

## Missing the Mosaic: Gazing Through the Prism of Asian Futures

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*The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* by Hugh White (2012) is an extremely engaging, lucid and readable exposition on the alternative futures of Asia projected through the prism of multiple models that could apply in deciphering the evolving contours of the interface between the United States and China in recent years. White presents a noble and convincing narrative on how a bold and visionary deal with China by President Nixon in 1972 had facilitated an unprecedented 'golden age' of peace and stability for the last forty years in Asia. This master-stroke deal not only aligned adversarial China with the United States and against the former Soviet Union but set large parts of Asia on an irreversible course of Western-oriented economic and political reforms: making Asia, under the American leadership, the world's most vibrant region thereby heralding the proverbial Asian century and the legendary rise of China. It is this unprecedented rise of China that is projected as the fundamental trigger which calls the US leaders today to make similar bold and visionary choices for the future of Asia.

Going by history, Hugh White believes, this does not seem to be an insurmountable challenge for the United States. US leaders have dealt with similar challenges—from the previous rise of Nazis, Fascists and Soviets—and have continued to be world leaders for over 100 years underlining the creed of US exceptionalism. Of course, US leaders have never faced a challenger of the size and genre of China and especially in a world that has since transformed in both its methods and metaphors. Never before was our world as closely knit together as now. Besides, for the first time, China presents not a military challenge but one of simply becoming the largest economic power—overtaking the United States; and it will do so sooner than later. This clearly impinges on US interests without Beijing having to directly threaten the United States in any manner. Deeper than that, both the global discourses and China's actions seem to gradually undermine the very indices and connotations of 'power' that make the United States the sole surviving superpower, thus forcing the United States to re-enforce or revisit its assets and assumptions that have been the source of its power and influence so far.

This narrative is especially engaging for being so definitive about its assumptions and their expected outcomes which also make it vulnerable to the narrow-bandwidth of its binaries and biases, something that are seen as the benchmark of academic works that distinguish these from policy research perspectives. Though strong in its formulations and impressive about its organisation of materials presented, the reading of this book generates intense curiosity and responses to it are likely to trigger great debate on several of the issues and formulations presented by the author. Some of the issues that invite attention and further debate may include the following which are presented largely in contrarian relish to prompt responses on this very important subject of alternative futures of Asia and especially the future trends of intense interface between Washington and Beijing.

### **US Primacy Versus China's Hegemony**

At the very outset, White alludes to the centrality of global transformation and yet his analysis often fall prey to conventional wisdom and past experience as basis of his analyses. America, for instance, is too sharply painted like a benefactor (almost like a paragon of virtues) rather than as major beneficiary of this 1972 deal by President Nixon. Similarly, the follow up trends unleashing the Asian century clearly underplay the contributions of local Asian nations and leaders. Indeed, for an Asian reader, constant use of the words "US primacy" and "China's hegemony" appear intriguing. Similarly, use of the expressions 'Asia' and Asian century—for what actually is merely the Pacific-Asian region—appears seriously flawed if not a calibrated superimposition of cold war politics over Asia's history and geography. A book so deeply grounded in the fundamental hypothesis of an 'Asian century' and rise of China forcing US leaders to make tough choices cannot afford to take such a casual approach to geography and history so lightly. Similarly, use of the very loaded metaphor 'America' for the United States also remains equally intriguing and betrays author's uncontested internalisation of the Monroe Doctrine.

White's limited view of Pacific-Asia—as Asia—clearly allows the author to build the story of milk and honey and of the primacy of American leadership as the primary reason for it. To some extent one can take a benign view of both the East Asian Financial Crises as also the recent spread of terrorism which remains intrinsically connected to Asia's links to the so-called US leadership as also to its crisis. But how can one ignore other strong contrarian trends in the rest of Asia—Central, West, South—which have little reason to feel a part of any such narrative of either peace and prosperity or of the US leadership of Asia. Clearly, contributions of the US leadership, especially since the early 1990s, in the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and more recently in Egypt, Libya, and Iran tell a very different story of Asia and its future. Other than thousands of body bags for the United States and millions of causalities and destruction for these Asians, such US interventions have

invariably left behind far more radical regimes than the ones the United States came in to overthrow in the first instance. For them US leaders already have made their choice of 'offshore balancing' which clearly sounds like deserting them midstream.

The most perennial and curious feature is White's constant comparisons of the nature of politics and society between China and the United States which seem hurried if not simplistic. To take an equally simplistic opposite extreme of this argument, one only has to look at the state of affairs in the US polity and society when it stood at the ripe age of 63 in 1837—which is the current age of China's People's Republic as Hugh White makes these comparisons. Having consolidated the Louisiana Purchase (1803), US leaders were preparing for the annexation of Texas (1845), Oregon Territory (1846), Mexican Cession (1848) and Alaska Purchase (1867). All of these present well-known examples of intrigue and brutality with few parallels in human history. Conversely, the picture of the China of 2187—when it reaches the age of the US polity today—surely can be far more optimistic. Even when these comparisons are inevitable, there is need for a far greater caution in comparing apples and oranges. These inadvertently push the reader to see an anti-China slant that also goes against White's mention of China's material achievements and an increasing acceptance of China around the world which seem to hold great promise.

### **Debating Alternative Futures**

Then there is this issue of evolution of the 'State' itself which remains a critical part of global discourses on alternative futures. The contemporary nation-state as an institution is less than 400 years old and it has been evolving rapidly. For 1000 plus years before the nation-state there was a world of agrarian societies where the large-sized society of China had been the mystic civilisation attracting attention from far and wide. China's power and influence then was measured not in per capita income or defence expenditures but using very different indices of culture and commerce spread by traders and pilgrims from different parts of the world. As we take a broad-sweep from the ancient Silk Route to the Silicon Valley dominated by Asian-engineers, States are already beginning to create space for non-State actors. Civil society has developed a global persona and lives, not in time zones, but in a real time of constant connectivity and consciousness. Even in its core traditional functions like War, states (with the United States in the lead) increasingly depend on private security companies. Moreover, militaries are expected to represent only a miniscule core of the comprehensive national power and, as we move towards soft power, the gap between the United States and China remains far too little and is shrinking rapidly. So scenario building of nuclear competition between the United States and China seems like more than stretching it.

State policies of the United States and China can have only limited value as being the sole barometer of Asia's possible future trajectories. But White outlines Asia's futures as linked directly to the rise of China which in turn presents US leaders with three specific policy options: to withdraw from Asia, to push China back and to share power with China. White prefers the third one as the least costly of all. However, there is no talk of China's socialisation which could be an even cheaper option for the United States as worth considering? The United States indeed has been working on this option assuming to turn China into US-III (with EU being US-II). This also makes the example of transition of leadership from Great Britain to the United States look far more credible, cost-effective and the most likely model for Asia's future. Co-opting China into all so-called Western-sponsored international regimes and then outsourcing the nuclear non-proliferation of North Korea to China since 2003 alludes to this being the preferred strategy of US leaders. The book also misses on engaging with the ASEAN led efforts at launching initiatives for communitarian models of regional integration. Currently, in spite of sporadic speculations on US-China brinkmanship, these ASEAN-centric forums represent the most agreeable regional forums for discussions on the alternative futures amongst all Asian leaders. For sure, this model promises to be far more lasting than any Concert of Asia that involves only the United States, China, Japan, and India; as Russia and other so-called middle-powers of Asia are kept out of these arrangements.

It is interesting to note that even in the various alternative futures painted by the author China is presented largely in a negative light, if not as evil pure and simple. US polity, on the other hand, has been and promises to remain the benefactor, almost a paragon of virtues. One is not sure whether any such simplistic binary perspective can be supported by either their past or their present. Flowing from this basic assumption is his exercise in scenario building of potential China-US confrontation which remains a prisoner of the time warp of cold war years whereas today the world seems completely transformed and too connected; where states have become far too focused on non-traditional threats from non-State actors and increasingly dependent on civil society participation and initiatives. Even in so-called monolithic China, one can see a rise of non-governmental organisations and transformation in the media and private ownership and initiatives which are becoming noticeable. So China is not only economically far more robust and less overstretched than either the former Soviet Union was or the United States is today, China also has far more Chinese living in the United States and contributing to the US economy, polity and society than Soviets could have ever imagined. The United States and China share far stronger economic interdependence and their interface remains far too broad-based to be limited to their State-to-State interactions. It surely cannot be restricted to the limited bandwidth of three policy choices of State entities.

## **Other Asian Players**

In reality, neither US nor Chinese leaders seem to be taking initiatives based on any such scenario building. Most of their actions remain knee-jerk reactions that seek to address scores of teasers and triggers from visions of leaders at the helm to the view of the man on the street all broadly reflecting their traditions and broad understandings. State policies on both sides also remain focused primarily on their domestic constituencies and compulsions. The book clearly misses on discussions on the trends in their domestic politics and societies. Who could contemplate till 2008 that the United States would elect a black man to the White House, and do so again in 2012. The US presidential elections of 2012 were the last for US history with whites constituting the majority of voters, which itself is likely to unleash noble trends. Similarly, China's polity has become far more transparent and debates about factions and in-fighting within the Communist Party as also in terms of China's gradual reforms towards creating greater space for making choices at all levels of political participation and decision making. Their societies are changing even more rapidly.

Currently, China seems to lead Asia's economic order based on its co-prosperity sphere of influence where most nations today have begun to see their own prosperity being linked to the prosperity of China. Similarly, the United States continues to lead Asia's security order where most nations except few exceptions—China being most notable—see their security in the leadership of the United States. Both these orders remain parallel and yet share a complex relationship involving a mosaic of changing shades and changing ratios of costs and benefits which again remain subject to changing assessments and interpretations. The mosaic of Asia seems far too intertwined to be understood using a model of East-West equations of the Cold War years. Even treating their states as autonomous and primary actors would be limiting given the enormous intermixing of their economies and societies. American symbols like McDonalds and KFC make more profits in China than in the United States and China remains the source of manufacturing for so many US businesses.

Meanwhile, most middle-powers of Asia—India included amongst these—remain cautious and will prefer not to be forced to choose sides. Most of them expect to see the United States and China calibrating their interface on a day-to-day basis; gradually learning from these baby-steps rather than becoming prisoners to any grand strategies. Besides, each of these middle-powers will have their own ambitions and needs that will guide their analyses and initiatives. India for instance sees 'strategic autonomy' and 'multi-alignment' as its most preferred policy though it does not fully define its alignments and initiatives which have often been far too pragmatic to even the Indian elite's comfort. But if India has to take a policy stance on proposals like being part of any 'Concert of Asia' as outlined by Hugh White,

official New Delhi is likely to feel extremely reluctant to be seen endorsing any such idea.

## **Concert of Asia**

India, that Hugh White finds historically “isolated” and currently not of direct relevance to Pacific-Asia itself sounds like a dated, very western and a non-starter of an assumption to begin with. Most Indians feel proud of India’s participation in international affairs and consider India as one of the pioneers in launching the Asian Relations Conferences in March 1947 (even before its own independence) and for contemplating of an Asian Relations Organization. Most experts consider India’s engagement with East Asia since early 1990s as a success story of India’s foreign policy. This includes India’s engagement with Australia which may have been partially facilitated by India’s recent engagement with the United States. India shares Australian perspectives of co-opting China into any such future Asian orders yet mainstream India remains wary of any formulation that smells of ‘spheres of influence’ or ‘balance of power’ which remain the very basis of Hugh White’s Concert of Asia.

Others may also have objections on other counts. The nineteenth century Balance of Power model so approvingly presented by Hugh White had a ‘balancer’ as also had relatively equal statured states as its members. Who will play the ‘balancer’ in Concert of Asia and how to bridge the enormous gap amongst the United States, China, Japan and India in terms of their wealth and populations. Moscow—the largest weapons supplier to both China and India—will have its own reasons to feel sore with Hugh White for Russia’s clear exclusion from Concert of Asia. Others like Indonesia—which are part of Kevin Rudd’s Asia Pacific Community—have also been celebrated for their democratisation and growth rates. Lately, the lowering growth rates of India have led to insinuations that the ‘I’ of BRICS, IBSA, BASIC should now stand for Indonesia and not India. And then there are the rapidly growing South Korea and pregnant-with-great-potential, Vietnam, and of course Australia! Once Hugh White goes beyond the G2 model he needs to explain the basis of his inclusions and exclusions.

And finally, where do we place ASEAN in any such Concert of Asia? ASEAN does not even believe in any such model. Conversely, community-building approach of ASEAN has apparently been the one most favoured even in Pacific-Asia; and endorsed by several leading Australian experts and practitioners including several former prime ministers and foreign ministers. Successive Indian leaders from Nehru onwards have also been reluctant to be part of any Concert of Powers and have propagated and practised confidence and community building approaches. India has stood firm in not sending forces to be part of coalitions of the willing in either Iraq or Afghanistan and continues to explore diplomatic solutions in the case of Iran. Indeed, the Chinese have also shown a similar orientation. One is not sure

therefore as to who are the willing takers of Hugh White's Concert of Asia? If anything, Hugh White's Concert of Four raises more questions than it even seeks to answer; unless, of course, raising questions was itself what the author may have intended.

That European experiences and lessons cannot be replicated in Asia has been the most regular refrain of Asian scholars. This often sounds rhetorical and anti-colonial but it is also true. With chunks of its landmass hosting Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism and nations varying to extremes in every conceivable variable, any future trajectories of this Asian mosaic will require multilevel and multidimensional projections and can at best provide only a broad sweep of a rather flexible and constantly evolving road-map to its future. This partly explains why Asia continues to be confused with Pacific-Asia. This also tells us why, in spite of so many regional and sub-regional forums, it has not been possible to put up a single pan-Asian forum so far. This nuanced (or nostalgic) Asian approach to alternative futures of Asia may be far more realistic but it has limitations in generating quick and specific long-term policy options as is attempted by Hugh White in *The China Choice*. The book therefore fills a critical space and makes a very thought-provoking and interesting read and this one-big-idea brain-teaser now calls for a deeper and broad-based sequel, from a Chinese perspective.

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