

Concert of Indo-Pacific: An Option for Peace and Order in the East Asian Seas

Suggestions for lasting peace in the South China Sea and beyond need to incorporate small and medium states as well.

Recently, Dr. Hu Bo from Peking University contributed an op-ed to *The Diplomat* titled [“3 Keys to a Peaceful China-US Maritime Coexistence.”](#) He called on the United States and China to build a new balance of power in the western Pacific with three policy recommendations for the two countries to: (i) reach a necessary consensus on power distribution in the western Pacific, (ii) rationally handle third-party factors, and (iii) make joint efforts to build inclusive maritime rules and order. These proposals seem to reflect the view held by many other Chinese elites about the current world and how it should be changed. And this view is worrying, if not alarming, to me.

Dr. Hu is right to observe the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China in the maritime domain. But his approach reflects the 19th century perspective when power politics were the mainstream and big powers enjoyed the rights to (i) divide the world into spheres of influence based on power distribution, (ii) work on rules to govern relations between themselves, again based on power distribution, and “rationally handle third-party factors,” and (iii) persuade or force other countries to accept such rules and order. His recommendations may sound interesting from big powers’ perspective, but sounds dangerous to smaller states whose interests are compromised by big powers’ politics, as history has shown.

On the first point, Dr. Hu tried to persuade the United States to replace the current multi-power-centered structure with a G-2 configuration in the western Pacific. This proposal clearly disregards and downplays the roles, influence, and interests of other major players in the region such as ASEAN members, Japan, Australia, the EU, India, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia,

and some Western countries including the U.K., Germany, France, and Canada. Those powers have high stakes in the region in terms of freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded maritime trade, strategic interests, and so on. In one way or another, they have been playing an important role in maintaining peace, stability, and the international liberal rules-based order across the region.

Any G-2 model would also bypass ASEAN, a group of 10 Southeast Asian nations that have high stakes in their immediate maritime neighborhood, and sideline the ASEAN-led security arrangements, which host dialogues and cooperative mechanisms to promote confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution in the region.

Second, Dr. Hu implicitly suggests that the United States should be content with the new power distribution and work on a deal with China. Along that line, Washington should keep a low profile on sovereignty and related issues, restrain itself from intervening into regional maritime affairs, and not heed calls from the small and medium states concerned. In fact, Washington has always been neutral on the territorial sovereignty issue, and no one country is urging the U.S. to interfere in the region. The United States has been in the region for a long time, and its engagement is based on its national interests in terms of freedom of the seas and overflight as well as upholding international rules and norms. More importantly, the United States, alongside other major powers, has paid more attention to the region recently because they are alarmed by [Chinese gunboat diplomacy](#) and coercion through “[grey zone](#)” tactics. Beijing subtly leverages its physical strength to change the status quo on the ground at the expense of other states in the region, including the United States.

Third, Dr. Hu audaciously suggests that the United States “cooperate calmly” with China to rewrite the maritime rules. It seems likely that the author intended to redirect the debate over the South China Sea away from the current focus on the legality of claims and actions at sea. His

proposal essentially calls to establish a “gentlemen’s agreement” that might be used as a proof of American agreement with China – allowing Beijing to sidestep the 2016 arbitral tribunal award, and to revise the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982 (UNCLOS) in China’s favor. It is fair to say that UNCLOS is a package deal, which was carefully drafted and adopted based on a delicate balance of the interests, rights, and duties of coastal states, noncoastal states, and the international community. So it is not up to the United States and China alone to change it, but requires specific procedures and consensus from all parties, with the logics and process being different from those of power politics.

It is natural to expect the United States and China to play a leading role in building a sustainable security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. However, it is inappropriate to look at the issue from the lens of 19th century great power politics, which aimed to divide the world into spheres of influence at the expense of other states’ interests. The following are several take-away counterproposals.

First, the United States and China should seriously take into account other states’ positions and interests. They should participate constructively in ASEAN-led arrangements while working together to improve regional and global multilateral mechanisms/institutions for effectively coping with transnational and cross-cutting challenges, for example the COVID-19 pandemic. They should also work together to maintain order at sea based on international laws and norms, particularly UNCLOS. The great powers should not use physical might to coerce and intimidate the weaker ones, but wield influence in a healthy manner.

Second, the United States and China should steer away from the power-based structure and promote a trust-based one. At the end of the day, the support of the wider international community matters. When big powers seek to maximize power through bolstering military might and flexing muscle, fear and suspicion will widely spread in the region. Other states will worry

about being drawn into the “clash of the titans” and having to take side. The big powers, therefore, need to engage in deeper confidence-building measures so as to build trust — not only between themselves, but also in the rest of the region.

Third and accordingly, the two powers should refrain from unlawful military activities in the East Asian maritime domains and turn them into seas of peace and cooperation. China should exercise self-restraint and stop militarization, coercion, and intimidation in order to create a conducive environment for continuing Code of Conduct negotiations in good faith. Confidence-building measures should be promoted with cooperation on nonsensitive issues in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS.

If the East Asian seas continue to be stirred up by “might-makes-right” behavior, the proposal for [shedding a position of neutrality](#) will gain more prominence. International efforts to support the Southeast Asian littoral states will be beefed up to help them defend their sovereignty and legitimate maritime entitlements. International law and the maritime order should be upheld as everyone has an interest in navigating freely and safely through the East Asian seas. Therefore, any attempt to reverse history back to rude power-based politics would soon hit a wall.

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