

## Finding a sweet spot amid US-China rivalry

Bilahari Kausikan

Is the world really evolving towards multipolarity? No one can predict the future, but on the available evidence, I doubt it.

Clearly the unipolar delusions of the immediate post-Cold War era are over. Yet only the US still has the capability to consistently act strategically on a global scale.

At the same time, events over the last decade or so, particularly in the Middle East, have demonstrated that US power does not automatically translate into influence, especially when exercised unilaterally. The US cannot act effectively when it acts alone but needs to form coalitions, as it did during the Cold War.

The Cold War, despite all its dangers, had a coherent structure. It was the danger posed by the Soviet Union that compelled acceptance of US leadership no matter what doubts countries not in the Soviet camp might have harboured about American policies – even China after 1972 in effect accepted US leadership – and thereby imposed some structure on the global system.

The paradox of our times is that while only the US retains the capability for global leadership, there is no longer any clear strategic imperative to compel acceptance of US leadership. Without a clear strategic imperative, the American people too now seem reluctant to shoulder the burdens of leadership. Hence the confusions and incoherence that today characterise the international system. But incoherence is not multipolarity.

Who is capable of restoring coherence to the global system by exercising global leadership? Europe? Perhaps in economic terms when it sets its house in order. But strategically Europe is irrelevant. Its Common Foreign and Security Policy is at best an aspiration; at worst, a joke.

Europe has been unable to influence events even within its own borders – in the Balkans in the mid-1990s, and more recently in the Ukraine. In both these cases, and there are other examples, it was the US that pulled Europe's chestnuts out of fires that Europe had – in fits of hubris – kindled but could not control. The lesson is that there is no "soft power" unless you have "hard power".

Who else? The Brics? The term was first coined by a fund manager as a marketing device to part the unwary from their money.

It is not a self-evidently viable geopolitical concept. What unites the Brics except a vague dissatisfaction with the established order and a desire for a global role or at least global recognition? But the sources of their dissatisfaction and hence their aspirations are not identical or even similar.

In any case, aspiration must be matched by capability. With one exception – China – the Brics are primarily significant as regional powers and are able to act globally only sporadically. Even China is still somewhat ambivalent about its global role.

At present, it is perhaps more useful to think of the future in terms of regional structures rather than global structures.

The Western-shaped and dominated global system of the last 200 years or so – a system that in the 18th and 19th centuries was multipolar, and bipolar for much of the 20th century – is undoubtedly in transition.

### Bipolar East Asia

Less clear, indeed opaque, is transition to what? It is pointless to speculate on an unknowable future. But the shape of regions can already be glimpsed. Certainly our region, East Asia, is going to be bipolar, structured by US-China relations.

Post-World War II East Asia was very largely an American creation. But there is now a consensus: That while the US presence is still a necessary, indeed irreplaceable, condition to ensure stability for East Asian growth, it is no longer a sufficient condition for stability and needs to be supplemented – not supplanted – by some new

architecture. There are various experiments at elaborating supplementary architecture and they largely define day-to-day East Asian multilateral diplomacy. But all still are only that – experiments. Whatever the eventual outcome, US-China relations will certainly be the central pillar of any new East Asian system.

The US and China are now groping towards a new *modus vivendi* with each other and with other countries in East Asia. It will be decades before they reach a new equilibrium.

In the meantime, Singapore, in common with all other countries in East Asia, will have to endure the trials and tribulations that are inevitable when strategic adjustments of this magnitude are under way. The challenge is to position ourselves so as to preserve maximum autonomy and avoid being forced into invidious choices. This does not mean taking positions on issues that affect our interests. Avoiding taking positions is to surrender autonomy and we must be prepared to clearly state and defend our interests on such issues such as the South China Sea, which is becoming something of a proxy for the major power adjustments that are afoot.

It does however mean leaving open the widest range of options and maintaining the best possible relationships with all the major powers, even as we take positions that are in our national interests.

### Sweet spot

Can we cope? We have coped quite well so far and are now in a sweet spot in our relations with all major powers. If we mess it up, we will have no one to blame but ourselves. There is no reason why we cannot continue to cope.

To do so, we must understand the processes under way between the US and China accurately. Misunderstanding can be

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dangerous. The US-China relationship is complex, difficult to encapsulate in a phrase or sentence. It is characterised by both profound interdependence and deep strategic mistrust. Interdependence does not erase the possibility of conflict but limits it, and gives both parties a strong incentive to try to avoid conflicts. The chief risk is conflict by accident and not war by design.

Neither the US nor China is looking for trouble. They need and want a stable relationship. At the same time, neither is going to easily concede to the other and rivalry is an intrinsic and inescapable part of any major power relationship. Competition between the US and China is thus inevitable as they try to establish a new *modus vivendi*.

The dynamic of US-China competition cannot be reduced to simplistic dichotomies between a "rising power" and a "declining power" or between a "status quo power" and a "revisionist power". China is certainly rising but the US is not in obvious decline. And like all big countries, both the US and China are simultaneously and selectively upholders of the status quo when convenient and revisionist when it suits them.

To oversimplify this complex reality can lead to miscalculation in what will become an increasingly complicated and unpredictable environment. Again, Cold War clarity is gone and will never be re-established. During the Cold War, there was never any doubt who was friend and who was foe, irrespective of which side we were on or even if we pretended to be non-aligned.

Now matters are far more ambiguous. China evokes anxieties in countries on its periphery. But no country in East Asia – not even Japan or Vietnam which have very complicated relationships with China – considers China to be an enemy. And while the US is a friend, it is sometimes a very demanding and officiously intrusive friend. More fundamentally – and problematically for those of us who must adjust ourselves to their adjustments – the US and China do not really know yet what they want.

Even as it tries to strengthen its traditional alliance system and make new friends, the US knows that it must reach some accommodation with China and enlist its help to maintain order. But what sort of order? China wants to reclaim some of its

historical role in East Asia. But how much and how?

China is such a central node in the world economy that the US might as well try to contain itself as contain China. The US is so much a part of East Asia that China might as well try to displace itself from the region as displace the US.

And without the US presence, China might well have to deal with a nuclear Japan. So the US does not yet know how much help to ask for and what price to pay for help and China does not yet know how much help to offer and what price to ask for its help.

We must deal with these complexities without being disheartened or intimidated by them. Being in the midst of US-China competition will not always be comfortable. But it is precisely the existence of competition that holds out the possibility of manoeuvre to preserve autonomy.

### US-China collusion

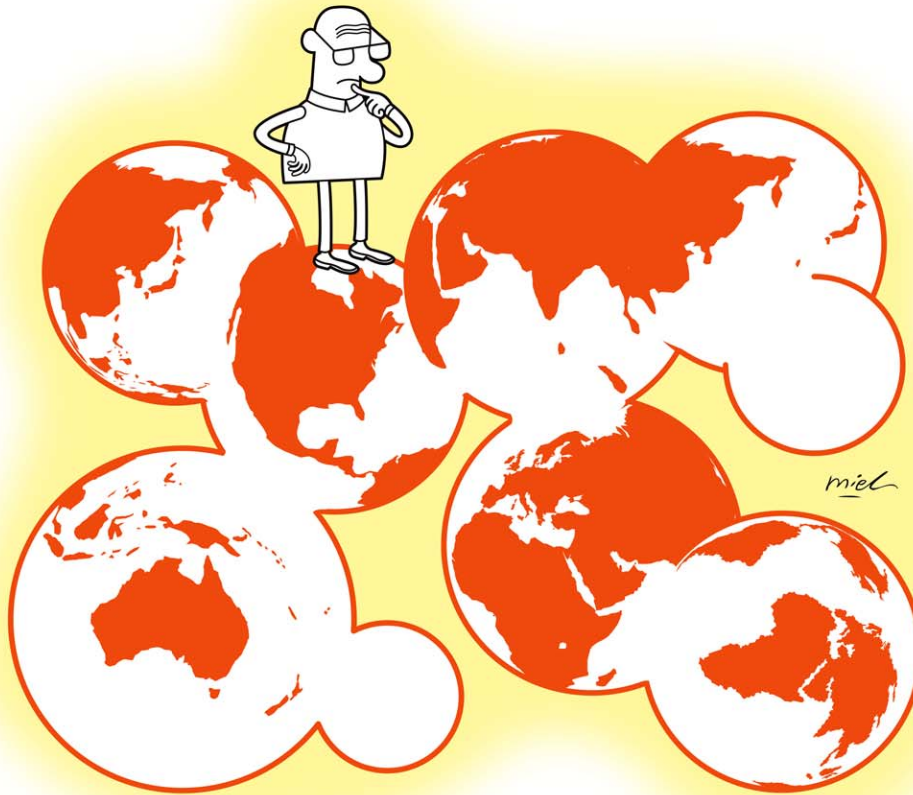
US-China collusion will be a whole lot more uncomfortable.

The possibility of US-China collusion is not a paranoid fantasy. In 1981, at an international conference held at the UN to discuss the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, an issue arose between Asean and China. The question was what should happen in Cambodia after the Vietnamese withdrew. China wanted the return of the Khmer Rouge. Asean wanted elections to allow the Cambodian people to determine their own rulers.

Singapore took a particularly strong stand on this. The US, concerned about its relationship with China, singled out Singapore for special pressure. An Assistant Secretary of State threatened our Foreign Minister with "blood on the floor" if we did not relent. We stood firm and the US eventually changed its position.

But the lesson was clear: When great powers reach agreements, they generally try to make someone else pay the price. What happened in the past could well happen again, even over such currently fraught issues as the South China Sea where, in the long run, a more symmetrical US-China naval equation must develop and compel a recalibration of the way the US calculates its interests.

• Bilahari Kausikan is a former permanent secretary for foreign affairs, and now an ambassador-at-large.



# Will the future be multipolar?

Two speakers gave their take at last week's Institute of Policy Studies' conference on Singapore at 50: What Lies Ahead?

# US and Chinese interests likely to converge

Jia Qingguo

With the rise of China and India, the two most populous countries in the world, the world is bound to be somewhat different in the future.

This assessment has not taken into account other dynamics in the world such as change in technology, social media, demography, climate change and the spread of terrorism. The question is: How different will it be?

While it is always risky to predict the future, one may be able to sort out a few likely developments on the basis of our understanding of history and the present.

## US retains its lead

To begin with, the leading position of the US in the world is likely to be sustained despite the rise of China and India and the repeated warnings of American decline.

Most analysts would agree that although China may overtake the US in terms of gross domestic product size, the US lead in political influence, economic efficiency, scientific innovation and military capabilities is likely to remain.

Neither China nor India is anywhere close to overtaking the US in these areas. Russia may possess some sophisticated military technologies. However, it is lagging further and further behind. And there is little sign that the European Union is getting united and will thrive. Other countries are even less likely to overtake the US.

Moreover, as an immigrant country, the US is likely to remain the country that is most connected

to the rest of the world at large and therefore most knowledgeable about the world.

On top of that, the US is likely to retain its appeal to the world with its well-entrenched liberal democratic institutions. Despite defects, these institutions have been working in terms of maintaining order, enabling periodic peaceful transition of leadership, and making it possible for people to speak their minds with much less fear than in many other countries.

## Non-Caucasians' role

Second, the rise of China, India and some other developing countries and the relative decline of Europe and Japan are likely to make the world much less Atlantic-centric and more pluralistic.

The non-Western world – especially Asian countries – will play a much larger role in world affairs. The rise of the non-Caucasian world, coupled with the changing constitution of the population of the Western countries as a result of ageing and immigration, means non-Caucasian people will play a larger role in global governance.

Their ways of thinking are likely to shape global governance much more than before. For instance, more importance may be attached to protection of community interests than protection of individual interests. Protection of individual freedom of speech may not be allowed to trump respect for religious sensitivities.

## China's development

Third, China is likely to continue its path of development, namely, accept the existing international order, reject territorial expansion, seek national welfare and prestige through trade, and adopt universal values while insisting on applying them according to Chinese conditions.

It is a path of development that has enabled China to have a peaceful international environment, to focus on domestic challenges, to achieve rapid growth for as long as more than three decades, and to attain its current level of prestige and influence in the world.

It is a path of development from which China has benefited a lot in the past and is likely to benefit even more in the future.

China has no good reason to abandon it.

## Cooperation with the US

Fourth, China is likely to avoid confrontation and develop a largely cooperative relationship with the US. Confrontation between the two countries would be against their fundamental interests. Military conflicts between them would be devastating. Those in the two countries who advocate such things are out of their minds and completely irresponsible. If they really wish to have a war, they should send their kids to do it.

The way China has risen so far and is likely to rise in the future gives no good reason for the US to oppose it. Also, despite the bumps in China-US relations as China rises to become a developed, rich, strong and global power, China and the US will find their interests and aspirations more aligned with each other's than before.

As it becomes more developed, China will find it increasingly in its interests to protect the environment and fight climate change just as the US does.

As it grows wealthier, China will find it increasingly in its interests to ensure stability and help the poor just as the US does.

As it gets stronger, China will also find it increasingly in its own interests to play a more proactive role in addressing regional and global challenges ranging from proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and drug trafficking to humanitarian disasters just as the US does.

As it assumes more of a superpower status, China will find it increasingly in its interests to defend the world order so as to protect its interests just as the US does.

Given all these, the two countries are likely to find more incentive to work together to protect their respective interests and address regional and global challenges.

## China's dual identities

Finally, while the broad trends of developments discussed in the previous passages may look benign, the process of change can be tortuous and full of conflicts.

Among other things, as China rises, it has acquired new identities while the old ones remain. As a result, it has dual identities in many aspects: it is both a developing

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country and a developed one, both a poor country and a rich one, both a weak country and a strong one, and both an ordinary power and a superpower.

If identity defines interests, China also has dual interests in many aspects: The interests of both a developing country and a developed one, of a poor country and a rich one, of a weak country and a strong one, and of an ordinary power and a super power.

As a result of this, China finds it increasingly difficult to define its interests and behave in a consistent way. All this is happening at a time when the outside world is anxious to gauge China's intentions. Since China cannot be certain as to what kind of world it wishes to have at this stage, the outside world can only be confused.

Against this background, the interactions between China and the outside world can easily get into a negative mode. Therefore, if not handled well, things between China and the outside world can go wrong, and indeed terribly wrong.

To avoid confrontation and ensure a positive outcome, all countries concerned need to resist the temptation to jump to quick conclusions about each other's intentions and take emotional measures against each other.

Instead, they should try to give each other the benefit of the doubt: encourage the other side to keep to its professed good intentions and remind the other side if it does not. They should make greater efforts to develop a positive relationship through enhancing cooperation and managing differences.

Are we going to be successful in this? Offensive realists tell us no. And they can find a good deal of evidence to prove their point.

However, while we should not underestimate the ability of human beings to engage in bad things such as conflicts, we should not underestimate the ability of human beings to engage in good things such as cooperation.

After all, despite the repetition of conflicts in history, peace-time lasts longer than war.

The fact that we are now wiser and the stakes are now higher may increase our chances of making good judgment.

• Professor Jia Qingguo is Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, China