



The US Navy's USS Rafael Peralta (left) and the Australian navy's HMAS Ballarat conducting maritime manoeuvres off the coast of Queensland, Australia, this month. The US has not given up its hegemonic status in Asia, says the writer, adding that it spent much of the 1990s and 2000s boosting the alliances that really mattered. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

# Hierarchy, stability and Pax Americana

Smaller states should look at America's character and actions, not its position in the world order, in deciding if the superpower can best fulfil their strategic and economic needs

**Khong Yuen Foong**

For *The Straits Times*

In a recent contribution to this paper, *Straits Times* editorial writer Asad Latif poses the fascinating question: Which system is more likely to produce peace? By system, he meant the diplomatic system that the powers-that-be rely on to regulate inter-state relations.

He contrasts two systems, a hierarchical one typified by the Chinese tributary system and its *tianxia* aspirations (of ruling all under heaven), and a horizontal one per the Westphalian system privileging "the formal equality of sovereign states independent of any external, higher authority".

He argues that a Pax Sinica in the form of a contemporary *tianxia* will not work or bring peace to Asia

because its underlying modality – where China occupies the centre of a hierarchic system and "from which hegemonic stability radiated outwards" – runs up against the "Westphalian principle of equal sovereignty".

He cites Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's poorly received "fact" about China being a big country and the Asean countries being small as evidence of small countries' aversion to hierarchy. The writer's conclusion: China should "reject any interest in creating a vertical, hierarchic order" if it wants the small powers to consider acceding to its leadership in its ongoing competition with the United States.

Interesting advice, but I fear it is based on an imperfect understanding of hierarchy and who is at the top of that hierarchy today. I would argue that the real issue is not hierarchy itself, but the

identity and actions of who is at the top of that hierarchy.

## AMERICA AS WORLD LEADER

To clarify these points, we need to turn our focus away from China and examine the position and role of the US in the world in general, and in Asia in particular. Although the US is mentioned several times in the article, Pax Americana is not. Pax Americana – the post-World War II system of international order undergirded by US military and economic preponderance – is based as much on hierarchy as the Chinese tributary system or Pax Sinica.

As the name implies, Pax Americana is a US-led world order, with the US at the top of the hierarchy, buttressed by a formidable phalanx of alliances and US-created or US-led economic-financial institutions. Unlike China, the US does not need to tell Asean that it is a big country – the Seventh Fleet and the US dollar as reserve currency do just that.

International relations specialists often liken the US to the 800-pound gorilla in the room, the implication being its size and

**The issue is not really about hierarchy or hegemony, and smaller powers' aversion to it. The latter seem quite content with US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. The issue is about the identity and actions of the hegemon. Do the smaller states find the (erstwhile or future) hegemon's identity and actions threatening or reassuring? In other words, we should not confuse the great power's position in the system with its character and its actions.**

power command respect and deference. You cross it at your own peril: ask Cuba, North Korea, North Vietnam, Iran and Iraq.

Others prefer the more technical term hegemon, which implies the

US occupying the top position in a hierarchy, with many relevant others recognising and assenting to its leadership. Both China during its tributary system days and the US since 1945 may be seen as hegemon whose leadership was accepted by their tributaries or followers.

Many countries consent to or are resigned to living with a US-led hierarchical international system because they see the US as a benign hegemon. They acknowledge that the US is adept at looking after its own interests, but they also see the US as a generous power that also listens, shares and delivers. Witness its "good wars" (such as World War II), and international programmes such as the Marshall Plan, Fulbright scholarships, and the provision of foreign aid to developing countries.

Consistent with the responsibilities of the hegemon, the US also provides "public goods" – creating and backing the international economic and financial institutions, opening its vast market, providing security through alliances – to those who buy into the Pax Americana.

The US is far from a perfect hegemon. When it overtook Britain at the turn of the 20th century to become the pre-eminent global power, it failed to provide the public goods necessary for upholding global economic order. In the post-World War II era, it fought two Asian land wars, with mixed (Korea) or disastrous (Vietnam) results.

In the post-Cold War period, according to American political scientist John Mearsheimer, the US "has been at war for two out of every three years". And despite its self-image as the "leader of the free world", the US coddled numerous dictators around the world so long as they lined up behind the US in confronting its enemies.

The Trump years, with its focus on making America great again, often at the expense of allies and friends, also caused consternation in Europe and Asia: The benign hegemon was acting less benignly. These failures and the Trump years notwithstanding, America's allies and followers in Asia, Europe and Latin America seem to have concluded that in the overall scheme of things, American hegemony had enough "win-win" elements for them to partake in, and benefit from, the American-led system.

Even until recently, China behaved as if the benefits outweighed the costs. This general satisfaction contributed to the peace (no great power war) and stability of the last 70 years.

## POWER 'BALANCER' IN ASIA

The election of President Joe Biden has also reassured some of America's friends and followers. If the plethora of recent visits by high-level officials to Asia and the Quad vaccine partnership (with its focus on South-east Asia) are any indication, the administration is indeed working its way back to the Asian table.

If the Pax Americana is still around, we need to rethink Mr Latif's implicit narrative of the US as the power "balancer" in Asia. For him, it would be rational for

small powers in the region to "fall back on the balance of power mechanism... by drawing on the countervailing agency of other great powers" to counter China's "hierarchic ambitions".

The problem with this narrative is that it assumes that China is, or has become, the hegemon in Asia and that the US is the external balancer that worried states should call upon to balance China.

As indicated above, the US has not given up its predominant or hegemonic status in Asia. It hardly needs Mr Yang's "big country-small country" quip to pivot back to Asia: it never left. In fact, it spent much of the 1990s and 2000s beefing up the alliances and partnerships that really mattered, even as key officials skipped some Asean meetings.

US grand strategy since World War II has been to maintain its predominant power in three crucial regions of the world: Western Europe, the Persian Gulf and East Asia, and it has successfully done so. While it is true that China is catching up fast, most measures of comprehensive national power still put the US as the predominant power today, the one at the top of the hierarchy.

True believers in "balancing power" therefore should counsel small and middle powers to balance against the strongest power, the US.

That this is not happening is because, as Harvard political scientist Stephen Walt has argued, states balance against perceived threats, not power.

## THREATENING OR ASSURING?

My bottom line is that the issue is not really about hierarchy or hegemony, and smaller powers' aversion to it. The latter seem quite content with US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

The issue is about the identity and actions of the hegemon. Do the smaller states find the (erstwhile or future) hegemon's identity and actions threatening or reassuring? In other words, we should not confuse the great power's position in the system with its character and its actions.

On the issue of national character or identity – which is linked to domestic political complexion – the Biden administration is confident about, and perhaps even banking on, the intrinsic superiority of democracy, for both national rejuvenation and for maintaining its pole position in the international system.

China's leaders are convinced that the US is a declining hegemon with a dysfunctional political system, although they also realise that the timing is not ripe for them to seize the baton.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew once said that China does aspire to be the No. 1 in Asia and the world in time. Between now and then, the choice faced by Asia and the rest of the world is about which hierarchy – the Pax Americana or the Pax Sinica – best fulfils their strategic, economic and political needs.

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