

## Power, Inertia and Choices: Advancing the Debate about China's Rise

Evelyn Goh

Most contemporary writing on the US-China relationship is heavier on advocacy than analysis, and Hugh White's new book is no exception. However, in a field dominated by loud cries either for US policy-makers to rise up and counter the China challenge or for Chinese decision-makers to prove themselves as responsible stakeholders, *The China Choice* stands out in pressing for alternative thinking. For that reason alone, White's call for Washington to share power seriously with Beijing, and his suggestion that this should take the form of a regional concert involving essentially the United States, China, Japan, India and possibly Indonesia, is unlikely to be received with universal enthusiasm.

Few would welcome White's power-sharing argument because it challenges their assumptions, ambitions and illusions about power and leadership in the region. The current China discourse in the United States is overshadowed by a gathering worry that US global primacy is in decline, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis. This insecurity exacerbates the traditional dichotomy and ambivalence vis-à-vis China to ferment an often vitriolic debate that nevertheless shows signs of coalescing towards a middle ground that agrees on two points. First, that inevitably growing Sino-American interdependence must be accompanied by a strong US policy of deterrence; and second, that China as currently constituted cannot be a full-fledged trusted strategic partner since its political identity is at odds with the existing liberal international order.<sup>1</sup> As such, when US policy-makers contemplate power-sharing in Asia, it usually takes the form of delegation to or cooperation with established allies, while China is still regarded as having to prove its intentions.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in three recent publications, moderate China scholar Christensen agrees with the more hawkish Friedberg on deterrence, while Friedberg and the liberal institutionalist Ikenberry converge on the need for China to change ideologically: T. J. Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); A. L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011); G. J. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Within China, a debate is growing slowly but steadily in the transition away from Deng Xiaoping's *taoguang yanghui* policy of biding time to develop comprehensive national power, towards questions of what kind of great power China should be and whether China ought to support or challenge the existing order. But this is still a gradual awakening, and without more coherence in narrowing down the parameters of this struggle for identity, power-sharing with the United States cannot be an option seriously favoured by opinion leaders against the backdrop of growing popular nationalism within China. Other countries in East Asia, meanwhile, either sustain national security identities that feed upon the assurance of continued US primacy, ground their national security strategies upon at least some degree of US-China rivalry, or seek to retain some strategic autonomy by forestalling great power domination. For all three reasons, a potential US-China condominium is distasteful.

Essentially, in spite of the constant debate and some earlier innovation, US and Asian responses and management of China's rise have been characterised by relative inertia. At the same time, Chinese policies and rhetoric have been relatively low-key and committed neither to supporting the status quo nor to revising it. In this arena so lacking in positive choices, Hugh White's book performs a valuable service: regardless of whether we agree with his prescription, we must take seriously White's diagnosis that this state of affairs cannot continue because

Washington and Beijing are already sliding towards rivalry by default, seeing each other more and more as strategic competitors [such that] the quest for political, strategic or military advantage becomes the overriding priority.<sup>2</sup>

His argument that the United States particularly must therefore stir itself to make some choices about China is not only timely, but helps to shine the spotlight on two core issues that have been buried in the myriad discourses thus far.

### **Alternative Thinking: Power-share**

First, *The China Choice* cogently sets out an important alternative strategy towards rising China, in contrast to the prevailing notions of balancing and containment, or bandwagoning and accommodation. As White rightly argues, accommodation—in the form of US withdrawal from the region—is out of the question, while containment and preserving the status quo of US primacy will be costly, dangerous, unpopular and potentially self-defeating.<sup>3</sup> Others have suggested 'hedging' as a way to mix containment and engagement, but the concept carries little meaning for a dominant power that

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<sup>2</sup> H. White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Collingwood, Vic: Black Inc., 2012), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> An argument also made powerfully in D. C. Kang, 'Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks', *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2003), pp. 57-85.

is essentially concerned with preserving its primacy to the exclusion of other powers.<sup>4</sup> Hedging is also a relatively passive notion, centred on the management of the status quo. Hence, White's suggestion of power-sharing as the potential, positive strategic choice for the United States and China is not only radical but potentially revolutionary.

Power-sharing is an option that I agree with and have analysed in the past. Examining the evolving regional order in 2005, I suggested that the contemporary situation of China generally adjusting its behaviour and rhetoric to conform with international norms and not out-rightly challenging US primacy could evolve in two different ways. China and the United States might embark on a process of "negotiated change" by which they consciously negotiated and managed a structural transition from US primacy to a power-sharing "duet". Or, their mutual antagonism and dissatisfaction with the shifting power distribution might lead to conflict and an unpredictable power transition.<sup>5</sup> The route of negotiated power-sharing would be preferable for the higher chances of a peaceful transition entailed, but I shared White's recognition that this option necessitates significant reversals to both American and Chinese mindsets and ambitions. Indeed, my greater concern was and remains that

the radical change required in American attitudes about China, the US role in the Asia-Pacific, and its exercise of power as the unipolar power will arguably be much more difficult to achieve

and that insufficient attention has been paid to the question of socialising the United States into non-military cooperative modes of security behaviour and into non-zero-sum strategic interactions with China.<sup>6</sup> White's focus on the United States in the book endorses the direction in which this main challenge lies.

## **Negotiating Satisfaction**

The second big contribution *The China Choice* makes is in kick-starting considerations of what power-sharing between the United States and China would look like. As White observes, sharing power would mean for China "abandoning hopes to lead Asia and accepting a strong US presence there indefinitely" and for the United States

accepting that its unique leadership role is no longer feasible and learning to work with China as a partner in a way that America has never done with any other country before.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See E. Goh, 'Understanding "Hedging" in Asia-Pacific Security', *PacNet*, vol. 43 (31 August 2006).

<sup>5</sup> E. Goh, 'The U.S.-China Relationship and Asia-Pacific Security: Negotiating Change', *Asian Security*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2005), pp. 216-44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>7</sup> White, *The China Choice*, p. 6-7.

He draws upon the remaining classical model of international relations, the 19<sup>th</sup> century European Concert of Powers, to flesh out what this type of cooperative great power management system would entail. Essentially, the United States and China must agree to limit their mutual competition—and, for White, this turns on an agreement to grant each other equal and independent status as great powers. In so doing, they would therefore agree not to try to dominate each other and to resolve differences by negotiation rather than force.

The book pays more attention to making the case for why this radical choice is necessary than how it can be put into practice, but in a small section, White lists seven “essential understandings” that the two sides must agree upon. These relate to mutual legitimacy: treating each other as equals, recognising each other’s domestic political systems, respecting each other’s national interests and right to develop armed forces sufficient to defend them, committing to resolve differences peacefully, agreeing on the norms of legitimate conduct, mutual willingness to counter attempts to dominate, and the ability to sell this to domestic audiences.<sup>8</sup> White will undoubtedly be criticised for not providing more substantive suggestions for how these fundamental agreements are to be translated into policy practice; however, he has quite rightly started at the beginning. The essential stumbling blocks to a more genuinely cooperative relationship between Washington and Beijing do still lie in their mutual perceptions, identity and ideology. Approaches that concentrate mainly on how to achieve an optimal mix of engagement and containment policies will by definition be conservative because they do not address these fundamental social structural constraints.

White tells us that the crucial question is not whether Asia’s future is American or Chinese supremacy, but “escalating rivalry or some form of great-power accommodation that constrains that rivalry”.<sup>9</sup> But more importantly, *The China Choice* reminds us that what is at stake is not only the nature of the US-China relationship, but the future character of the Asian order itself. The character of any functioning international order is basically determined by the shared understandings of the key state actors, but the two de facto shared understandings right now are that the United States will not relinquish its strategic leadership and military dominance, and China does not have a legitimate stake or voice in the existing order. This sets Asia up for the classic conflictual power transition scenario whereby a growing discrepancy between power resources and status causes a dissatisfied rising power to challenge the uncompromising incumbent hegemon. Yet, even within power transition theory, scholars have more recently focused on the scope for negotiation, which is wider than many believe. As one rationalist scholar observes, “the fact that fighting is costly ensures that a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 137-41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

bargaining range always exists".<sup>10</sup> The basic difficulty in reaching and sustaining such agreement revolves around expectations about continuing changes in distribution of power, but such commitment problems do not render bargaining impossible; rather, it consigns incumbent hegemon and potential challengers to "serial negotiation".<sup>11</sup>

White's book takes this argument to policy audiences in forcing us to consider more carefully the specific elements of what needs to come under negotiation between the United States and China if we aspire to a stable international order. This is a powerful rejoinder to classical realists like Henry Kissinger (2012), who suggest that a stable balance of power will occur naturally through mutual adjustment with the United States as China grows. Changing the nature of the relationship requires conscious negotiation of mutual satisfaction—as Kissinger himself found in negotiating the historic rapprochement with Communist China in 1971-72, which involved significant diplomatic performance and substantive policy actions on the part of the Nixon administration to grant China great power status, show respect for its core national interests and defer to its national security imperatives.<sup>12</sup>

In developing the argument for what Sino-American power-sharing would look like though, White encounters two key problems. First, there is a significant disjuncture between American and Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific that extends beyond the closing gap in operational military capabilities and economic influence. The United States exercises what may be accurately termed comprehensive power in the region: US strategic relationships are underpinned by and deliver on a structure of beliefs and benefits that China does not yet begin to match. For the not-insignificant number of US allies and partners in East Asia, the American relationship and US leadership often grows out of mutual identification that goes beyond instrumental gains alone. The World War II settlement and Cold War geopolitics tied the existential security of many non-communist partners into US commitment and alliances, while experience, training and groupthink consolidated a sustained pro-US sentiment within the region, creating a series of dyadic Deutschian 'security communities'.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the most vibrant of the East Asian economies took off within the framework of the US-led global economic order and its institutions, and their embedded-

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<sup>10</sup> R. Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem', *International Organization*, vol. 60 (2006), p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> S. Chan, 'Exploring Puzzles in Power Transition Theory: Implications for Sino-American Relations', *Security Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2004), p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> E. Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From Red Menace to Tacit Ally* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See especially N. Hamilton-Hart, *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012) on pro-Americanism in Southeast Asia and J. J. Suh, 'Bound to Last? The U.S.-Korea Alliance and Analytical Eclecticism', in J. J. Suh, P. J. Katzenstein and A. Carlson (eds.), *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 131-171 on the US-South Korean security community.

ness within these hegemonic structures is evident how these economies continue to support such institutions even after the Asian financial crisis. Over the last three decades, China's growth has undoubtedly brought most Asian countries selective economic gains and some diversification of dependencies, but China has not yet provided significant evidence of being able to create or lead in providing a strategic order that would deliver sustained security and benefits for these states.

Second, the United States and China are operating within seriously overlapping spheres of influence in the contemporary world—and the key region of overlap is East Asia. While White's argument suggests that this provides the ultimate imperative for cooperation between them, it is worth recalling that the key organisational principle of the European Concert was the ability, notionally at least, to draw relatively distinct spheres of influence within which to delimit each great power's areas of relative authority. Within East Asia today, however, China and the United States are, on the one hand, courting the same core strategic constituencies to establish regional strategic leadership—particularly key middle powers like South Korea and Indonesia. On the other hand, they each have to manage clients or junior partners that are difficult to control—North Korea for China, and increasingly the Philippines for the United States, for example.

### **Concert or Bust?**

Indeed, the most controversial part of *The China Choice* flows from the above constraints. White's idea of a potential concert of power led by the United States and China is unlikely to work, because a concert is a uniquely social arrangement that requires consent and complicity from all the key states within the regional order. White may be right that US supporter states do not support its primacy per se, but this does not mean that they would necessarily support power-sharing between the United States and China as the alternative.

As White himself acknowledges, the most significant challenge for a regional concert will come from Japan. Japan's post-war strategic position and identity has rested upon the fundamental base of the US alliance, and the unresolved Sino-Japanese geopolitical contest has been held at bay by the United States providing a dual assurance to keep these adversaries apart.<sup>14</sup> After the end of the Cold War, Japan has revised somewhat the limits within which it is willing to exert military power, but this has taken place very much within the confines of the US alliance. Indeed, sustaining the alliance remains at the heart of Japanese security imperatives, and this aim increasingly relies upon some degree of Sino-American friction and exacerbates Sino-Japanese antagonism. Against the stringent material and ontological constraints of Japanese domestic politics, White's proposal that a

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<sup>14</sup> H. White, 'Why War in Asia Remains Thinkable', *Survival*, vol. 50, no. 6 (2008/9), pp. 85-104.

regional concert would have to include a more 'normal', independently militarised Japan makes significant—and perhaps unrealistic—demands on its leaders and political system.

White may also underplay the lessons of the Korean conflict for a potential concert. The seemingly unresolvable conflict on the Korean peninsula has highlighted more than any other issue the limits to US-China strategic cooperation of the sort required in a concert of power. The two sides have not been able to narrow down a range of common goals that would allow joint management of the conflict; and as long as Pyongyang remains willing to threaten the South, Republic of Korea leaders would find it difficult to turn away from the strong reliance on the US alliance towards support for a US-China condominium to determine Korea's future. In Southeast Asia too, it is hard to imagine effusive support for a concert of great powers that would by definition exclude the majority of these small states. This was already evident in ASEAN's successful attempts to undermine an earlier Australian initiative to construct a major power-centred Asia-Pacific Community. Once again, picking out Indonesia as a sub-regional power only elicits alarm and resistance from this collection of states that have expended so much political and institutional effort to create for ASEAN a 'driving seat' in regionalism precisely to avoid great power dominance that would undermine their autonomy.

### **Advancing the Debate**

These constraints do not make the prospect of power-sharing between the United States and China impossible, but they do serve to heighten the challenge of what White is suggesting. Ultimately, it is not only the United States that has to make a choice about China. Almost every country in the Asia-Pacific faces some very tough strategic choices ahead—so the challenge is even bigger and more ambitious than what White sketches out in his book. The fact that *The China Choice* has caused so much controversy is a sign that White has succeeded in his main aim of provoking and dislodging policy-makers and politicians from their 'cruise control' mode and comfortable illusions about rising China. This is a starting point from which to build further innovation and alternative thinking about how to manage the evolving international order.

In advancing this debate, two further tasks stand out. First is the need consciously to develop alternative strategic concepts for the Asia-Pacific 'after hegemony'—not only in terms of great power interaction but also for national security strategies of the countries that remain deeply intertwined with US preponderance. Second, we need more sustained analytical attention paid to China itself. Arguably, the main forces of change and innovation in the coming years are most likely to arise from within the rapidly changing political and discursive landscape within China. In responding to White's stimulating book, the next fundamental question is, why should

China seek to share power? With what and how can the United States and other Asia-Pacific partners make power-sharing worth China's while, more than other alternatives? These questions will come to dominate the field as our focus is forced to shift from others' choices about China to China's choices.

*Evelyn Goh is Reader in International Relations, Department of Politics & International Relations, University of London. [Evelyn.Goh@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Evelyn.Goh@rhul.ac.uk)*