

The Asia-Pacific's "Balance of Relations" and Dangerous Choices by Satu Limaye

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The shirtsleeves summit between Presidents Obama and Xi at Sunnylands, California earlier this summer, important as it was, was no milestone in United States-China relations. But the meeting inadvertently confirmed the balance of relations in the Asia-Pacific region: US-China and US-Asia relations are better than China-Asia or intra-Asia relations. This balance, favorable to the United States and also to regional stability and prosperity, will oscillate in relation to the ups and downs in US-China relations, but the larger framework – better US relations with China and Asia than those between China and Asia and within the region – will persist.

The threats to this balance do not come from the two most expected sources: deterioration of US-China relations triggered by growing strategic mistrust or purported US economic decline and political dysfunction. Rather, threats to the public good provided by the current Asia-Pacific balance of relations would come from efforts to push chimerical and dangerous choices in the region. One such choice involves Washington or Beijing pressing regional countries to choose between them. While both governments jockey to achieve priorities and interests, neither has offered, much less forced on, any regional country such a crude choice.

The flip side of this choice is that regional countries, notwithstanding their lesser leverage, seek to get Washington or Beijing to “choose” them. Up to now, regional countries have tried to get the most from both, and have succeeded admirably. Some Asia-Pacific regional countries, while making clear that “we don’t want to choose,” have either chosen particularly strong relations with either the US and China (e.g., Cambodia to China and Singapore to the US) or occasionally sought to see how far they can push and pull Washington or Beijing toward their positions on sovereignty and territorial disputes.

Alternatively, there is concern that the US and China might choose to privilege a bilateral relationship, or G2. A Vietnamese colleague calls this the “US-PRC grand bargain.” Both countries reject such an arrangement, but efforts to set up a framework for their ties (e.g., “responsible stakeholder,” “strategic reassurance,” or “new kind of great power relationship”) invariably make nervous outsiders perceive it as an objective. Efforts to seriously implement any of these alleged choices would upset a workable, although admittedly imperfect, situation in Asia-Pacific international relations.

The current “balance of relations” is not zero-sum or static. It requires persistent calibration. Absent major missteps,

this balance will continue to the region’s advantage for three reasons. First, American political dysfunctions and funding shenanigans pale in comparison with the uncertain trajectories of China’s polity and economy. The sum total of US power in the years ahead will be higher than ever – and multiplied by long-time allies and new friends who will seek to facilitate the maintenance of US pre-eminence in their own interests. Of course, US challenges should not be underestimated and China’s overstated, but they also should not be equated. Second, US “asks” in the region are about rules and norms not sovereignty and territory – and therefore inherently less threatening. Critics might deem US pursuit of rules/norms as an indirect intrusion into sovereignty (authoritarian regimes think so), but American approaches to order and leadership aren’t as disruptive as flimsy territorial claims. Third, American leadership constrained (mostly) by rules and norms is less worrisome to regional states than China’s murky conception of order (e.g., “New Security Concept” or “Nine-dashed lines”?). US insistence on leadership and pre-eminence does not set off the same alarms as China’s apparent preference for Beijing-led hierarchy as indicated in its actions and words (such as Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s claim that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries,” to the ASEAN foreign ministers in Hanoi, July 2010). Acquiescence to hierarchical stability in the Asia Pacific may have worked in a pre-modern age, but it will not work in a networked region that has both engaged and informed modern nationalisms.

The current “balance of relations” favors US interests, provides space for China to modernize, and enables regional stability and prosperity. But if existing dynamics change, and the choices identified above are pressed through new policies, this balance could be upset, with all the attendant consequences.

A final choice for US policy in the region is essentially an internal US debate about how best to secure the country’s interests in Asia. Some argue that getting the US-China relationship right will be critical to shaping positive outcomes across Asia. Others counter that it is by managing US alliances and friendships properly that the US will shape a region consistent with US interests and values. Each approach has its logic and subtleties about what constitutes getting China or alliances/friends “right.” But this alleged choice is also mistaken and dangerous to pursue. So far, US policy has been nimble and adroit. It has reassured allies and friends in the region without getting entrapped or excessively alienating China. The “rebalance to Asia” has made clear that getting relations with both China and allies right is the key to getting Asia right. A US policy that privileges a rules and norm-based approach backed by a capacity to counterbalance efforts to ignore, violate, or unilaterally rewrite existing arrangements is

the “right” way to proceed. The US, China, and the region will continue to benefit if no country has to choose.

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