

Is Minimal Order Enough? Hugh White's Strategic Parsimony

Robert Ayson

Hugh White's prescription for order in Asia has two essential and inter-related elements. The first is the requirement for the United States to treat China as a co-equal great power. The second is for China to accept that it can lead in Asia with the United States, but not instead of it. Hence Asia's order depends upon the United States being willing to forsake its practice of primacy and China forsaking its own hopes for practicing the same thing. Without this mutual restraint, White's argument goes, the region is faced with the clear prospect of a dangerous and damaging strategic rivalry which could all too easily lead to great power war.

Readers might wonder whether White's 184 pages of text in *The China Choice* goes further than this straightforward algorithm, but as I will argue below, his argument is spectacularly parsimonious. This quality helps him set the tone of the debate about Asia's order with a clarity that few others can match. It is one reason why even those who strenuously disagree with White's conclusions often find themselves using his argument as a baseline for the debate. But his economical approach may also leave out some of the questions and features which may count for Asia's order in the end.

In this article I will examine three elements of White's strategic parsimony and show that in some cases at least they bring perils as well as analytical advantages. First, I will show that despite White's declaration of support for a four-way great power concert in Asia, he is really pinning his main hopes on what amounts to a United States-China duopoly. Second, I will argue that while *The China Choice* sometimes portrays these two giants as actively sharing power in the region (a point that comes across even in the book's evocative subtitle: *Why America Should Share Power*), its author focuses mainly on an agreement between them to avoid war by eschewing primacy and the rivalry this generates. This is an argument for common restraint rather than cooperative government. Third, I will suggest that while White occasionally flirts with the role of *values* in underpinning this already parsimonious order, his conceptualisation of order is based on the recognition by the two great powers of their *interests* in restraint.

As a result, White's analysis presents a distinctly geopolitical argument for Asia's order, reflected in the admiring words that he has for such figures as Bismarck and Kissinger. One of the questions that needs to be asked is

whether the limited deal he wants the United States and China to strike with each other is going to be up to the mark, including for the medium and smaller powers in the region who will consume the security this agreement is aimed to provide. My suspicion is that even if those other countries are willing to subordinate their interests to the US-China strategic duopoly he has in mind, and even if the aim of war avoidance between them is as urgent as White suggests, his calculus of order through limited interest-based restraint may not provide a deep enough foundation for Asia's order.

And Then There Were Two

There is no doubting Hugh White's enthusiasm for the early nineteenth century Concert of Europe as the main model for the great power understanding he prescribes as the basis for a new order in Asia. He presents this post-Napoleonic arrangement between Europe's five great powers (Austria, Prussia, Britain, Russia, and eventually France itself) as the archetypal "agreement, implicit or explicit, among the major players not to seek primacy in a strategic system" and as a conscious effort "to minimize the risk of war that is inherent in the balance of power system".¹

There are good reasons for White (and others besides) to be attracted to this Concert formulation. Among them is the prospect that Asia's order might rest on strategic cooperation based as much on informal understandings as formal undertakings, rendering today's debate over the region's *security architecture* the sterile and bureaucratic conversation that is so often becomes. Another is the sheer fact that for a period of time (whose length historians continue to debate) Europe's great powers were able to consciously manage their relations in such a way to avoid outright war between themselves, and to navigate the fundamental disagreements that challenged their vital interests in especially dangerous ways.

In his eighth chapter, White depicts a modern Asian version of that concert. In addition to the United States and China, the leading actors intrinsic to any discussion of Asia's strategic future, he nominates two others, Japan and India. There is nothing terribly novel in the notion of a wider group such as this. But in this instance, these additional nominations are made somewhat half-heartedly. White argues that if Japan is unable to take its place as an independent great power in its own right, its other options as either too dependent an ally of the United States or a client of a stronger China will make a US-China concord impossible. But this means that Japan is little more than a strategic nuisance with an ability to negate a concert but little real capacity to contribute to one. India may one day possess the latter quality that Japan lacks, but the problem here is one of timing. White's treatment of India is akin to selecting an opener for Australia for next year's

¹ H. White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2012), p. 136.

Ashes test cricket series on future promise than on established form. There seems to be little chance that India will be the real great power in Asia that White sees it becoming before the United States and China have either passed or failed the test of their own strategic relationship. And it is noticeable that White's main interest in India's role is whether it makes it easier or harder for the United States to maintain its own strategic primacy in the region.²

Although White behoves all four of these powers to "accept one another as equals"³ there is not much evidence in *The China Choice* of a framework for that particular quadrilateral equality. He does little to suggest (for reasons that should be obvious), that alongside the United States and China, any other powers in Asia (including Japan and India) need to resist their own temptations towards strategic primacy. These would surely be delusional fantasies. In White's strategic universe only two powers really matter, and the rest are largely observers of the contest between them. If China and America do get into an "escalating rivalry", he argues earlier on in the book, there is not a lot others could do

because the two rivals are the world's strongest and richest states: their size and power make it hard for any other country or group of countries to restrain them very much.⁴

It is a strategic duopoly and that is all there is to it when we peel back the layers in White's book. China is there because it is already "undermining the military foundations of US primacy in Asia and fundamentally challenging Asia's strategic order" and it is essential that the United States continue as a great power because the region needs an American presence that is "large enough to ensure that China's power is not misused".⁵ Third place is a long, long way back in these considerations. I wish the region as White depicts it were otherwise. The prospect of a third and fourth great power in Asia, as well as the presence of strong and confident medium powers, might offer the rest of us in the region some alternatives to the spectrum of choices along the line running between Beijing and Washington that his analysis feeds into.

This bilateral monopoly generates at least one important question. Was there something to the larger group that comprised the Concert of Europe that took the pressure of any single great power from making the one big choice? I ask this because White is clear that in today's two player game the ball sits firmly in one half of the court. It is up to America to "take the initiative to offer China as much as it reasonably can to bring to bring it to the table".⁶ This is one explanation for the Presidential speech he provides at

² See *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 129.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

the end of the book which suggests that the best course for America consists of “stepping back from primacy and allowing China a bigger role”.⁷ No corresponding address is provided for the Chinese premier to make. That gives the impression of a superpower that is “lonely” in ways other than envisaged in the early post-Cold War years. And perhaps even more lonely than it might be thought in 2013: China’s price for entering into the bilateral discussion White has in mind might well be the US alliance system which helps spell security in large parts of Asia but which often adds up to containment in Beijing.

A Limited Deal on Limits

The idea of America ‘stepping back’ from primacy, and China not ‘stepping in’ to the same role, provides a nice connection to the second aspect of White’s parsimony. The entry price to that bilateral discussion may be high, and certainly higher for the United States which has to treat China as the genuine equal it has not yet fully become. But White is not in fact asking too much of the great powers in terms of the running of Asia, despite the reference in the same Presidential speech to them “as equal partners in a joint regional leadership”.⁸ This form of words suggests more than the main contents of the book which precede them. Like the vast majority of White’s powerful strategic analysis in other writings, *The China Choice* is about how to maintain a regional peace rather than what do with it. This is not a guide to how China and the United States should lead the region once they have recognised each other as equals. It is not a book about the joint government of Asia. It is about the necessity of that recognition in the first place: how Asia can be secure so that any beneficent government can then occur.

White’s main objective here is an important one. The ability of the great powers in a system of states to avoid war between themselves is rather more than a *necessary* condition for order. It is perhaps the most important one. Without great power peace, most other goals are little more than hot air. Other scholars may be a little less worried than White is about the possibility of a Sino-American armed conflict, a debate which will no doubt continue. But few of them could disagree about the damage that war could do to the region, including to the economic prosperity upon which the greatness of the great powers has been built.

Because White does see such a damaging war as a genuine prospect, and one the great powers may already be heading towards as signs of their rivalry for primacy become evident, the achievement of great power peace ranks as more than a significant achievement. It almost becomes the *sufficient* condition for Asia’s order. It becomes the yardstick by which other elements of Asia’s international relations are measured. The quest for

⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

⁸ Ibid.

status, for example, is a dangerous commodity because the beliefs with which it is associated “have caused the biggest wars”.⁹ Likewise, the levels of Sino-US economic interdependence, which White notes are higher “than any two comparably powerful states” before them will “certainly restrain ambition and rivalry on both sides” but if we want to preserve peace we should not be putting too much “faith in the power of money”.¹⁰

White certainly lays out some of the principles of the Sino-US partnership designed to forestall such a calamity. The concert he has in mind requires each great power to “fully accept the legitimacy of the political systems of all the others” and also to tolerate the differences in views that thereby result.¹¹ He even suggests that “the powers must share a clear understanding of legitimate conduct”.¹² But before the global governance types reach for their smelling salts in a state of shock, White’s parsimony takes over once again. Unacceptable conduct here is that which aims to dominate the others and this is expressed, above all, in the use of force by one great power on another.¹³ Here White is not talking about any use of force, but only between the great powers themselves because this is what will really threaten their vital interests. The more narrow the foundations of the concert, and the more directly they bear on the interests of the power themselves”, he writes, “the more robust the concert will be.”¹⁴

Robust perhaps, but perhaps a bit too narrow? *The China Choice* is not Hugh White’s fourteen points on the management of Asia’s political order. It is a primer on the main condition which can make that order possible. It is not a book about how China and the United States together can run Asia (with or without the help or hindrance of other would be and imagined great powers). It is really about how the peace can be maintained between them so that Asia can run.

That is actually a potentially reassuring note to make, at least for those excluded from the high halls of great power diplomacy. One of the main arguments against the European Concert, which White acknowledges, is “that it ignored or sacrificed the interests of the small and the middle powers to the interests of the great”.¹⁵ White himself is not too perturbed by this problem: it pales into insignificance against the main prize of great power peace. He has never been a prisoner to universal multilateralism. But a deeper great power partnership which did more to decide issues in Asia than might occur in White’s minimal concert could be expected to generate particularly strong levels of disharmony in the region. By comparison, if the

⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 54-5.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 138.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 135.

aim is simply to keep the great powers from each other's throats, parsimony and minimalism have their advantages. Perhaps only Japan would be unhappy with such a deal.

Add a Tiny Pinch of Values?

This vision reflects White's reading of the motivations of the European leaders in the wake of Napoleon's bid for hegemony:

The concert was not founded on any abstract commitment to principles of peaceful coexistence of the brotherhood of man. It gained its strength from the clear and very practical recognition by successive generations of European statesmen that the costs of seeking hegemony outweighed the benefits.¹⁶

This is an interests-based account of these motivations if ever there was one. White protests that "Peace is a value too" and that "There is a moral obligation to minimize the risk of war if at all possible",¹⁷ but there is no doubt which side he comes down on in the relationship between values and interests. He wants his President to err on the side of the latter by instructing the American people that "we must deal realistically with the world as we find it", by coming to an accommodation with China, "or sacrifice our own interests and those of wider humanity".¹⁸ White's Asia has little time for the flouncy notions of 'shared values' which sometimes inhabit American foreign policy. Even "America's allies in Asia are practical folk for whom such talk means little against the overriding imperative for peace and order."¹⁹

White clearly sees himself as one of these practical folk. An emphasis on shared values may work for the in-group but not for the diversity of systems which a Concert needs to include, even if we are only talking about the United States and China. The latter is ruled, White says, by a communist party which "is ruthless in preserving its monopoly on power".²⁰ But this fact is no obstacle to a partnership with the world's leading liberal democracy. "In the mid-nineteenth century", he suggests, "the political systems of Russia and Britain had as little in common as those of the United States and China do today."²¹

It would take a much longer essay than this to test such a bold proposition, although there may be some common values (including the value attached to prosperity, and its relative importance vis-à-vis ideology) which are already bringing America and China together. But I suspect that one of the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 173.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

reasons White argues for what turns out to be a rather limited partnership between the United States and China (based on the avoidance of primacy and war) is that this is about all two such different political systems with differing value systems can be expected to agree on. And even then White suggests it will be “a long shot!”²²

This is why it is surprising to read White's approach to the Cold War relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers whose value systems clearly were in disharmony, but who managed to fashion a way to avoid war with one another. Speaking through his President, White suggests there was anything but an understanding between the two: “We were fierce in our refusal to accommodate the Soviets.”²³ Elsewhere he refers to the “critical decision that the Soviet Union could not be trusted to work with the United States”.²⁴ But if I am right in suggesting that White's thesis is really more about Sino-US mutual restraint and less about the two great powers working side by side, there may be more to the Cold War experience than he suggests.

Indeed one of White's intellectual predecessors spent a good deal of his early career writing about the prospects for an accommodation between the United States and Soviet Union. In their mutual, although limited, embrace of some of the basic principles of arms control, Hedley Bull argued that from time to time the basis of a crude understanding between the superpower rivals could be detected. At the centre of this informal deal was something very familiar to readers of *The China Choice*: the conclusion that war between the two nuclear armed powers was too costly for them to entertain.²⁵ This common interest was the starting point for their accommodation, just as it appears to be in White's prescription.

But it is also true that Bull wanted something more. Looking back on European history in a slightly different fashion to White, he saw evidence of a common European civilisation featuring common goals and values around which a society of states had been built. Translating that onto a new international canvas would be difficult: the system of states went far beyond Europe and it included members of the Eastern and Western blocs and the divide between the declining European powers and their former colonies. But these challenges did not stop Bull from contemplating what set of values might be needed for that new international society.²⁶

²² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁵ See Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race: Disarmament and Arms Control in the Missile Age* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson for The Institute for Strategic Studies, 1961).

²⁶ For that story, see Robert Ayson, *Hedley Bull and the Accommodation of Power* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

This raises the question of whether Asia's order in the twentieth century can rest on the parsimonious understanding about primacy and violence that White suggests or whether it needs to go deeper by entering the hazardous frontier of common values. And this, unfortunately, is where the Cold War experience is potentially of less value than I have initially suggested. One of the potential advantages of the East-West standoff was the separation of its leading protagonists into almost self-contained economic systems and political communities. There was, as scholars like Thomas Schelling explained, a powerful interdependence at play resulting from the nuclear striking power of each superpower,²⁷ and managing this question put a premium on the avoidance of direct armed conflict between the Americans and the Soviets. But that sort of strategic bargain could be had in the presence of some pervasive political, ideological and even economic antagonism. Arms control was nearly enough to stabilise the relationship.

The same cannot be said for the relationship between the United States and China who at the very least are strongly interdependent economically. They are also competing for leadership amongst a fairly similar group of Asian countries, rather than maintaining primacy over their own separate blocs. As China grows, its influence on other Asia-Pacific countries is becoming more obvious. The fact that China is willing increasingly to wield that power is more than a reason for the region's interest in America sticking around, an interest White acknowledges. It is one of the areas where a further discussion about restraint will be needed, and where some emphasis on the values associated with that restraint will be helpful. This is especially so if another thinker in Canberra is right in wondering in closed meetings whether the real question as China grows stronger is not whether Asia will be at peace or at war, but what sort of peace Asia will come to experience. White's own observation that "The close connections between business and government in China make it easy for China to apply commercial leverage for diplomatic ends"²⁸ might be part of that challenging picture.

The complexity and depth of Sino-US interdependence, and the relationships of influence they have with some of the same states in Asia may make it difficult to neutralise their rivalry by a set of external limits on primacy and war. The sort of restraint that keeps the two great powers apart in their own space may well offer less than White hopes when he contemplates the possibility of an informal understanding between Asia's great powers about their respective spheres of influence.²⁹ This approach had far greater traction in the Cold War (including respect for the spheres of influence which divided Europe), and is the first of the five rules of the game used by John Lewis Gaddis to explain the long peace between the United

²⁷ See Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

²⁸ White, *The China Choice*, p. 45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-1.

States and Soviet Union.³⁰ In fact two of Gaddis's other rules, the avoidance of direct military confrontation and the prohibition on undermining the other side's leadership,³¹ are very similar to corresponding points in the seven great power understandings which underpin White's Concert of Asia.³²

But Asia's order may depend less than White suggests on the deals that the United States and China can do about their own international relationship, including the extent to which Washington recognises China as a legitimate great power. It may have more to do with whether there is any sort of common project for Asia's future: a positive view on where the region is heading which goes well beyond the avoidance of great power conflict. This requires rather more than a concerted effort by the great powers to tolerate their differences. It may require a concerted effort at bridging some of those gaps so that more of the common goals and purposes which populate Bull's notion of an international society can be found.

This is very tricky territory. Some of the most significant differences between the United States and China, which cannot but affect their relations with each other and with others in the region, comes from their attitude to the most fundamental of political questions: "how they strike the balance between liberty and order".³³ I would not necessarily suggest that this part of their respective value systems be tackled first. But it would be hard to imagine a deeper order emerging without, say, an informal agreement between the two great powers about aspects of the rule of law. This takes us beyond the strategic dimension which is prominent in White's analysis into wider systems of rules. But it also leads us into a world of political compromises that few countries, especially big and proud ones like the United States and China, may be willing or able to consider.

Conclusion

The China Choice is a deliberately provocative piece of writing that gets us to the big question: what will be necessary for order in Asia, the world's most important region. Its success is not necessarily to be measured by the extent to which readers agree with Hugh White's answer in terms of the sharing of power. A few months ago I happened to ask an Australian official about the thinking that was going on there in terms of the changing balance in Asia. His answer, that no-one really agreed with Hugh White's position, would have pleased the author of *The China Choice*, because it was a sign of his success in setting the terms of the debate. That's a sign, perhaps, of a degree of intellectual primacy.

³⁰ See J. Lewis Gaddis, 'The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Cold War System', *International Security*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 134-5.

³¹ See *Ibid.*, pp. 135-6, 138-40.

³² See White, *The China Choice*, pp. 138-40.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

But getting the answer right also matters, and it matters for the two countries who are meant to accommodate one another in White's schema as well as for the other countries of Asia. As White has shown, a parsimonious approach to one's subject is often more compelling than a more inclusive but less definite account. And it is hard to find a more important strategic proposition today than the argument that order in Asia requires the two great powers to restrain their rivalry by holding back on primacy. That's already a big call, because of the imagination it requires in discounting America's current power and anticipating China's fuller regional presence. But, even then, is it going to be enough? I would argue that mutual restraint in the name of common interests needs to be buttressed by more attention to common and uncommon values in Asia. But in part because that may mean some other difficult choices, the parsimony of Hugh White's framework may remain hard to resist.

Robert Ayson is Professor and Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. robert.ayson@vuw.ac.nz.