

Hugh White's *The China Choice*: A Critical Analysis

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It is difficult to argue with the central recommendation in Hugh White's *The China Choice*. If indeed the United States only had three basic choices in responding to China's rise—capitulation, confrontation/containment, or working out a cooperative power sharing relationship, “allowing China a larger role but also maintaining a strong presence of its own”—US interests, and those of China and the region writ large, would indeed best be served by taking the cooperation route. One can argue that there are other policy choices, although most would in truth be variations on his three main alternatives.

My problem with his analysis is, first and foremost, that it is based on a faulty assumption. White seems convinced that the current US policy toward China, as spelled out (according to him) in President Obama's speech before the Australian Parliament in November 2011, is one of containment, in order to maintain US “primacy” or “supremacy” in the Asia-Pacific. He accuses Obama of “speaking dismissively of China's achievements and prospects”. He is flat out wrong! A more careful reading of Obama's speech, and the many China policy pronouncements by him and senior foreign policy spokespersons such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, would argue that the United States is currently embarked on exactly the same course that White says it should pursue, albeit with a somewhat different (and in my view more sensible) approach.

Curiously, White cites Secretary Clinton in describing the “different kind of relationship” that he is prescribing, one that she, like White, says would “require adjustments in our thinking and our actions, on both sides of the Pacific”. White has been associated with government service long enough to know that when a Secretary of State gives a major foreign policy address outlining US-China policy, she is not making suggestions to the President of the United States; she is outlining official US policy, the same policy White wishes the United States would follow.

President Obama's speech before the Australian Parliament was not about China; it was about the United States. It was aimed at reassuring friends and allies that, despite its domestic financial difficulties and political gridlock, America remained “all in” in Asia, as White notes it should and must, if long

term stability is to be preserved. Here's what Obama said about China in that speech:

Meanwhile, the United States will continue our effort to build a cooperative relationship with China. All of our nations ... have a profound interest in the rise of a peaceful and prosperous China-and that is why the United States welcomes it. We've seen that China can be a partner, from reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula to preventing proliferation. We'll seek more opportunities for cooperation with Beijing, including greater communication between our militaries to promote understanding and avoid miscalculation. We will do this, even as continue to speak candidly with Beijing about the importance of upholding international norms and respecting the universal human rights of the Chinese people.¹

True, as White stresses, Obama also said that

history shows that, over the long run, democracy and economic growth go hand in hand. And prosperity without freedom is just another form of poverty.

Promoting freedom and democracy is what US presidents do; the message was not just to China but was and is a global one, steeped in US (and Australian) tradition. It is a great stretch to say that this is dismissive of China's accomplishments. While on the one hand White acknowledges that building a cooperative relationship should not preclude America from "speaking out against Chinese internal policies and events of which it disapproves", he sees current US criticism as "contesting that government's essential authority": "Governments that contest one another's legitimacy and seek one another's overthrow cannot [work together as equals]". Even the most paranoid of Chinese interlocutors do not usually accuse the United States of trying to "overthrow" the Chinese Government. How White reaches this conclusion is anyone's guess.

White's most damning unsubstantiated (and I would argue completely inaccurate) accusation is that

since about 2009, a clear consensus has emerged in Washington that China poses the biggest threat to America's international position, and that responding to this threat is now the highest foreign and strategic policy priority.

Really? I thought it was international terrorism and keeping weapons of mass destruction out of their hands, an effort which requires collaboration between Washington and Beijing. Perhaps White should have read the speech that Obama gave in July 2009 outlining US policy toward China when he hosted his first Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Washington. A few illustrative excerpts follow:

¹ B. Obama, speech to Australian Parliament, Canberra, 17 November 2013, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>> [Accessed 21 February 2013].

The relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century, which makes it as important as any bilateral relationship in the world. That really must underpin our partnership. That is the responsibility that together we bear.

[O]ur ability to partner with each other is a prerequisite for progress on many of the most pressing global challenges.

[N]o one nation can meet the challenges of the 21st century on its own, nor effectively advance its interests in isolation. It is this fundamental truth that compels us to cooperate.

[T]he United States respects the progress that China has made by lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Just as we respect China's ancient and remarkable culture, its remarkable achievements, we also strongly believe that the religion and culture of all peoples must be respected and protected, and that all people should be free to speak their minds.

Let us be honest: We know that some are wary of the future. Some in China think that America will try to contain China's ambitions; some in America think that there is something to fear in a rising China. I take a different view. And I believe President Hu takes a different view, as well. I believe in a future where China is a strong, prosperous and successful member of the community of nations; a future when our nations are partners out of necessity, but also out of opportunity. This future is not fixed, but it is a destination that can be reached if we pursue a sustained dialogue like the one that you will commence today, and act on what we hear and what we learn.²

The major problem with White's book is that its central accusation—that Washington is today determined to maintain regional supremacy by containing and confronting China—feeds the paranoid suspicions of those in China who see the United States as trying to hold China back. By feeding these suspicions, White makes it that much more unlikely that China will accept US overtures as genuine. As he himself acknowledges, building a cooperative relationship will only work if both sides are committed to it. His accusations will discourage China from making the "mutual concessions needed to pull back toward cooperation". Americans (along with Japanese, Europeans, and others) have invested billions of dollars in China to help it reach its current level of prosperity. This is not to demean the great accomplishments of the Chinese people and their government. But, had the West embarked on a policy of containment verse engagement, China's growth would have been slower and considerably more difficult. It has been the bipartisan policy of US presidents since Nixon's breakthrough visit, to help China rise and become an interdependent partner in an increasingly prosperous Asia. This has not been by accident; it has been deliberate US policy which Obama, like his predecessors, has followed.

² B. Obama, speech at the U.S./China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Washinton DC, 27 July 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-the-US-China-Strategic-and-Economic-Dialogue> [Accessed 21 February 2013].

President Obama began his presidency with an outstretched hand to China. Unlike several of his predecessors, he did not campaign against China as a “strategic competitor” (George W. Bush) or as the “butchers of Beijing” (Bill Clinton). From the onset he focused on building a cooperative, constructive relationship and seemed almost deferential to China. Some (myself included) have argued that Beijing misinterpreted Obama’s softer, polite approach as American weakness and, rather than meeting Washington half-way (as White prescribes), decided to push harder against US interests and allies, compelling Washington to push back, thus signalling (again as White prescribes) that attempts at achieving Chinese supremacy will also be resisted.

All this is not to dismiss the many cogent arguments in White’s book about the benefits of power sharing and the need to develop a more cooperative Sino-US relationship. His description of the consequences of a precipitous US withdrawal from Asia are compelling and convincing. Many of his other observations and recommendations also ring true. He does seem overly alarmist, however. His assertion that “war between the United States and China is already a clear and significant danger” does a disservice to the leadership in both countries which already recognise the need for cooperation and the limits to competition. Chinese leaders are also more aware of their own shortcomings than is White, who sees China “in the long run, more formidable than the Soviets were at the height of the Cold War”. Maybe one day, but not anytime soon. Even if the overall size of China’s economy exceeds that of America’s one day (which is likely although I suspect it will not come as soon as White and others like to predict), this does not make China more “powerful” either economically or strategically.

The dilemma he describes for Australia (and others)—whether we can continue to rely at the same time for America for our security and on China for our prosperity—in truth does not really exist. First, no one is asking Australia or anyone else to choose between the two countries. Second, economic partners come and go and economic reliance in most instances is mutual. China needs Australia’s natural resources as much as Australia needs China’s purchases. How much of Australia’s exports goes to Chinese companies and how much to multinational companies that twenty years ago were in Taiwan or Korea and twenty years (or less) from now are more likely to be in Vietnam, Indonesia, India, or elsewhere? Two-way trade in goods and services between Australia and China account today for 19.9 per cent of Australia’s total trade, versus 11.9 and 8.9 per cent with Japan and the United States respectively). When it comes to direct foreign investment in Australia, the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan top the list. The United States and United Kingdom are also the top destinations for Australian overseas investment (Japan is sixth). China does not even appear on either top ten list. While China is an increasingly important trading partner for Australia (as it is for the United States), to state that Australia relies on China for its prosperity is a gross overstatement. Indeed,

Australia's trade with ASEAN constitutes 14.5 per cent of total trade; with the EU it is 13.4 per cent. It sounds like Canberra's prosperity rests in numerous hands.

It is in looking at the military balance and in describing military scenarios where White is at his weakest. How does China's navy and air force, largely equipped with Russian hand-me-downs and Chinese copies of less than the best that Russia might otherwise have to offer pose "by far the greatest challenge to American sea control in the western Pacific by an Asian power since the defeat of Japan in 1945". Asserting that marines and aircraft carriers are "no longer a viable strategic option for Washington" displays a profound lack of understanding of sea power principles and the willingness, indeed necessity, to take risks in wartime. The idea that such forces would no longer be deployed during periods of increased tension during peacetime flies in the face of considerable history to the contrary.

Time and space limitations do not permit a longer assessment of White's accusations about US nuclear policy objectives. Suffice it to say that he should read the Obama administration's April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and its commitment to "strategic stability" with China. He also repeats the accusation frequently heard from his Australian colleague Gareth Evans that it was "sheer luck" that allowed us to avoid a general nuclear war during the Cold War era. This does a great disservice to the military planners and their political bosses in both the Soviet Union and the United States/NATO, who worked tirelessly to ensure that accidents and miscalculations did not trigger a nuclear catastrophe.

White also describes one scenario where a naval confrontation between China and Vietnam quickly descends into a nuclear confrontation between the United States and China. This requires much too vivid an imagination, especially given that the United States has no defence commitments to Vietnam and, his (and Beijing's) accusations to the contrary, has not been encouraging Vietnam or anyone else to militarily confront Beijing in the South China Sea. Washington has called for a peaceful solution, a credible and binding Code of Conduct, and a commitment to freedom of the seas. He avoids a discussion of a potential China-instigated military confrontation with the Philippines, a US treaty ally. One wonders how White thinks the United States should respond in such an instance, where one could construe Chinese motives as being aimed at testing Washington's commitment or seeking primacy, which White acknowledges must be resisted.

White also seems all too eager to hand Taiwan over to the Mainland and to encourage Japan to abandon its alliance with the United States in order to become an independent major power in Asia as part of a Concert of Power along with the United States, China, and India—Russia, despite its growing economic power and far superior military forces (*vis-à-vis* China) is out, in White's calculations.

As regards Taiwan, White argues that the United States “has no reason to oppose reunification if it happens with the unforced consent of a majority of Taiwanese people”. Not only is this true, this is declared US policy. The United States is not “implicitly opposed to this outcome”, as he asserts (again without documentation). Washington does not oppose “eventual, peaceful, consensual reunification”. It does oppose Chinese coercion or the threat or use of force in bringing about reunification. White asserts that

possession of Taiwan by China would not make any real difference to the strategic balance between the United States and China in the Western Pacific.

This only holds true if unification is truly consensual. Any Chinese government that the Taiwan people would willingly become a part of is likely to be one that is not threatening to the United States or to its neighbours. But US credibility in Asia would suffer greatly were it to stand by and allow Taiwan to be consumed by China against its will. This would clearly represent a move by China to assert its primacy in Asia, which White rightfully argues should be resisted.

White asserts that

a stable concert of power in Asia will only emerge if Japan is willing and able to act more independently of America and join the concert as a great power in its own right.

What’s missing is the formula by which Tokyo accomplishes this feat. The other three members are nuclear powers. Does this require Tokyo to also develop a nuclear weapons capability to be an equally great power? Indeed, if one removes the extended deterrence that the US security treaty currently provides, would Japan have any credible option other than to develop its own nuclear weapons? And what would be the reaction in Korea (South and North) to Japan’s major power status? Would this really create a more “stable” situation in Asia? Would China, even under such circumstances, be willing to treat India and Japan as equals?

Is creating a concert of powers that encourages a more independent (potentially nuclear weapons-equipped) Japan, while demeaning Russia and disregarding or downplaying the role of Korea, Indonesia/ASEAN, and others (including Australia) really the best path toward working out a cooperative power sharing relationship that allows China a larger role but also maintains a strong United States presence? Or, does the current US alliance system, which embraces Japan and Korea and encourages the rise of China within limits, make more sense?

Throughout his book, White asserts that “most [Americans] don’t even consider” the cooperation option and that many in America and even in Asia “believe that there is no third option for Asia between US primacy and

Chinese hegemony". But, in truth, this is the course that American leaders have consciously followed, albeit cautiously, not due to concerns about their own intentions, but rather about China's.

White raises many of the concerns that American policymakers today must take into consideration when crafting a cooperative approach toward China. If China is indeed a revisionist power, as White seems to suggest, then is seeking accommodation the right approach? Will Beijing be more likely to interpret this as a weakness to be exploited rather than an opportunity for power sharing? Will it temper or fuel Chinese ambitions? Hedging is not containment. Hedging is preparing for the worst while hoping and working toward the best. The signals that Washington is willing to share power in a future Asia are considerably more clear than are the signals that China will be as willing once it is fully risen.

One wishes that White would have understood and accepted this basic fact and instead focused his book on the more recalcitrant partner in this equation. I would encourage him to climb off his *China Choice* bandwagon and instead begin working on a follow-on volume entitled "*China's Choice*", aimed at persuading Beijing that Chinese supremacy or primacy is equally unlikely and unacceptable. Unless and until China is prepared to adopt the same course, White's third option sadly will not be achieved.

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