

## Response to Commentary on *The China Choice*

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The five thoughtful essays presented here offer a wealth of ideas from their eminent authors, and I am very grateful both to them and to the editors for having prepared and presented them. *The China Choice* is not deliberately provocative. My aim was simply to put the arguments as plainly and starkly as I could. But I did not expect that they would command instant and widespread agreement, so I am at least pleased that it has helped stimulate this kind of debate. In this short note I will try to take that debate a little further, not by attempting specifically to rebut the many excellent points made, but to see where they might take the issues from here.

One point on which almost all the reviewers agree is that *The China Choice* only tells half the story, and I fully concur. The second paragraph of the book explains how the future of Asia will be shaped by decisions in both Washington and Beijing, and both governments share equally the responsibility for building a relationship between them which is stable and peaceful. This book focused on America's choices about China only because they seemed to have had less attention than China's choices about America. However China's Choices certainly deserve more study, and I have only half-jokingly threatened to write a sequel which might be called *The America Choice: Why China Should Share Power*, because it does seem to me that China's choices are very similar to America's in some ways, and are obviously just as important and in many ways just as hard. I had space in *The China Choice* only to touch on these choices (pp. 48-53, 60-64), and will not attempt a more extensive treatment here. Suffice to say that while America has to decide how much it would be worth paying to try to retain primacy in Asia, China has to decide how much it is willing to pay to achieve primacy. My argument is that the price for both is very high, so both would be better off forgoing dreams of primacy and accepting parity instead. But that option only exists for each of them if the other makes the same choice. Hence China's choice about America is just as important as America's choice about China.

This central issue apart, most of the points raised in each of these essays concerns one or both of two central questions. The first is whether or not problem in the trajectory of the US-China relationship is as serious as I argue. The second is whether the solution I suggest to that problem is any good. Let us look at these in turn.

## Is there a problem?

One of the central arguments in *The China Choice* is that the current trends in US-China relations pose very serious risks to both countries and to the rest of us. The obvious costs and risks of pursuing the kind of radical new Asian order which I propose in the book could only be justified if the congenial *status quo* is unsustainable, and the costs and risks of other models of a new Asian order were even greater than those of the model I propose. So it is very important to get clear just how big the risks we face are. The commentaries here raise three different kinds of question about this. The essence of my pessimistic view is that the United States and China have increasingly incompatible views of their relationship with one another and their roles in the Asian order. China wants to take over America's leadership role in Asia, while America wants to hang onto it. So there are two issues to explore: first, is China really challenging US primacy? Second, is the United States really resisting?

Take China first: is it China really challenging the *status quo* in Asia? In different ways I think Ralph Cossa, Jindong Yuan and Swaran Singh each raise this question by suggesting that China has a huge stake of its own in the *status quo*, and might therefore be expected to support rather than challenge it. I think there is a lot to be said for this argument. To the extent that I hold out much hope that China can be convinced to make wisely the choice about its future relations with the United States outlined above, that hope is based on the undoubted fact that China itself has so much to lose from breaking the economic interdependence which has been so central to its economic rise.

But that hope can only go so far: it is based on an assumption, unsupported so far as I can see by clear evidence, that China will always place economic considerations above all others. More fundamentally, it rests on the assumption that China will accept that its economy must suffer if the *status quo* in Asia is overturned. Again I do not think there is much evidence for that. Evidence for the contrary is provided precisely by the fact that China seems both so aware that its economic rise depends on peace and stability, and that it is so evidently determined to challenge US primacy. There comes a time when we have to accept the plain evidence of our eyes and ears.

One final point: those who doubt China's determination to challenge US primacy often exaggerate how much of the present order China might actually want to change, assuming that any challenge to the current order must necessarily be comprehensive. But China is in many ways a deeply *status quo* power itself. It does not seek radical changes in the way Asia works, precisely because it works so well for them as it is. They simply want to change who is in charge, and they see no reason why under their leadership the Asian order should not run pretty much as it has done under US leadership, only even more to their advantage. Of course they may be

wrong about this, but that seems to me to be what they think. This means we would be wrong to believe that China would be deterred from contesting US primacy because of the value it places on many aspects of the current order.

And finally of course we have the plain evidence of China's conduct. Is there any credible account of its actions over the past few years, especially in the South and East China Seas, other than that they are intended as a deliberate and calculated challenge to US primacy in Asia?

So what of the US response? Cossa especially argues that the United States is already doing all that could reasonably be expected to accommodate China's ambitions—indeed that the United States is already treating China as an equal. If that is true, then there is no need for further accommodation. But we need to consider what counts as sufficient accommodation of China. Cossa is arguing that America has already given China as much strategic space as it needs and deserves—which is not enough to erode the US-led *status quo*. He certainly believes that China *should* be satisfied with whatever can be done to accommodate its ambitions without eroding US primacy. But we cannot assume that China *will* be satisfied with that. And this is what really matters here: not what we might think China should or should not accept, but what it will accept. The risks of escalating rivalry and war do not depend on the rights and wrongs of each side, but only on the presence or absence of profound disagreement between them. I see no evidence that China is in fact satisfied with what the United States is offering so far. The remaining gap between US and Chinese views of what China should accept drives the risk of rivalry and conflict.

The resulting risk of major war is, as I have explained, central to my analysis and prescriptions. Cossa and others perhaps think I exaggerate it. I certainly do not think that a US-China war is inevitable: indeed my purpose in *The China Choice* is to suggest how the risks could be much reduced. But I do think the risk is very real and growing. Whether I am right or not depends ultimately on questions about how major wars start and what causes them, which are rather too large for this quick note. Let me just say here that people who are confident war can be avoided often assume that wars only happen when one side or the other actively seeks it. That is not so. They happen when both sides find themselves having to choose between making war, or some alternative which they conclude, either coolly or in the heat of the moment, is even worse. Neither the United States nor China want war, but both could very easily find themselves forced to choose between war and abandoning their vision of themselves as a leader in Asia. That is exactly the kind of situation in which leaders, and peoples, choose war. That is why I think there is a very serious problem.

## What is the solution?

*The China Choice* offers a solution to this problem which is both radical and—as Robert Ayson so elegantly puts it—rather austere. My proposal is austere because my aim was to discover the easiest, simplest, most modest measures which would give a real chance of reducing the risk of major war. It is radical because, if my analysis is right, even the most modest measure turns out to be very big indeed, very hard to conceptualise and very difficult to implement. Like the authors of these essays, I think the Concert of Asia model which I offer has many flaws and drawbacks. The only real merit I claim for it is that it would reduce the risk of major war without sacrificing the most important features of a stable international order. But that seems to me to be a very big merit indeed. Also like others, I think the difficulties of establishing a Concert of Asia are very great, and that it will most likely not happen. It is instead much more likely that the present situation will persist, US-China strategic rivalry with steadily escalate, and the risk of major war will grow.

Nonetheless, if I am right that the kind of accommodation I propose is the best way to limit the risk of catastrophe, then it might not be as fanciful a proposal as it seems at first glance. Certainly it would take extraordinary statesmanship by leaders in several countries to make it happen, but if those leaders realise the risks and costs of the current situation, then the incentives to take the very difficult steps needed to avoid them would be strong. This is where the force of economic interdependence might come into play. Many people recognise how important interdependence is in shaping the relations between states, but they mistake its effects. It does not prevent strategic rivalry arising, but it does increase the incentives to manage it effectively. So the interdependence between the United States and China does not prevent them having to compromise with one another's vision of their respective roles in the Asian order, but it does give them big incentives to reach that compromise. Many people who cannot imagine any disruption of the economic interdependence between the United States and China nonetheless find it equally hard to imagine that something like a Concert of Asia might ever arise. But in fact without the kind of accommodation embodied in the Concert, economic interdependence probably cannot survive. So the incentives to build something like the Concert are perhaps greater than people assume, and the chances of it happening are perhaps not quite so low.

Of course this argument only holds if the Concert model would actually work. Not surprisingly to anyone who knows her work on this subject, Evelyn Goh makes some outstanding points about the nature and workings of a Concert which deserve a fuller response than I have room for here. Let me just touch on three of the issues she, and others, raise. First, there is the question of the relative power of the United States and China. Goh correctly points out that the United States provides many benefits to other countries in the region

that China cannot yet match. She says that this leaves the United States with a big power advantage, which [I infer] might mean that the United States could not, or need not, establish a Concert-style system with China. I am not sure the inference follows, because the benefits which America has delivered have not been the result of US primacy alone. They have also been the result of Chinese acceptance of that primacy. America has been able to do all it has done in Asia since 1972 only because its position has been uncontested. China therefore can, and I think is already, eroding these US advantages even if it cannot replace them with advantages of its own.

Second, Goh makes a very important point about spheres of influence. To build a stable concert on the European model would seem to entail the definition of exclusive spheres of influence for each power. That seems very hard to do because they both seek influence over the same sets of smaller powers. I agree, but with two observations. First, if separate and exclusive spheres of influence do turn out to be essential for the United States and China to live in peace with one another, that may be a price we have to pay. The difficult task of delineating the dividing line between them would then become one part of the difficult process of establishing a stable new order. It would be painful and regrettable but not I think impossible. Second, I do not think we should assume that this would be necessary. Spheres of influence were a prominent part of the nineteenth century European order, but not I think essential to its workings. We can envisage a Concert system that found some other mechanism for reconciling conflicting interests in third countries. It would be interesting to explore this idea in more detail.

Thirdly Goh, along with Ayson, Singh and Cossa, raises critical questions about who is inside the Concert, and what becomes of those who are left out. The first of these relates to the issue of which powers are strong enough to get a seat at the table. I have suggested that there will be four—the US, China, India and Japan—but this simply reflects my hunch that these will be the powers that will be strong enough to disrupt, and therefore veto, any regional order that does not satisfy them. My core point is that the Concert will only involve as full members those countries which have to be there if the order agreed between them is to survive. If one of my four does not meet this test they will fall away, and if some other power does it will have to be accepted. The only powers I am sure will pass the test are China and the United States. Which others might make the cut eventually—not just India and Japan but Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia—is an important area for further study.

The second question concerns the countries which do not make the cut. What kind of a say do they get? We must here distinguish between normative judgements about how we would like Asia's new order to evolve, and analytic judgments about how it would or could actually evolve. I do not believe that an exclusive concert of great powers is a desirable way to build a new Asian order. I only argue that it is much more likely than any more

inclusive process to deliver an order which effectively limits the risk of rivalry and war, because the compromises necessary for agreement between the great powers will be much harder to reach in a larger forum. This is contrary to the inclusive diplomatic norms that have evolved in Asia over the past few decades, but that experience will be of limited use in the very different decades ahead. The ASEAN way has been the result, not the cause, of the major power amity of recent decades, and it will not help to deliver the basis for a new amity now that the old one is falling apart. At the risk of sounding a little Thucydidean, if the region's great powers do a deal among themselves, the middle and small states will not in the end have much choice about whether to accept it or not. But they might take comfort in the thought that if the great powers do not do a deal, then the outcome for them would be even worse.

Even so, I think there is a lot more work to be done on the kinds of institutions and mechanisms that might develop to manage regional issues within a regional order based on a great power concert. These might not necessarily be very much different from those we have today, but like them they would be products of the underlying order, not determinants of it. Thinking more deeply about the shape of such institutions and mechanisms might be a very useful area for further work.

## Values

This brings me finally to Robert Ayson's very thoughtful comments. Ayson's recent work on Hedley Bull<sup>1</sup> gives him a wonderful foundation for thinking about the Asia's future order and the conditions for peace in the Asian Century, and anyone who has read his work will see how much my thinking owes to him, as well as the significant areas on which we differ. There is a great deal that could be said, but I will limit myself to a very brief and preliminary response to what I take to be the core point in his contribution here: that my model of a new Asian order is too austere to provide an adequate basis for Asia's future, in particular because it focuses too narrowly on interests rather than values.

Let's start by going back to Bull for a moment. Ayson's book shows clearly how Bull believed that the anarchical society which is the foundation of order among states must be built, at least to some extent, on a shared set of values. This was the origin of his later interest in cosmopolitan conceptions of international justice, because he took the view that without a measure of justice there could be no convergence in values. But this conception of the place of values in order clearly presupposed a fairly rich conception of order—something rather more than the mere absence of war. I think Bull's views on all this might well be right, at least as far as they go, but I do not

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Ayson, *Hedley Bull and the Accommodation of Power* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

think that this account is complete. It may well make sense to identify a rich conception of order that depends on values in this way, but if so I think it is also necessary to recognise another, more austere conception of order as well. This minimal concept of order might indeed be limited to simply avoiding war between states, and might therefore fail to do much that we would like an international order to do. But it is nonetheless important because avoiding war is so important. As Ayson suggests, this minimal order need be based on nothing more than a shared desire to avoid war, but we forget the most painful lessons of the twentieth century if we do not see in that one of the most vital aims in the management of international relations. I favour an austere approach not because I do not believe a richer order would be preferable, but because that richer order would be harder to achieve, and I fear that by reaching for a richer order we may fail to secure even an austere one. I'd rather settle for half a loaf than no bread. Does this mean we ignore values in favour of interests? Only if you think the avoidance of war is a mere interest, rather an very important value in its own right. In the promotion of that value I am happy to plead guilty to austerity.

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