asia-Pacific system at large.

Washington and Beijing should also pluralize and nest their recent areas of engagement, such as the “early harvest” outcomes that they consolidated in San Francisco in November 2023, within a broader set of Asia-Pacific stakeholders. Securing the cooperation of more stakeholders will be more effective—and will also promote greater accountability from both great powers, as their multilateral commitments will likely be less vulnerable to the ups and downs of their bilateral relationship.

Take, for example, their agreement to initiate a dialogue on the perils of artificial intelligence (AI), including ensuring that unsupervised AI is never allowed to dictate command-and-control systems related to the use of a nuclear weapon. The two sides should expand the dialogue to the role of AI in target selection and decision-making linked to kinetic and cyber warfare and, utilizing the ADMM-plus Experts’ Working Group (EWG) framework, promote rulemaking on military applications of AI among a broad set of regional participants.

Washington and Beijing have also recently released preliminary governance frameworks for AI. Working with regional economic partners under the aegis of APEC, both sides should now craft a baseline regulatory framework for regional AI governance, anchored to principles laid out by the United Nations’ High-level Advisory Body on AI.

A second example is their agreement to resume mil-mil communications at the highest levels. Both sides should go a step further and, in conjunction with key regional states, initiate a work program to draft model regulations related to unmanned autonomous systems at sea. Naval platforms without crews do not enjoy the protections of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea as they are not classified as “vessels.” Yet, lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) permeate the maritime environment and when conflict arrives, they will be at the forefront of hostilities—as Kyiv’s drones have amply demonstrated in the Black Sea. Better to write the rules in peacetime, and thereby limit the scope for unintended escalatory tensions too.

Finally, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand—the three major (self-proclaimed) non-claimant ASEAN states of the South China Sea region—should band together and diplomatically propose and underwrite a win-win outcome to the festering Second Thomas Shoal dispute (the United States is unfit to lead on account of the Obama administration’s botched mediation on Scarborough Shoal in 2012). As per the arrangement, Manila must tow away the fracturing tank landing ship BRP Sierra Madre from the shoal; Beijing must provide a solemn undertaking not to occupy the shoal thereafter (as a low tide elevation, it doesn’t even count as “territory”). Washington can thus be spared the embarrassment of having failed to provide any materially useful support to its ally to retain control of the shoal—for want of the Philippines-U.S. treaty obligations being triggered. A little bit of compromise from all interested parties could go a long way.

The United States and China bear a responsibility to rise above parochial visions of ideology and short-term interests and secure the continuing peace, prosperity, and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. The steps outlined above might be a good place to start.

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Southeast Asia, China, and the Belt and Road Initiative: Still Going Strong?



Guanie Lim

Relations between great powers and their neighboring regions are often fraught. The cases of the United States and Latin America, or the European Union and North Africa, come to mind. For instance, tensions related to immigration from Latin America and North Africa, has led to the rise of right wing populism in the United States and Europe, respectively. This has fueled the rise of populist politicians such as Donald Trump in the United States and Marine Le Pen in France. In China's case, economic engagement has helped to stabilize and strengthen its relationship with Southeast Asian countries, despite ongoing disputes in the South China Sea. One important facet of this engagement is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which China launched 11 years ago.

Most of the Southeast Asian countries do not have the means to fund major infrastructure projects, resulting in an infrastructure deficit in the region. Chinese investments, including those of the BRI, have thus become an important economic force in Southeast Asia. The reality is that very few economies have matched Chinese business groups' appetite in pushing infrastructure projects, especially capital- and technology-intensive ones which take a long time to produce returns. While other players have attempted to promote infrastructure building and other forms of cooperation in Southeast Asia, such as the EU's Global Gateway, there is considerable room for improvement. By contrast, Chinese firms have managed to deliver some of the most challenging projects in the region. Two recent examples come to mind: the Boten-Vientiane railway in Laos and the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail in Indonesia. The generally positive reception to these projects since their opening has likely increased the appeal of similar initiatives to the public.

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Indonesia's experience in opting for China (over Japan) for its landmark railway project is worth discussing. The Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail was one of the most heavily criticized Chinese projects before and during its construction. Despite some delays and dissenting voices along the way, the project began commercial operations in late 2023. Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Pandjaitan are evidently satisfied enough with the project's outcome to want to continue cooperating with the state-owned China Railway Group Limited (CREC) to extend the railway service to Surabaya, Indonesia's second-biggest city. The Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail has allowed Indonesian policymakers to address longstanding issues, such as the challenging task of setting up development links between Jakarta and smaller urban hubs. And, importantly, working on this project has enhanced the organizational capabilities of the Indonesian central and local governments, which will help them manage other complex undertakings in the future.

In Vietnam, ties with China have generally been cordial. Notwithstanding reservations in some quarters over the economic domination of China, the reality is a lot more nuanced. For one, Vietnam has harnessed the investment dollars of transnational corporations de-risking from China, transforming itself into a 'connector economy' interlinking the US and Chinese markets. There is another subtext here—the influx of investment and businesses triggered by the US-China competition adds positive momentum to Vietnam's attempts to continue and even deepen the pro-market reforms it first initiated in 1986. Vietnam and China are currently in the midst of exploring strengthening rail and road infrastructure and connectivity between the Yunnan province in China and Vietnam (including Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong), through the BRI initiative.

It is true that some of China's 'Going Out' efforts have fallen short of their initial aims. Reasons for this range from political pushback in certain host economies to overoptimistic financial projections. This has led to adjustments, resulting in a shift towards "smaller, greener, and more beautiful" undertakings and projects centered on knowledge and technology, rather than resource- and labor-intensive endeavors. In addition, ad-hoc deals are transitioning towards more institutionalized arrangements, especially after the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) was established in 2018. The CIDCA represents an institutional innovation to harmonize efforts across multiple state organs, with the overarching goal of implementing and overseeing development aid projects more effectively. These transitions, while not usually mentioned in the popular media, underline an important reality of economic cooperation: real and consequential changes often happen slowly and subtly, hidden far in the background.

It is reasonable to expect some occasional pit-stops as the BRI heads into its second decade in Southeast Asia. The key lies in exploring common platforms to further Southeast Asia-China cooperation. At the same time, it is important to avoid sweeping, oversimplified caricatures of Chinese capital exports. A more balanced perspective, which takes account of context-specific issues in the host economies and the region's wider economic architecture, would be more fruitful.

Great powers and their neighbors share a common interest in fostering regional peace, prosperity, and political and economic stability. China has been instrumental in meeting the pressing need in Southeast Asia for infrastructure development through the BRI, and it has in turn reaped political and economic dividends. Economic interdependence has also raised the costs of potential regional conflict. The role of the BRI in managing the China-Southeast Asia relationship could serve as a valuable model for study for other great power-neighborhood relations, such as those between the United States and Latin America and between the European Union and North Africa.

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How Malaysia Can Boost Asean Agency and Centrality amid Global Challenges



Elina Noor

On October 11, Laos handed the baton of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) chairmanship to Malaysia during the closing ceremony of the 44th and 45th Asean Summits and Related Summits. Malaysia will officially assume the chair on January 1 next year with the theme “Inclusivity and Sustainability”.

In 2015, when Malaysia last held the Asean chairmanship, the world was in the throes of violence. From Bamako to Beirut, Paris to the Sinai desert, communities mourned hostages taken, wounded, or killed—sometimes in the hundreds—in various extremist attacks. A few days before Kuala Lumpur welcomed delegates to the 27th Asean Summit, Malaysian Bernard Then’s severed head was found in southern Philippines, months after he had been abducted from the Malaysian state of Sabah by Abu Sayyaf militants.

Ten years on, the strategic landscape looks decidedly different in Southeast Asia. Myanmar remains locked in intractable civil strife since the junta’s 2021 coup, and clashes in the South China Sea threaten to metastasize into a wider regional conflict. With Asean paralysed on both fronts, dialogue partners’ preference for minilateral arrangements such as Aukus and the Quad, and an unpredictable US president back in the White House, Asean centrality remains in question despite years of formal community-building since Malaysia presided over the 2015 launch of the Asean Community in Kuala Lumpur.

While the cessation of hostilities in Myanmar and in the South China Sea will no doubt remain key priorities for Asean, any expectations of material success on these fronts in 2025 have to be tempered. The rotational, one-year term of the Asean

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chairmanship means that chairs can only add on to their predecessors' efforts and organisational foundations established in previous years.

Still, Asean faces other contemporary challenges, many of which it has identified in the Asean Community Vision 2045. Malaysia's theme of "Inclusivity and Sustainability" is a timely reminder to reprioritise a "people-oriented, people-centred" community. There is gathering momentum to do so. The catastrophic annihilation of Gaza and the brazen impunity of the powerful have once again laid bare what previous social, economic and political inflection points such as the 1998 Asian financial crisis, 2008 global financial crisis, and Covid-19 pandemic had already made clear: the international order needs reordering because it no longer responds to the needs of the majority. The established powers that thumped their chests as architects of multilateralism and international law are themselves actively undermining those very institutions.

Asean members have begun to diversify their strategic portfolios in tentative but telling ways. The expansion of cross-border local currency transactions and regional payment connectivity among member states to ensure financial resilience is one example. Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam becoming partner countries of Brics is another. Others include the expected upgrade of the Asean-China Free Trade Agreement in 2025 and last year's establishment of the Asean-Gulf Cooperation Council summit.

Malaysia's list of initiatives may already be filling up as the countdown begins for the start of its chairmanship. But beyond economic integration, which Asean already excels at relative to political-security and socio-cultural matters, Malaysia could build on Asean centrality and agency in the following mix of incremental and bold ways beginning next year.

First, while Asean should respond to great power contestation, it should not be distracted or debilitated by it. The return of US president-elect Donald Trump to the world scene may reanimate an awkward mix of disquiet, indifference, even sanguinity, among policy watchers about how the United States will engage with the rest of the world.

But while Asean should certainly prepare for the probability of volatility, it should not be consumed by it. What this means in practice is doing more of what it has been doing—actively seeking partnerships with other parts of the world while holding on to established ties. Malaysia's proposal to convene an Asean-GCC-China meeting next year exemplifies the former. It could also follow up on the Asean-Pacific Islands Forum memorandum of understanding signed during Indonesia's Asean chairmanship in 2023 by initiating substantive discussions on topics of common concern, including the climate emergency and critical digital infrastructure like subsea communication cables.

Second, Asean needs a genuinely cross-sectoral forum to deliberate the impact and implications of technology. The bloc has been focusing on tech policy from an economic lens, having bet on digital transformation to propel growth. But tech will have a great impact on all three pillars of the Asean Community now that the US-China race for tech dominance has led to the securitisation of the entire tech value chain, from raw minerals and component parts to infrastructure and platforms.

As Asean is a critical node in global supply chains and subsea cable routes, as well as a burgeoning consumer market, it is critical that the region's stakeholders weigh in on the diverse implications of tech, including on national or regional security, commerce and trade, energy and ecology, and social equity. Establishing a standing forum or an advisory council akin to the Asean Eminent Persons Group that convenes expert stakeholders from different backgrounds can support the region in responding holistically and strategically to developments in the tech landscape.

Third, and relatedly, the region's current preoccupations with the digital and green revolutions offer an opportunity for Malaysia to meaningfully apply "inclusivity and sustainability" in both areas. This will require going beyond the region's overwhelming tech optimism and critically assessing how data-driven tech entrenches or exacerbates social inequities through environmental costs, algorithmic bias and labour exploitation; how the concentration of computational infrastructure affects accessibility, inclusivity and accountability; and how the datafication of everything affects society in the long run.

Examining these questions will demand taking a cross-disciplinary approach rather than a primarily economic one to tech. It will require, for example, considering alternative data governance frameworks that adequately protect community data, understanding the historical arc of tech and its relationship to power, and consulting on technical standards that regulate the entire life cycle of AI systems and their impact on the environment. The Malaysian government and/or policy institutions could initiate Track 1.5 meetings on these under-discussed issues, and the outcomes of these meetings could then be fed to the Asean Digital Ministers Meeting. Additionally, the private sector and philanthropic foundations in Malaysia and around the region could help fund research on these topics as they specifically relate to Southeast Asia.

Malaysia's leadership of Asean in 2025 will afford the country occasion to build on the efforts of past chairs. However, in order to realise the centrality, community and agency the region aspires to, the incoming chair should dare to do things differently, if only because the world is no longer the same.

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