
The Quest for a Concert of Powers in Asia

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As China rises to power in Asia, the hunt is on for a means to ensure its 'peaceful rise'. One approach advanced in the Australian debate is that Beijing might be inducted into a concert of powers, similar to the Concert of Europe. But different positions within international relations theory would view the capacity of a concert of powers to fulfil this role very differently. 'Offensive realists' would see any concert as being at best short-lived, while neorealists and constructivists would argue that potential power balancing, multilateral organisations and normative values would accord greater flexibility within the concert to accommodate changing conditions and power parities. This paper explores the prospects of a concert of powers in Asia from the point of view of the nineteenth century European precedent, the theoretical issues involved, and the applicability of the idea in present day Asia. It concludes that although a concert could be a useful mechanism, it should not be relied on to the exclusion of other means of assisting regional dialogue and transparency.¹

The rapid rise of China and apparent relative decline of the United States have precipitated a debate about the nature of the order in Asia that will emerge as a consequence. Leading Australian commentators such as Coral Bell and Hugh White have recently advanced the idea of a concert of powers as a possible solution to the region's security problems.² The concept of a concert of powers is highly seductive given the perception in some quarters that the current Asia-Pacific security architecture is incapable of assisting China's 'peaceful rise', and that unless the region can develop an alternative approach it faces the bleak prospect of a return to overt power balancing, containment and a possible new 'cold war'.

But how difficult would a concert of powers be to develop and maintain, and how appropriate would it be to Asia's current circumstances? This article reviews these questions in light of the historical model provided by the Concert of Europe and discusses some theoretical issues relating to the idea and its viability in modern Asia. In contrast to Bell and White, it is more sceptical about the potential role and stability of an Asian concert. It argues that circumstances in nineteenth century Europe were very different than

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the scholarly advice of the two anonymous readers of the original paper. Any remaining faults are, of course, my own.

² Coral Bell, *Living with Giants: Finding Australia's Place in a More Complex World* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2005); Hugh White, *Power Shift: Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2010). Michael Wesley notes that the G6, which was locked into consideration of the issue of nuclear weapons in North Korea, could profitably be converted into such a concert with the subtraction of North Korea and addition of India. See Michael Wesley, 'Asia-Pacific Institutions', in William Tow (ed.), *Security Politics in the Asia-Pacific: A Regional-Global Nexus?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 65.

they are in Asia today. Power parities are shifting rapidly and a concert of powers may not prove inherently stable enough to accommodate these circumstances. This rapidly changing landscape may tend towards more overt power balancing, or even containment strategies. The latter, in particular, would not be consonant with the maintenance of a true concert of powers. Nor is it clear that even if the United States were to concede strategic space to China in Asia as a necessary precondition for a concert of powers, Beijing would continue to behave in ways conducive to the maintenance of such a system.³ Although the idea of strategic compromise with China should not be cast aside, it would also be wise to continue to develop other options for dealing with China's rise in parallel to the pursuit of a concert.

The Precedent of the Concert of Europe

It is commonplace today to reference the Concert of Europe, meaning the time from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the start of the First World War, as a period during which a concert of powers was able to prevent catastrophic war of the kind endured during the twentieth century. Bell, for example, argues that the concert was instrumental in preventing "hegemonial" war in Europe throughout the nineteenth century, a view shared by White.⁴ They then apply this historical example as a model for today's situation in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet we need to ask, in what ways did the Concert of Europe really succeed and what might it tell us, if anything, about our circumstances in modern Asia?

Historians of the Concert of Europe generally agree on three main elements: a commitment to maintain the *status quo*; an agreement not to use war or its threat to settle problems (or if war does occur, to ensure it is short and not 'systemic'); and an agreement that a concert is an informal arrangement built on enlightened self-interest rather than one dependent on formalised norms. In his seminal study, Carsten Holbraad refers to the Concert of Europe as "the idea of a loose association of great European powers consulting and acting together occasionally."⁵ According to Bell, problems are dealt with informally as between equals, with "assiduous consultation".⁶ This is akin to an elite 'gentlemen's club', which informally acts to manipulate events according to its wishes.

Most commentators also see power balancing as lying at the heart of the idea of the concert of powers. According to Henry Kissinger, the genius of the nineteenth century practitioners lay in their ability to transform an existing power balance set up to contain and defeat Napoleonic France into a

³ White, *Power Shift*, pp. 55-6; Bell, *Living with Giants*, p. 41.

⁴ Bell, *Living with Giants*, p. 40; White, *Power Shift*, p. 23.

⁵ Carsten Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe: A Study in German and British International Theory 1815-1914* (London: Longmans, 1970), p. 4.

⁶ Bell, *Living with Giants*, p. 41.

concert of powers—a challenge that Bell sees as equally applicable during the Cold War.⁷ It is the possibility of a balance forming against a member that wishes to break the unwritten rules of the concert that prevents the possible offender from doing so. The possibility of balancing against an offender is also derived from the belief that in a concert, all members are approximately equal in power. If the strength of any one member were to become too great, a possible balance would not act as a deterrent. Hedley Bull considers power balancing to be so central to the Concert of Europe that he does not even refer to the term ‘concert’ but describes what existed in Europe as a “complex or multiple balance”.⁸

Douglas Stuart, however, sees other attributes of the Concert of Europe as being more important than power balancing. He argues that for most of the period of the Concert, Britain and Russia were far stronger than the three other powers, even to the extent that they could not be ‘ganged up upon’ by the others—thus diminishing the salience of the idea of the balance of powers.⁹ He nominates three more important components of the Concert of Europe: containment, reconciliation and shared values.¹⁰ Hans Morgenthau argues that the key driver of the nineteenth century concert was the fact that Europe possessed an “intellectual and moral unity” which was based on its Christian, conservative values and which was cultivated by a succession of “brilliant diplomatists”.¹¹ Implicit in his argument was the idea that Europe itself constituted a kind of ‘nation’. French philosopher Jacques Rousseau agreed, seeing Europe as an “invisible nation” in which “the actual system of Europe has exactly that degree of solidity which maintains it in a state of perpetual agitation without overwhelming it”.¹²

Almost all scholars ascribe different phases to the Concert, during which it is said to operate differently, as dictated by the demands of the time. According to Amitav Acharya, “[t]he system worked well between 1815 and 1823, but experienced a steady decline thereafter.”¹³ Holbraad argues that, at least in Germany, “the pattern of speculation about the Concert of Europe clearly reflects the course of history”.¹⁴ In other words, the reality of the times interacted closely with the norms of the Concert, if not actually driving them.

⁷ Coral Bell, ‘Kissinger in Retrospect: The Diplomacy of Power-Concert’, *International Affairs*, vol. 53, no. 2 (April 1977), p. 207.

⁸ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1977), pp. 108-9.

⁹ See Douglas T. Stuart, ‘Towards Concert in Asia’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 37, no. 3 (March 1997), pp. 230-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 209, 146-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹³ Amitav Acharya, ‘A Concert of Asia?’, *Survival*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Autumn 1999), p. 85.

¹⁴ Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe*, p. 13.

Most analysts see the Concert of Europe as representing a complex phenomenon in a complex time rather than a simple 'engine' for producing peace. That is not to say it did not exist as a 'system' and did not help prevent catastrophic war in Europe during the century after the defeat of Napoleon. But it was nebulous and defined by its subtlety, particularly as it related to the idea of the balance of power—a much older European concept.

Despite the Concert of Europe having prevented catastrophic war in Europe itself, there is some dispute concerning just how peaceful the nineteenth century was. Certainly, the century was not one without war in Europe, with the Austro-Prussian war, the Franco-Prussian war, the two Schleswig wars and the Crimean War being some of a number of available examples. Moreover, the nineteenth century concert was conducted against the backdrop of rabid colony-seeking and colony-exploiting behaviour. This set of circumstances may have provided an outlet for the participating powers not available today. And it also challenges the idea of the century being one of peace. Finally, although nineteenth century Europe did not experience catastrophic war for a century after Napoleon, by 1914 the build up of tension in the European 'system' was such that the relatively minor incident of the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand led to one of the most catastrophic wars of all time.

In view of these doubts about the characteristics and benefits of the Concert of Europe, further inquiry is needed concerning the theoretical underpinnings of the concert idea in order to provide greater clarity and help determine how, if at all, it might be applied to modern Asia.

Some Theoretical Considerations

Individual views on the theoretical underpinnings of the concert of powers depend significantly on assumptions about the role of balance of power in driving a concert of powers. Morgenthau undervalued the role of power balancing in relation to nineteenth century Europe and emphasised other elements of the Concert. It is still the case, however, that most proponents of the idea stress the role of balance of power in maintaining a concert of powers. Although Holbraad regarded balance of power theory as lying at the heart of concert of powers theory, he also noted the concept of balance of power was interpreted very differently in Germany and Great Britain.¹⁵

To the extent that balance of power is regarded as important to concert of powers theory, neorealists would tend to be more comfortable with the concept of concert of powers than realists. Neorealists such as Kenneth Waltz argue that power balancing would likely re-establish a rough *status quo* to offset the rise of a great power like China, whereas realists would be

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 152-3 and passim.

more inclined to see the international system purely in terms of interaction between individual state units. It is this *potential* of power balancing that gives rise to the possibility of an emerging concert.¹⁶ Although admitting the possibility of miscalculation, neorealists assert that power balancing tends to maintain peace, since the costs of war for any side in a balanced situation are too high. Thus the powers in the concert need to be approximately equal in order to balance each other's presence. They also constitute an 'incipient' balance capable of countering any single power that seeks to overthrow what is understood to be the order underlying the concert.

However, concert of power theory also contains constructivist elements. For example, it assumes that the powers in play have learned that war is not a suitable state and that judicious compromise is better than unrestrained competition. These constructivist overtones allow for the possibility that a concert may evolve into something more formal and structured. Holbraad argues that this actually occurred in British thought during the later stages of the Concert of Europe, providing a direct antecedent of Wilsonian diplomacy and the League of Nations.¹⁷ Conversely, others argue that an existing, modern structure might evolve into a concert, such as is the case with the G20 or an expanded permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council.¹⁸

Unless enshrined in an incipient 'nation' as implied by Morgenthau of nineteenth century Europe, 'offensive realists' would claim that a concert is inherently unstable. According to the offensive realist view, a concert, to exist at all, would need to consist of a collection of nearly equal powers in a state of stasis. This collection of powers, moreover, would not modify their behaviour by seeking compromise to avoid the formation of a possible power balance against them. Indeed, the offensive realist line of thinking would regard China's rise as a zero-sum-game, in which one great power would lose and the other win, and in which each would strive to outpace the other, no matter the consequences. Other conditions such as growing international trade and the increasing salience of regional and international institutions would be seen as extraneous to the real competition. According to this view, any informal mechanism such as a concert of powers would have scant prospect of remaining intact in the face of the overwhelming onslaught of pure competition.

Power transition theorists such as Organski would also argue that changes in great power relations give rise to dangerous times.¹⁹ In this view, rising powers such as China are dissatisfied with the *status quo* and prone to challenge it, including through war. They too would take a dim view of the

¹⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 98-130.

¹⁷ Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe*, pp. 162-204.

¹⁸ Bell, 'Kissinger in Retrospect', p. 207.

¹⁹ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

possibility that a concert of powers might significantly mitigate these pressures. Others, however, argue that the danger of war in transition periods is overstated and that transition theory does not accurately reflect international reality.²⁰

In purely theoretical terms, it could be argued that the 'offensive realist' interpretation of a concert consisting of near equal powers in stasis is inherently difficult to maintain. Basic rules of physics suggest that the more factors (countries) in a state of equilibrium, the narrower the constraints in which they could coexist.²¹ Another analogy might be drawn from systems theory. There is little doubt that a concert of powers, with multiple members having to coexist in something approximate to a state of equilibrium, would constitute a system. Such a system, like any other, would need to be self-correcting through the feedback mechanism in order to continue to function as a stable concert. Its internal adjustments would have to occur within a tight set of restrictions, beyond which, the system itself would collapse. Seen through the realist lens, therefore, any concert of powers that might evolve in Asia would be highly unstable and would not provide a suitable platform for Asian security.

Of course, any attempt to draw on natural laws to illustrate international relations can only be heuristic. Nevertheless it can be instructive, particularly in pointing us to the need carefully to define the constraints that would be necessary to ensure the continued existence of a concert of powers.

For the realist, those constraints would be highly restrictive. To coexist in stasis, the powers would firstly need to be fully accepting of the ideologies of their fellow concert members and have no aspirations to change them. They would also need to have no aspirations to change profoundly the *status quo* in other areas, such as control of territory or access to resources. The latter would need to continue to be resolved through the market mechanism rather than through any quasi imperialist or mercantilist mechanisms that a rising Asian power might seek to impose on supplier nations.

Secondly, states would need to be similar in power and to maintain that power parity over time. Unlike neorealists, classical realists would see the stasis in any concert to lie in the fact of power similarity amongst all

²⁰ See for example Steve Chan, *China, the U.S., and Power Transition Theory: A Critique* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008); Jack. S. Levy, 'Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China', in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (eds.), *China's Ascent: Power, Security and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 11-33.

²¹ One analogy is water, which can exist as a gas, liquid and solid in stable equilibrium, but only at one point of pressure and temperature, being 273.16 Kelvin and 611.73 pascals. However, water can exist as a gas and liquid or as a liquid and solid in equilibrium at various combinations of temperature and pressure.

members rather than the possibility of formation of a balance of power capable of absorbing and countering shifts in power parity.

It is also worth noting that these two restraints—*status quo* maintenance and power equity—are closely connected, in the sense that if one were to become unstable then the other would likely do the same. For example, an India that were to become significantly less powerful *vis-à-vis* China would feel vulnerable to China's wish to realign the *status quo* in respect of the border dispute or the status of the Indian Ocean.

A third restraint would be that no two or more powers could draw too close at the expense of any other. Thus the India-US and India-Japan relationships would need to be restrained in terms of their natural propensity to become more intense in the context of a rapidly rising China, at least in so far as the operations of the concert were concerned and according to the beliefs of the realist. However, any radical shift in either *status quo* acceptance or power parities would tend to run counter to the maintenance of this equidistant set of relations, thus further ensuring the instability of the system.

Neorealists, however, would be in a position to posit a far more flexible view of a functioning concert because the possibility of a power balance would act as a shock absorber to cushion the effects of changing power parity or attitudes to the *status quo*. Since the neorealist idea of the concert of powers is heavily dependent on power balancing, or its possibility, the idea of the balance of power as contained in the idea of the concert of powers is worthy of further examination.

The key question is to what extent the role of power balancing in the concert is permissible while still allowing for the existence of the concert. Is power balancing in a concert always to be 'incipient', in the sense that its possibility is what keeps the actual concert in play, or can power balancing from time to time be actualised, and if so, for how long and in what degree? This problem is informed, for example, by the experience of the Cold War. For the most part, the Cold War consisted of a dyadic power balance rather than a concert of powers. Although it could be argued that this dyadic balance helped to maintain stability for four decades, advocates of the modern Asian concert would not see the Cold War as something to be emulated. White argues that sustained Sino-US competition would be "darker than that [a concert], and the more intense the conflict the darker it would grow".²² But this raises the question of whether a balance in being could be re-shaped into a concert or if it would inevitably evolve into unbridled competition?

Bell is 'catholic' on the question of power balancing and the Cold War, even praising Kissinger's policy of *détente* as holding out the possibility of a new

²² White, *Power Shift*, p. 51.

global concert. According to her, the “central balance” and concert are not the same thing, but

the business of transforming an achieved *balance* of powers into a *concert* of powers involves the same sort of network of common conventions, common assumptions and some common interests in the two cases [the Concert of Europe and a possible Cold War era concert arising out of *détente*].²³

She also maintains that the nineteenth century concert was dependent on *actual* power balancing, usually constructed by Great Britain in response to any attempt by a Continental power to be too assertive. In asserting this position, she distinguishes between ‘containment’ of the military variety exercised by NATO against the former Soviet Union and what she calls “off-shore balancing” conducted by Britain in the nineteenth century in the context of the European concert. She also sees this off-shore balancing role being conducted today by the United States in the Asian context. This takes the form of the ‘San Francisco system’, which involves a series of bilateral relationships between the US and its Asian friends and allies and which is sometimes referred to as the ‘hub and spokes’ model.²⁴

In this approach adopted by Bell, Kissinger and others, the idea of the balance of power is not only intrinsic to the idea of the concert of powers, but also a useful precursor to the emergence of a viable concert of powers. A concert can thus arise either from an existing balance or out of concern that a balance might be constructed. This idea of the role of a ‘balance in being’ *versus* an ‘implicit balance’ will be further explored in the context of the example of the abortive ‘quadrilateral’ below.

Like neorealists, those of constructivist disposition would also be more sanguine concerning the strength and longevity of a concert of powers. While accepting the role of the balance of power, such theorists would additionally see positive constraints on those seeking to upset the *status quo* in terms of existing norms, structures and systems of economic interdependence. These, they would argue, can add considerable ballast to the concert of powers in terms of the level of flexibility within the system. It is in this sense that commentaries in the 1990s saw China’s membership of the World Trade Organisation and other multilateral organisations as a useful tool in facilitating a concert of powers by “tying” China in to the multilateral system.²⁵

So here we have an example of two broadly opposed theoretical positions, each of which gives rise to very different views on the efficacy of the idea of the concert of powers. The classical realist position would be one of

²³ Bell, ‘Kissinger in Retrospect’, p. 207.

²⁴ Coral Bell, *The End of the Vasco da Gama Era: The Next Landscape of World Politics* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2007), p. 51.

²⁵ Stuart, ‘Towards Concert in Asia’, pp. 238-9.

considerable scepticism about the prospects for any concert of powers. According to this view, a concert could only operate within rigid constraints. These constraints are, moreover, closely inter-related, so as one shifts, so too would the others, with the foundations for a concert consequently becoming comprehensively unstable. The neorealist and constructivist positions, however, would accept that there could be much more flexibility for changing conditions within the concert – largely due to the role of the potential power balance, but also due to the ballast offered by the institutional base.

Given these two radically opposed positions, it might be helpful in terms of taking the debate forward to see how a concert of powers might actually play out in the modern Asian context

A Concert of Powers for Asia?

It is possible to argue that a concert of powers would be a good thing for Asia without arguing that the example of nineteenth century Europe is necessarily applicable either to Asia or the modern world. To do so, however, it is first necessary to understand what we mean by the term 'Asia'. We also need a clear idea of what would constitute a viable 'concert of powers' in the Asian region—one separate from that derived from the historical record.

WHAT ASIA?

In the 1990s, Stuart and Acharya adopted a limited definition of 'Asia' in their explorations of an Asian concert. Acharya's concert included only four member powers—the United States, Japan, China and Russia. He argued that only North Asia should be included in any concert. According to him, South East Asia was less relevant to the great powers and South Asia had too many intractable problems, including the nuclear issue.²⁶ Stuart's idea of an Asian concert was even more limited. He made the case for a 'trilateral' arrangement consisting of the United States, China and Japan.²⁷

But today India is also increasingly relevant. India's nuclear status has been mitigated by the US-India nuclear agreement, which has effectively brought India into the nuclear 'tent'. India has a strong economic growth rate of between seven and nine percent and by 2025 is anticipated to be the largest country in population in the world.²⁸ With continuing economic globalisation and the rapidly growing salience of the Indian Ocean as the major energy and trade conduit into East Asia, South Asia is increasingly linked with East and South East Asia. Moreover, as India grows in power, any serious falling out between New Delhi and Beijing could radically affect the entire Asia

²⁶ Acharya, 'A Concert of Asia?', p. 98.

²⁷ Stuart, 'Towards Concert in Asia', p. 241.

²⁸ 'India's Population to Surpass China's', *The Hindu*, 16 April 2011, <<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article1701790.ece>> [Accessed 16 August 2011].

power equation. If India were to form strategic ties with the United States (whether formalised as an alliance or not), Asian security would be profoundly affected. Therefore, both Bell and White rightly include India in any potential Asian concert of powers.²⁹

It would be difficult to justify any South East Asian nation as a member of an Asian concert. That is not to say, however, that the issues evident in South East Asia, such as the question of the South China Sea, or security of energy supplies passing through the Malacca Straits, do not also cut across those that threaten the security of Asia as a whole. Acharya's solution was to suggest that the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) could operate alongside any concert and complement its activities.³⁰ In any case, the concert would need to exercise influence within the ASEAN area to deal with the issues mentioned above, especially since China is a key protagonist of the South China Sea dispute and has important economic interests in the security of energy supplies passing through the region.

Asian security could also be maintained by a global concert of powers. If a global concert could be made to work, an Asian concert would be redundant, since Asian security would be subsumed in global security. A global concert might be confined to those members who would comprise any Asian concert, plus the European Union, or it might be broad ranging, for example, involving the G20.³¹ But we also need to note White's point that for a concert to be viable, only the strongest powers "should have a seat at the table".³² Any concert containing more, and *ipso facto*, weaker, powers would be intrinsically less stable, since for a stable concert to exist each power needs to have a pretty good idea of what the other is about. Having more, but smaller, members naturally leads to opacity, since it is harder to keep tabs on nineteen (in the case of the G20) as opposed to four (in the case of the Asian concert proposed in the following paragraph) fellow powers. Opacity in turn leads to suspicion, which encourages secret dealing and power balancing. Thus a concert consisting of fewer, but larger, powers would clearly have better prospects.

²⁹ White, *Power Shift*, p. 31; Bell, *Living with Giants*, pp. 35-6.

³⁰ Acharya, 'A Concert of Asia?', p. 98.

³¹ Michael Lind, in his *The American Way of Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) argued for a global concert as opposed to hegemonial competition. Lind advocated a series of 'regional concerts' of power, for example in Europe and Asia. Richard N. Haas also supported a global concert. See 'Towards a 21st Century Concert', Remarks to the National Committee on American Foreign Policy on the Occasion of Receiving the Hans J. Morgenthau Award, <<http://www.cfr.org/world/toward-21st-century-concert---remarks-national-committee-american-foreign-policy-occasion-receiving-hans-j-morgenthau-award/p6865>> [Accessed 5 August 2011]. Graeme Dobell argued that the G20 offered a platform for a new concert of powers. See 'The 21st Century Concert of Powers', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2008/10/The-21st-century-concert-of-powers.aspx>> [Accessed 31 March 2011].

³² White, *Power Shift*, p. 24.

An Asian concert of powers—or more accurately a concert operating in the Asia-Pacific region—would therefore likely consist of the United States, China, Japan, Russia and India and would cover East, South East and South Asia. It would also have strong interests in the Gulf region and Central Asia, which supply so much of East Asia's energy.

WHAT CONCERT?

The tendency to rely on the record of the Concert of Europe in defining the nature of a modern concert in Asia can only take us so far. As discussed above, the defining characteristics of the Concert of Europe are by no means agreed. It was a somewhat nebulous, subtle arrangement that fed heavily from European cultural and diplomatic traditions. It existed during very special times following the Napoleonic Wars. It initially consisted of like-minded, *status quo* powers seeking to contain France. And it was framed and maintained against a background of colony-seeking and exploitation very different to today's world.

Another problem with our understanding of the concept—whether viewed historically or in modern terms—is that different schools within international relations theory are likely to view a concert of powers very differently.

As discussed above, 'offensive realists' would tend to be highly sceptical about the prospects for a modern concert of Asia. The realist would see the restraints governing a viable concert as being far more restrictive than would those identified by the neorealist or constructivist. Neorealism and constructivism allow for balance of power, normative values and trade to act as shock absorbers within the concert, while realism would suggest a tightly constrained, 'mechanistic' model. For a concert to work, a realist would need to posit that the concerned powers be few in number, that they be very nearly equal in power and not rapidly changing in power parities, and preferably that they would be significantly like-minded. Balance of power, or even its threat, would not be central to the idea.

The strict parameters dictated by realism certainly do not apply to modern Asia. China, for example, is not in a basically stable power relationship with any of the other powers that would comprise the concert. It is growing in power in respect to all of them and there is nothing to make us suppose that this relative growth will soon cease.

In fact, many commentators, including White, have argued that China's rise *vis-à-vis* the United States is likely to be sustained to the point where China is considerably more powerful than the United States.³³ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that China's economy will surpass that of the

³³ White, *Power Shift*, pp. 13-8.

United States as early as 2016.³⁴ Already China's enormous foreign exchange reserves, estimated at over US\$3 trillion, are being used to garner soft power on a global basis, including through the so-called 'Beijing consensus'.³⁵ Preponderant economic weight is soon followed by preponderance in other forms of power. At a time when economic problems suggest cuts will occur in US defence spending and cuts are already in evidence in the defence programs of other Western powers, China's spending continues to rise rapidly and its capability to advance.³⁶ Nor should we necessarily assume that this comparative rise of China would be slowed or even stopped at the point at which it surpasses the United States, or at which Washington were to concede strategic parity to Beijing (were that to happen). Moreover, despite Washington's off-shore balancing role, China, being located centrally and massively in Asia, has an inherent geopolitical advantage over the United States.

Although India, like China, is a rising power, China is actually growing more quickly economically and militarily. Even though India has an impending demographic advantage over China, China may well successfully substitute its vast, accumulated capital for labour, thus offsetting India's demographic advantage for a considerable period of time to come. Conversely, India will need to perform significantly better in the development of its infrastructure in order to capitalise on its labour-intensive manufacturing prospects and utilise its demographic advantage. With an economy under half the size of China's, India is not growing as fast. Rather, China is extending the gap. This widening gap between the two is not just reflected in economic terms but also in military spending.³⁷

India's rise also needs to be viewed not just in its Asian and global contexts but in its sub-regional context of South Asia. Viewed in this context, India still exhibits what might be called a 'weak-strong' paradigm.³⁸ On the one hand, India sees itself as potentially strong because of its mighty population, its rapid economic growth rates, its burgeoning technological capability and vibrant, democratic institutions. But on the other, India is weak due to the sclerotic and often corrupt nature of those same institutions. It is further weakened by its heterogeneous character, porous borders and the way

³⁴ Alex Newman, 'Chinese Economy to Surpass US by 2016', *New America*, 26 April 2011, <<http://www.thenewamerican.com/economy/economics-mainmenu-44/7263-imf-chinese-economy-to-surpass-us-by-2016>> [Accessed 27 April 2011].

³⁵ Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), especially pp. 3-4.

³⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'Executive Summary', *The Military Balance 2011* (London: IISS, 2011), <<http://www.iiiss.org/publications/military-balance/the-military-balance-2011/press-statement/>> (and follow links).

³⁷ For a more detailed analysis see the author, 'Sino-Indian Relations and the Rise of China', in Ron Huiskens (ed.), *Rising China: Power and Reassurance* (Canberra: SDSC and ANU E Press, 2009), pp. 51-64.

³⁸ For a fuller discussion of this idea see the author, *India's Rise to Power* (London, New York and New Delhi: The Macmillan Press and St Martin, 1995).

dissonance floats back and forward across these borders like so much flotsam and jetsam. The fact that the central government still confronts enormous issues of poverty, infrastructure, equity, education, health, welfare and political dissonance means that these programs command the lion's share of central government spending. Further, its main sub-regional competitor, Pakistan, is matching it in terms of nuclear weapons capability and has a 'strategic' relationship with its main Asian rival, China. All of these factors make India vulnerable to outside 'interference' in its South Asian 'backyard'. China, moreover, has not been slow to seize on such opportunities, which are amplified in South Asia because of the operation of what might be called the 'Kautilian dictum'.³⁹

Consequently, Indian concerns about China in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region have been evident at least from the early 1990s. These relate to what are alleged by some Indian commentators to be Chinese 'bases', especially in Burma.⁴⁰ They also relate to Beijing's steady acquisition of influence in South Asia, where China is selling weapons to all of India's immediate neighbours except Bhutan and is constructing deep-water ports in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. China does not have 'bases' in the formal sense and its actions in the Indian Ocean are currently defensive in terms of the perceived need to protect its vital energy routes out of the Gulf.⁴¹ But its growing footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region is nevertheless deeply worrying to India.

As well as Indian concerns about China's 'meddling' in South Asia, there are deep structural problems in the relationship, including the long-running and seemingly intractable border dispute, recently negatively coloured by China's apparent determination to push forward its claim to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which has a population of 1.1 million. Even the positives in the US\$60 billion trading relationship are offset by the rapidly developing trade imbalance in China's favour.

In short, the pace and nature of India's rise, the role of China in apparently challenging that rise (at least as seen from New Delhi) and the consequent power relationships India might assume in Asia are uncertain and unstable.

³⁹ Kautiliya, a fourth century BCE Indian strategic thinker, famously said that small states proximate to a powerful neighbour typically form alliances with more distant, powerful nations. He is also noted for his famous dictum that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Both these dictums provide an excellent summary of the situation in South Asia in relation to India and China.

⁴⁰ For an excellent analysis of the exaggerated claims of Chinese bases in Burma see Andrew Selth, 'Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth', Regional Outlook Paper Number 10, Griffith Asia Institute, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/18225/regional-outlook-andrew-selth.pdf> [Accessed 20 August 2008].

⁴¹ Andrew S. Erickson, 'The Growth of China's Navy: Implications for Indian Ocean Security', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 32, no. 4 (July 2008), pp. 655-8; Leszek Buszynski, 'Emerging Naval Rivalry in East Asia and the Indian Ocean: Implications for Australia', *Security Challenges*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Spring 2009), pp. 73-93.

In fact, there is considerable evidence that both India and the United States are already hedging against a possible difficult rise of China in pursuing the relationship with the other. While there are many voices and motives in Washington directing the nature of the Indo-US *rapprochement*, at the heart of the relationship is the US desire to create of India a major Asian military power capable eventually of helping to balance China's rise.

White, however, argues New Delhi's preference would be to maintain approximate equidistance between the United States and China, since "India is a great power with its own agenda".⁴² By implication, India would therefore be a good candidate for concert membership. It is certainly correct that the policy-making elites in New Delhi would like to see India in this light. But the key variables here are not so much the perceptions of the foreign policy making elites, but rather the actualities of power between India and China and how China might behave as it becomes more powerful. While, as White says, India may never form a "alliance" with the United States, that does not mean that the Indo-US relationship will not continue to evolve in strategic terms, pushed on by mutual concern about rising China.

The Sino-Japanese relationship is equally, if not more, unstable. If China is garnering power in respect of the United States and India, it is doing so even more rapidly in respect of Japan. The Japanese economy has been relatively stagnant for approaching two decades. Its population is ageing (with 23 percent over 65) and declining. Its highly restrictive immigration policy does not allow for easy replacement and renewal. China overtook Japan as the second largest global economy after the United States in 2010.⁴³

China and Japan are also locked into an intractable territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands (known by the Chinese as the Diaoyu Islands). The salience of the islands is increased by the living and non-living marine resources their possession commands. In September 2010, the dispute flared to a dangerous level with the seizure of a Chinese fishing boat by Japan. In response, China curtailed exports of rare earth minerals of vital importance to the Japanese economy and the crew was released.

As with the case of India, the Sino-Japanese relationship is likely to become increasingly asymmetrical and therefore possibly threatening, depending on how China chooses to behave. In these circumstances the propensity to rely on the United States as a potential balance against China is likely to become greater, thus potentially undermining the possibility of a concert of powers.

⁴² White, *Power Shift*, p. 31.

⁴³ 'China Passes Japan as Second-Largest Economy', *New York Times*, 15 August 2010, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/business/global/16yuan.html>> [Accessed 17 August 2011].

Given White's argument that the United States will need to cede strategic parity to China in Asia for a viable concert to form, this would in turn necessitate the United States maintaining some distance from Japan at the very time of growing Japanese insecurity in relation to China. White concedes this would be difficult for Tokyo, but notes that Japan will simply have to accept it.⁴⁴

In terms of a neorealist perspective, however, the possibility of 'implicit' power balancing would promise more flexibility in any concert arrangement. This flexibility could even be sufficient to absorb the tensions and shifting power parities outlined above. This point goes to the heart of both White and Bell's essential argument: that a China that confronts the prospect of contesting not just American power but a whole bloc of powers might well assess that the challenge is just not worth the profound disruption and uncertain outcome it would entail, and that therefore Beijing may well have an incentive to become a "soft hegemon" and join a concert of powers as the easier option.⁴⁵

At the moment, the 'incipient power balance' is maintained by the 'San Francisco system'. According to this system, these 'incipient balances' have been conducted by means of bilateral links between the United States on the one hand and the Philippines, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Republic of Korea (ROK) and Thailand on the other.⁴⁶ As China rises, however, this bilateral system of balances will quickly become inadequate in that Sino-US power parities will have shifted in China's favour, with the off-shore balancing capability of the United States consequently being diminished. This inadequacy of the bilateral balancing system would raise the prospect of the construction of a multilateral 'balance in being' against China. John Ikenberry goes so far as to use this possibility of a multilateral, global balance against China to question the very notion of a 'rising' China. He points out that China's rise needs to be gauged not just against the United States, but against the United States and all other like minded powers in what might loosely be called the 'Western bloc'.⁴⁷

One problem for this line of argument is that it is essentially globalist and consequently underplays the role of regions. The locations of many of the other countries in the Western bloc are distant from East Asia. This distance could well affect their propensity to act as a bloc. It might prove politically and practically difficult for France, or Germany, for example, to act in a concerted and resolute way in the context of distant, contested events not deemed relevant to their existential needs.

⁴⁴ White, *Power Shift*, pp. 31-2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3; Bell, *Living with Giants*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ Wesley, 'Asia-Pacific institutions', pp. 49-66.

⁴⁷ G. John Ikenberry, 'The Rise of China: Power, Institutions, and the Western Order', in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (eds.), *China's Ascent: Power, Security and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 111-3.

Even in a strict Asian context that excluded the European powers, however, it may well be possible to construct a viable multiple balance that could effectively balance China for many years to come—and herein lies the flexibility inherent in the neorealist interpretation of the concert idea. Such a balance could consist of the United States, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, India and possibly Indonesia and other ASEAN member nations—a potentially powerful group of like-minded powers. In fact, such a balance (excluding Korea and the ASEANs) was actually attempted when Prime Minister of Japan Abe and US Vice-President Cheney tried to construct what amounted to a power balance against China in 2007—the so-called ‘quadrilateral’. This was an attempt to induct India into the existing ‘trilateral’ dialogue consisting of the United States, Japan and Australia.

This attempt, however, illustrates the problem with an actual, as distinct from an incipient, multilateral balance. What happened was that China commenced to issue threats about the proposal, citing it as a direct strategic challenge. Beijing protested formally to the four powers and the Chinese news agency *Xinhua* asserted that “Any grouping without China, is ridiculous, irresponsible and impractical and marks formation of a small NATO to resist China”.⁴⁸ In response, both Australia and India sought to distance themselves from the proposal, concluding that the time was not yet ripe for any ‘balance in being’ against China, for fear of making of China that which they feared most—an out and out enemy.⁴⁹ Better to wait to assess whether there was still a reasonable prospect for a ‘peaceful’ rise of China in Asia. With Abe’s powerful advocacy of the ‘quadrilateral’ gone and a Democratic administration in Washington, the proposal is now in abeyance. The Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, announced during her 2011 visit to Beijing that Australia rejected the need to “contain” China.⁵⁰

It is noteworthy from the above account of the abortive ‘quadrilateral’ that it actually unfolded somewhat differently to the way concert of powers theory would suggest. Theory would have it that a revisionist actor would be constrained in its behaviour by fear of the formation of a ‘balance in being’ as opposed to an ‘incipient balance’. While there has been little subsequent evidence that Beijing in any way constrained its behaviour as a result of the episode, there is plenty of counter-evidence that the proponents of the ‘quadrilateral’ were forced by Beijing to constrain theirs. In fact, what transpired was as much about fear of derailing the relationship with China and China’s peaceful rise as it was about constraining China through the threatened ‘quadrilateral’.

⁴⁸ *Xinhua* (Chinese), 24 August 2007, quoted in D. S. Rajan, *Intellibriefs*, 29 August 2007, <<http://intellibriefs.blogspot.com/2007/08/china-media-fears-over-india-becoming.html>> [Accessed 7 April 2011].

⁴⁹ David Brewster, ‘The Australia-India Security Declaration: The Quadrilateral Redux?’, *Security Challenges*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Autumn 2010), p. 3.

⁵⁰ ‘Julia Gillard Rejects Need to Contain China’, *The Australian*, 27 April 2011.

As to the future, for concert of power theory to hold, Beijing would need to maintain a delicate balance between making it clear that it would view any 'balance in being' as a threat on the one hand and modifying its behaviour in ways that would convince those considering joining such a balance that China was, indeed, engaged in a peaceful rise, on the other. On the occasion of the attempted 'quadrilateral', China got this balance right, but it is a fine balance indeed. The question therefore is: will China continue to get the balance just right once it is comparatively more powerful and the United States comparatively weaker, and will potential power balancers tend to stand apart from a 'balance in being' in such circumstances? Indeed, is Chinese policy making that finely honed and well coordinated?

Certainly, members of the proposed 'quadrilateral' would have been attempting to read China's messages as to its intentions assiduously since the attempt failed in 2007. Such messages include China's behaviour over the sinking of the *Cheonan* on 26 March 2010, following which Beijing apparently refused to admonish its North Korea 'client'. They would also have included events in the South China Sea, when the US Navy steamed through the region in March 2009 in response to alleged Chinese harassment of an unarmed vessel.⁵¹ China's attitude to human rights has also apparently hardened following the events in the Middle East and the so-called 'Jasmine Revolution'. There is nothing here to lead us to suppose that China has in any way modified its behaviour to accord more closely with the norms of the potential power balancers against it.

White and Bell are, however, of the view that China's behaviour, while assertive in some instances, is still within the acceptable norms of a concert of powers, in that it does not fundamentally challenge the *status quo*. Indeed, Bell is relatively optimistic about political developments in China.⁵² Others agree. According to Shiping, China since Deng has emerged as a 'defensive realist' state, in so far as it recognises that cooperative norms are necessary for its continued prosperity and rise.⁵³

But even Shiping does not go so far as to see China as a wholly satisfied, *status quo* power. According to him, China's dissatisfaction relates to the view that its actual power is not adequately reflected in the structure of the international system and that its humiliation at the hands of the West and Japan has not been fully expiated.⁵⁴ One might add that Beijing believes China's 'true' borders are not yet in place in respect of Taiwan, the South

⁵¹ 'US Warships Head for South China Sea after Standoff', *The Times*, 14 March 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article5898650.ece> [Accessed 7 April 2011].

⁵² Bell, *The End of the Vasco da Gama Era*, pp. 51-3; Tang Shiping, 'From Offensive to Defensive Realism: A Social Evolutionary Interpretation of China's Security Strategy', in Ross and Feng, *China's Ascent*, pp. 154-7; White, *Power Shift*, see for example p. 46.

⁵³ Shiping, 'From Offensive to Defensive Realism', pp. 154-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-3.

China Sea and the India-Tibet border and that its hold on Tibet and Xinjiang leave it open to internal and external challenge. And finally, China has a patent need of vast quantities of resources, especially energy, which are necessary for its breakneck economic development, which is in turn necessary to ensure 'social harmony'. Any perceived threat to these supplies would be seen as a direct threat to China itself.

Realists and power transition theorists would tend to argue that the problem with this discontent is not just that it exists, but that it would still exist once China were more powerful *vis-à-vis* the United States. This would in turn mean that the current system of bilateral balances would become less viable and that the incentive to impose a multilateral balance would increase. Once a multilateral balance was in place, so the argument would go, it would be difficult to describe the resulting arrangement as a concert of powers. Instead, it would look much more like the central balance during the Cold War. Moreover, no matter that China is a *status quo* power at the moment, there is no guarantee it will remain one once it grows in power still further. While this would not inevitably result in war, it would mean that it would be unlikely that China would continue to behave according to the highly sensitive norms necessary to maintain a concert of powers.

They would even argue that were the other potential members of the concert to continue to give China 'the benefit of the doubt' in order to maintain its peaceful rise, they may become locked in to the classic 'boiling lobster' scenario, in which hopes for a 'peaceful rise' of China might blind them to the indicators of how Beijing intends to use its power once powerful. Thus the final realisation that the system had reached a 'tipping point' (where that to happen) could occur in highly disruptive circumstances and only once China was too powerful to do much about it. It would be better, they would argue, to confront China now and make clear the limitations of the *status quo*, while it is still possible in terms of power parities to do so.

This is, of course, a classic 'offensive realist' position and is succinctly put by Molan:

The question remains: are we going to manage China's emergence as a great power from a position of strength, or are we going to hope that China is nice to us, our allies and our neighbours?⁵⁵

Unfortunately, Molan's question cannot be simply or easily answered. To manage China's rise "from a position of strength" would eventually involve reformulating the 'hubs and spokes' model for US engagement into

⁵⁵ Major General Jim Nolan (Retd.), 'Ross Babbage's Valuable Provocation', *The Interpreter*, 8 February 2011, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/02/08/Babbages-valuable-provocation.aspx>> [Accessed 21 August 2011]. See also Ross Babbage, 'Australia's Strategic Edge in 2030', *Kokoda Paper*, no. 15, February 2011, <<http://www.kokodafoundation.org/Resources/Documents/KP15StrategicEdge.pdf>> [Accessed 21 August 2011].

something that looks more like a multilateral power balance. But as the example of the abortive 'quadrilateral' illustrates, this in itself would require considerable delicacy in order not to appear like containment of China and thus effectively pre-empting the prospects for a peaceful rise for China by means of a concert of powers or some other 'architecture' such as a regional cooperative security body. Such an approach would involve greater harmonisation not just of US capabilities with its friends bilaterally (as is currently being canvassed between Washington and Canberra), but also greater inter-operability and coordination multilaterally.

Whether such activities would be consonant with the emergence of a concert of powers is a moot point. On the one hand, they would seem to run counter to those who, like White, argue that "the best outcome for Australia would be for America to relinquish primacy and share power with China ... in a concert of powers".⁵⁶ On the other—and drawing from the ideas of Bell about the role of power balancing in the construction of a concert—more forthright power balancing might eventually assist the development of a concert of powers, in so far as it would be made plain to China that the alternative to cooperation would be unmitigated confrontation. Either way there is a risk: concede too much 'strategic space' to China too easily and Beijing might simply assume weakness; form a coherent strategy for collectively balancing China and Beijing might be alienated and pushed into something akin to a new 'cold war'.

Conclusion

The establishment of a concert of powers in Asia has become an important option for analysts seeking alternatives to the apparent stark choice concerning China's rise that 'offensive realists' would evince—that is, confront China now and place limits of behaviour upon it before it is too late.

Essentially, the proponents of a concert of powers see it as a logical outcome of the emerging 'multipolarity' in Asia associated with the rise of China (and to a lesser extent India) and the relative decline of the United States. The alternatives, reliance on Cold War era power balancing and containment on the one hand and the currently inadequate multilateral system on the other, have appeared unattractive in the case of the former and inadequate in the case of the latter.

A deeper exploration of the concept of a concert of powers as it might be applied to modern Asia, however, illustrates a number of potential problems. A concept that receives a considerable portion of its intellectual power from the example of nineteenth century Europe cannot necessarily be applied to the rapidly changing circumstances of modern Asia—circumstances that seem at this stage to presage the rapid rise of China *vis-à-vis* the other

⁵⁶ White, *Power Shift*, p. 55.

major powers. The formation and maintenance of a concert is said by proponents to rely significantly on the dynamic force of potential power balancing. But it is unclear from most discussions to what degree power balancing can actually be implemented without destroying the concert itself and turning it into an exercise in containment. And crucially, most proponents of the idea argue that it would be necessary to accord a rapidly rising power such as China strategic space in order to induct it into a concert. But this introduces the possibility that the aspirant power could conclude that the *status quo* powers are weak and that therefore it is unnecessary to deal with them as equals, as would be required within a concert.

One's attitude on this last problem will largely be determined by one's approach to the international system. Realists will be highly sceptical of the idea of a concert of powers, arguing that, in international relations, 'strength respects strength' and that a concert of powers is inherently unstable. Neorealists and constructivists will tend to put greater faith in the idea, for somewhat different reasons. But even for neorealists who would concede that potential power balancing is the driving force of the concert, a decision would still need to be made as to the degree to which actual balancing, as distinct from potential balancing, is necessary during the crucial state of the induction of the aspirant power.

The above exploration indicates that the concept of a concert of powers is somewhat nebulous and 'slippery'. Any concert that might be formed in Asia would be potentially unstable. Consequently, it would be unwise for Australia and its friends and allies to place 100 percent of their bets on the idea. They should therefore hedge by continuing to seek to induct China into a concert-type arrangement, but concurrently looking for ways in which collective strength can be fostered to contain and deter China if necessary. They should do so in the belief that Bell and Kissinger are correct in arguing that a concert can, indeed, grow out of a multiple power balance or the threat of such a balance.

Given this delicacy, our attempts at power balancing, or rather potential power balancing, need to be conducted rather more sensitively than was Mr Cheney's 'quadrilateral'. Perhaps this could be achieved by a more indirect system of coordination, one initially channelled through the medium of the United States, which could act as an informal coordinator of the different 'spokes' so that the system becomes, in effect, something greater than the sum of its parts—indeed, connected by a 'rim'.

Further, as Acharya suggests, we should not at the same time lose sight of the need to continue to try to buttress these arrangements with effective multilateral regional institutions. Such institutions, in themselves, may continue to have limited utility in terms of regional problem solving, especially for more intractable problems such as the China-India border or

South China Sea disputes. But they at least have the virtue of providing venues within which the great powers can meet 'in the wings', greater transparency as to motives and intentions, and normative values associated with membership, all of which could act to support the development and maintenance of a concert of powers.

This range of activities would thus involve the cultivation of a three-tiered system. At one level, the United States and like-minded powers could continue to develop continuing military preparedness, including sensitive coordination of strategy, doctrine and capability. A second level would involve continuing support for the development of a multi-layered, multilateral regional security architecture. Thirdly, a small concert of powers operating within and around this architecture could be fostered. But should the latter fail to evolve or flourish, which would be a distinct possibility, at least the other two strategies could continue to be developed as required.

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