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Regionalism and Great Power Management in the Asia-Pacific: Complementary or Competing Forces?

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to advance the recent turn in the literature on regionalism in the Asia-Pacific that considers the scope for an effective managerial role for the region's great powers. Drawing on the work of the English School of International Relations on "great power management", the article seeks to clarify the interaction between processes of regionalism and the special managerial rights and responsibilities of the great powers. It draws on both the lessons of historical instances of institutionalised great power management in the form of great power concerts and a theoretical reframing of the practice of great power management. The article argues in favour of a disaggregated approach that prioritises crisis management between the great powers over more expansive versions of great power management in the immediate term. Distinguishing between different types of great power management at both the global and regional levels and highlighting the different lessons that scholars have drawn from the history of great power concerts leads to three recommendations for aligning great power management with processes of regionalism. First, prioritising regular and purposely exclusive dialogue between the United States and China in the immediate term. Second, fostering ad-hoc regional power summits over the medium to long-term as the distribution of power in the region shifts from one of bipolarity to multipolarity. And third, throughout both phases, actively avoiding what is labelled "competitive minilateralism" that is likely to both compete with existing regional institutions and work against the order-building goals of great power management.

KEYWORDS

Great power management; regionalism; US-China rivalry; English School; Concert of Asia; balance of power

Introduction

In recent years the Asia-Pacific region has been marked by the return of great power rivalry. While at present competition between the United States (US) and China has not sparked serious conflict, this possibility is already forcing states in the region to consider their geopolitical alignments, both formal and informal, and causing fissures within regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Bisley, 2019; Le Thu, 2019). Other contributions to this special issue have highlighted some of the limitations in the Asia-Pacific's existing formal institutions and the ways in which they inhibit effective security governance. This article instead turns toward

informal or “social” institutions. It uses the concept found in the English School of International Relations (IR) of “great power management” (see, for example, Bisley, 2012; Bull, 1977; 1980; Cui & Buzan, 2016; Little, 2006; McCourt & Glencross, 2019; Zala, 2017) as a lens for analysing the relationship between great power rivalry and processes of regionalism.

Great power management refers to the special rights of the great powers to enjoy spheres of influence, privileged positions in international organisations and the ability to set the agenda for multilateral diplomacy being matched by a concomitant responsibility for crisis management, restraint in their relations with one another, and leadership in addressing transnational threats. Specifically, the article discusses whether the practice of great power management can be complementary to regional approaches to security governance or whether one must always come at the expense of the other.

Other contributions to this special issue look more closely at the phenomenon of “security regionalism” in the Asia–Pacific. The “growing web of security ties and activities that criss-cross the region” (Tan, 2017, p. 263) includes a variety of organisations aimed at managing conflicts between regional states. Rather than focussing on any one or combination of these organisations, this article instead builds on the work of Baogang He (2018) and others who have argued that security regionalism itself can become an arena for contestation between great powers. He (2018, p. 166) has argued that “the idea of security regionalism should be a critical part of great power management in the 21st century” and this article further develops He’s ideas by specifying which lessons from the history of institutionalised great power management (specifically, great power concerts) might be fruitfully applied to the Asia–Pacific today.

While the practice of great power management has recently received greater attention in the Asia–Pacific context (e.g. Foot, 2017; Goh, 2014; Quayle, 2018), this literature has tended to treat the concept itself – largely imported from the study of European diplomacy – in overly simplistic terms. The central argument pursued here is that a disaggregated approach to great power management in the Asia–Pacific, with a focus on minimalist crisis management, is likely to produce the greatest returns in the immediate future.

The article begins by exploring the concept of great power management and highlights the benefits of two hitherto underdeveloped aspects of the literature on this topic: a distinction between different types of great power management, and between global and regional variations of this practice. The article then turns towards an exploration of institutionalised great power management in the form of great power concerts operating in regional settings. In particular, this section focusses on the different lessons drawn by scholars from the experience of the European concert system of the 19th century. The discussion then applies some of these lessons in the context of the Asia–Pacific by examining the history of calls for a “Concert of Asia”. Finally, the article focusses on the idea that learning the lessons from previous historical forms of great power management should guide current attempts to foster this practice in the Asia–Pacific with a view to ensuring that it acts as a complementary rather than competitive force to regionalism. While drawing inspiration from prominent examples of institutionalised great power management from history, there is no reason why we must be beholden to them as models to be strictly replicated. Instead, current circumstances should guide which lessons are applied today and how this should translate into specific policy

recommendations. Three priorities in particular are highlighted: creating a mechanism for regular and exclusive dialogue between the US and China in the immediate term; fostering ad hoc regional power summits over the medium to long term as the distribution of power in the region shifts from one of bipolarity to multipolarity; and throughout both phases avoiding what is labelled “competitive minilateralism” that is likely to both compete with existing regional institutions and work against the order-building goals of great power management.

Great Power Management in World Politics

The potential for the great powers to make a special contribution to the maintenance of international order is well established in the IR literature (Bull, 1977; Waltz, 1979). So too is the corollary observation that the most powerful and influential states can equally act to “foment crises rather than to control them, to win wars rather than limit them” (Bull, 1977, p. 207). Whether the role that the great powers play results in greater levels of stability and order, or in crisis and disorder, rests on the degree of managerial responsibility that these states accept.

The concept of great power management has been developed in scholarship associated with the English School of IR since the 1970s. Hedley Bull (1977, p. 207) wrote of the great powers “managing their relations with one another; and by exploiting their preponderance in such a way as to impart a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society as a whole”. In this literature, great power management is treated as something more than just the diplomatic and strategic interactions of those states that rank highly in terms of the distribution of material capabilities in the international system. Instead the unique managerial role of states conferred with a particular social status (that of a “great power”) is identified as a social institution – or a “primary institution” of international society (Buzan, 2004a).

While the concept does not necessarily imply a normative preference for exclusive diplomacy or collusion among the great powers, its use recognises that over time this practice has become an everyday part of modern international society. In this sense, the whole notion that the great powers claim special rights in “managing” global issues while also accepting special responsibilities in doing so has evolved into an established practice that attracts shared understandings about norms and legitimacy (Bisley, 2012, p. 90).

Two issues remain underdeveloped in the existing literature on this topic, and both of these are central to the discussion that follows in the Asia–Pacific context. The first is the need to distinguish between the different forms or categories of managerial activities associated with the great powers. Rather than categorising a wide range of activities with often very different goals as simply “great power management”, it is possible to distinguish between at least three main types of activity. The second, on which more work has recently been carried out (and specifically in an Asia–Pacific context), is to distinguish between global and regional great power management.

On the first issue, some definitional clarity is required. Great power management can be defined as the established diplomatic practice in which a small minority of powerful states play a disproportionately active role in the maintenance of international order on the basis of their relative material capabilities and associated social status. It can therefore

be thought of as both a *practice* – in the sense of a socially meaningful pattern of activity (Pouliot & Cornut, 2015) – and as a *social institution*.

As a practice, it differs from diplomacy and multilateralism in general due to the agency attributed solely to the great powers as well as one of its defining features: exclusivity. It is both a form of diplomacy, and a form of multilateral diplomacy in particular, but great power management as a distinct practice cannot simply be reduced to one or the other. This distinction, and its importance, is illustrated below in the discussion of the lessons drawn from the historical example of the Concert of Europe for great power management in the Asia-Pacific today.

As a social institution, great power management amounts to one of the “durable and recognised patterns of shared practices rooted in values held commonly by the members of interstate societies, and embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles” (Buzan, 2004a, p. 181) that, for English School scholars, are the hallmark of an international *society* rather than simply an international *system*. Because it rests on an acceptance of special rights and responsibilities by the holders of great power status, and an equal acceptance of those rights and responsibilities by those that confer such status (the non-great powers), it is, at its core, a social arrangement. It may be closely associated with, and even rely upon, the distribution of material power, but it is also more than this.

The managerial role of the great powers can be viewed more clearly through the lens of three categories (or ideal types) of action: the avoidance of war between themselves, the early resolution of crises involving non-great powers that could escalate into such war, and providing leadership on collective action problems that threaten international society as a whole. Thinking about these three different forms of action – or first-, second- and third-order management – allows us to conceptualise the practice in either minimalist or maximalist forms (21st Century Concert Study Group, 2014, p. 23). First-order management is that which relates specifically to the management of relations between the powers themselves, whether in the form of preventative diplomacy or crisis management, and can be thought of as minimalist great power management. Second- and third-order management relate to diplomatic and military interventions in crises between (or even within) non-great powers (Astrov, 2011) and managing transnational security threats (Kopra, 2019) respectively. These can be thought of as maximalist forms of great power management.

The major benefit of distinguishing conceptually between the three types of management activities and their minimalist or maximalist purposes is that it allows for the possibility of greater coordination between the great powers focussing exclusively on peace and stability between themselves. It does not necessarily require the great powers to share deeper values that underpin a particular conception of international society (Bisley, 2012, p. 9) beyond valuing the goal of avoiding war between great powers. Importantly for the argument about the interaction between great power management and processes of regionalism outlined below, this opens up the space for the non-great powers in general, and regional institutions in particular, to play a much greater role in the management of regional security threats and crises.

This leads to the second issue of the distinction between global and regional great power management. Some of Bull’s earliest writing on great power management implied that the role of the great powers in working for, rather than against, the promotion of order might play out at a purely regional rather than necessarily a global level.

The application of this combination of special rights and responsibilities for the most powerful of states might in some cases “affect the preservation of order only in some area of the world or some segment of international society; in other cases they will relate to the maintenance of order throughout international society as a whole” (Bull, 1971, p. 145). Yet, as recent work (e.g. Cui & Buzan, 2016, p. 206; Goh, 2014, pp. 169–171) has pointed out, the later, more expansive English School literature on this topic had little of substance to say about how the primary institution of great power management might play out at a regional level. More than this, there is little sense of how powers with ostensibly global interests might manage their relations at a purely regional level and in conjunction with regional organisations.

If we are to examine the intersection of forces of regionalism and the practice of great power management, it is useful to consider whether there are relevant forms of institutionalised great power management that may serve as an historical guide. While such a guide need not function as a perfect analogy to be replicated, particularly given the role of historical memory in shaping contemporary policy discourse in almost all areas of public life (MacMillan, 2008), it is almost impossible to escape the use of such examples today. In any discussion of the practice of great power management in diplomatic history, the concept of great power concerts looms large. It is a mistake to treat great power management and great power concerts as synonymous: a great power concert is simply a formal diplomatic, specifically multilateral, manifestation of the practice and institution of great power management.

The Inescapable European Concert System

Today, as we witness the “return” of great power politics, calls for the establishment of a new concert of powers to manage the major questions of peace and order are growing – not least in the Asia–Pacific region (21st Century Concert Study Group, 2014; Alexandroff, 2015; Haass, 2019; McKinney, 2019; Shambaugh, 2014; White, 2013). The Concert of Europe continues to be, by far, the dominant historical referent for advocates of a new era of concert diplomacy (see, for example, Humphreys, 2018; Larson, 2018, p. 250; Mitzen, 2013; White, 2013, p. 130). While elements of concert-style diplomacy may have origins that go even further back in history, the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) and the European “concert system” that it put in place gave analysts and decision-makers alike an iconic example from which to draw. The diplomatic system that it put in place became the gold standard that is still used to illustrate the concept today. The Concert of Europe (also referred to as the “Vienna system” or “Congress system”) is so iconic that it is almost impossible to discuss the prospect of some kind of future great power concert without reference to it. As the authors of an exhaustive study of great power concerts have argued, it is “one of the few successful templates that history supplies” (21st Century Concert Study Group, 2014, p. 12). Furthermore, it is possible to characterise the concert era as the “heyday” of great power management (Cui & Buzan, 2016, p. 187).

Widespread use of the historical analogy of the Concert of Europe, however, belies the diversity of views found in IR literature on precisely what lessons can and should be drawn from the great power diplomacy of the era. For some, the concert gives us an important historical example of how a balance of power can be cultivated in a specific

regional context. In this view, scholars argue that it demonstrated how the great powers can “retain an ongoing undercurrent of balancing behavior” (Kupchan & Kupchan, 1991, p. 120) while engaging in formal, consensus-driven negotiations. While a functioning balance of power need not presuppose the existence of a concert of powers (Bull, 1977, p. 114), this line of reasoning asserts that a concert can still function while states operate in power-political terms as long as balancing does not descend into crisis. The Concert of Europe can be thought of as an institutionalised version of specific attempts to manage and cultivate a balance of power – or what Richard Little (2007a) refers to as a “purposive” balance of power, rather than treating the balance of power as a purely structural phenomenon to which states must adapt. For Buzan (2014, p. 143), “[t]he Concert of Europe during the nineteenth century provides the model for the balance of power as a conscious institution of international society”. The reading of the concert as an attempt to “create” a Europe-wide balance of power is closely linked to a pluralist approach to global order, prioritising the maintenance of order over the pursuit of justice.

Others have argued that the importance of the concert system was more transformational than simply an institutionalised form of a purposive balance of power. Robert Jervis, for example, argues that the concert was the best example of a security regime as the members’ behaviour “sharply diverged from normal” expectations of great power politics. This was because

[t]hey did not seek to maximize their individual power positions, they did not always take advantage of others’ temporary weaknesses and vulnerabilities, they made more concessions than they needed to, and they did not prepare for war or quickly threaten to use force when others were recalcitrant (Jervis, 1982, pp. 362–363).

A more ambitious reading of the Concert of Europe’s significance that goes beyond that of an institutionalised balance of power or the concept of a security regime is that which describes the Vienna settlement as a “collective” or “legalised” hegemony (see Clark, 2011; Simpson, 2004). This position uses the concert to illustrate how the great powers – recognised as a collective in a social setting in which their status is conferred upon them – can act with a degree of shared purpose. The members of the concert system were not simply leaders by virtue of their material capabilities who, via the exchange of information in regular meetings, acted as a security regime. Instead, they were leaders by virtue of the fact that they attracted “followers” in the form of the non-great powers who accepted (not always happily) their position as the order-makers of Europe – a position that required the great powers to act with common purpose. The central ingredient of a collective hegemony – or any degree of genuine hegemony, as opposed to simple primacy – is the attainment of a degree of legitimacy. In this view of the concert, its meetings should not simply be thought of as attempts at crisis management, but also as the expression of a collective hegemonic project.

While something akin to the practice of great power management may pre-date the Concert of Europe (Black, 2010, pp. 87–88), and the practice can be said to have outlasted the concert as well, the Vienna system signified a formalised approach to this kind of diplomacy. Under a concert arrangement, the great powers met with the explicit purpose of engaging in what was outlined above as the practice of great power management and, unless the concert was resisted by the non-great powers, the formal nature of the

meetings helped to legitimise the exclusive role of these states in engaging in this activity. The more regular meetings of the concert system in the decades that followed were generally held by foreign ministers, with summit-level meetings reserved for major crises. Over the century following 1815, more than 20 major meetings were held at the outset or the settlement of crises in or near Europe.

The distinction between the role of the great powers in managing relations between themselves in order to avoid great power wars on the one hand, and in addressing broader issues of society-wide importance on the other, termed minimalist and maximalist approaches to great power management respectively, speaks directly to the institutional forms that great power management takes. The relevance of this distinction for the current era of power transition is that contemporary global governance requires a maximalist approach to great power management. For Evelyn Goh,

the main challenge is how to harness great powers to some collective authority, or to embed them within stable structures of inter-state co-operation – not just to prevent war between them, but more to protect the orderly functioning of international life along agreed rules and norms (2014, p. 170; see also Hurrell, 2007, pp. 31–32).

In maximalist versions of great power management at either a global or regional level, the inequality inherent in the concept is at its most visible. As Cui & Buzan (2016, p. 184) point out, great power management as a socially accepted practice is not just about the great powers assuming special responsibilities (Bukovansky et al., 2012; Loke, 2016); it is about a *quid pro quo* that involves the matching of these responsibilities with special rights. For example, if first-order great power management involves the mutual recognition of spheres of influence, this implies the right to maintain such spheres in the first place. If second-order management involves the responsibility to manage crises between non-great powers, it also allows for a great power to become involved in the resolution of crises that are “not [its] immediate concern” (Bull, 1971, p. 143).

Like some elements of the balance of power reading of the concert, the association with second-order great power management emphasises the conservative, or at least strongly pluralist foundations of the Vienna settlement.¹ The concert’s series of meetings made routine the coordinated action of the great powers throughout numerous crises, often involving quelling revolutions such as in Naples, Spain and Greece in the 1820s and 1830s. Henry Kissinger (2014, p. 65) has captured the pluralist great power managerialism of this system: “[t]he Concert of Powers did not guarantee a unanimity of outlook, yet in each case a potentially explosive crisis was resolved without a major-power war”.

When we look more closely at the Concert of Europe through the lens of the disaggregated approach to great power management used here, it becomes clear that there are multiple readings of its function in European international society throughout the 19th century. This is important given that it remains the dominant historical reference point in contemporary discussions about security institutions and the management of great power rivalries – especially in the Asia-Pacific. So any attempt to ensure that security regionalism and great power management become complementary processes in the region will require at least some attempt to clarify whether the minimalist or maximalist type of great power management is envisaged. In addition to clarifying the goals that the practice of great power management is meant to serve in the region, any

institutionalised form of this practice – such as a concert of powers – will require clarifying the linked issues of geographic scope and membership.

A “Concert of Asia”?

A growing literature points to a more regionalised world order in the years ahead (Acharya, 2014; Buzan & Lawson, 2015; Kupchan, 2012), which, in principle, might allow for a return to at least a minimalist approach to great power management in the kind of concert arrangement covering a single region similar to the Concert of Europe. As the name implies, the Concert of Europe was a regional arrangement, but this does not necessarily mean that concert diplomacy must work hand-in-hand with regionalisation. The geographic confines of the European concert system during the 19th century were largely a product of the slow pace of the expansion of international society. A Euro-centric, if not outright xenophobic, view of both power and status meant that the special rights and responsibilities of the great powers as conceived of by European great and non-great powers alike did not extend beyond the confines of the continent. In fact, one of the major challenges to the concert system was the rise of new powers outside the traditional heartland of European great power politics (Little, 2007a, pp. 116–118). Yet what is better characterised as the globalisation of international society (Dunne & Reus-Smit, 2017) and the demise of the Vienna system has not prevented new proposals for great power concerts with a regional delineation. Couched within the growing discourse on the coming of an “Asian century”, and largely driven by concerns about a growing strategic competition between Washington and Beijing in the Asia–Pacific, a distinct element in the renewed interest in concert diplomacy is now focussed on the prospects for a “Concert of Asia”.

Calls for a concert of powers in Asia date back as far as the 1930s with the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies’ statement (quoted in Millar, 1978, p. 103) that “I look forward to the day when we will have a concert of Pacific powers, pacific in both senses of the word”. However, in the post-Cold War period, where expectations of a multipolar distribution of power at the regional level became widespread, the idea began to find some purchase (Friedberg, 1993–94; Stuart, 1997).

As early as 1997, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Susan Shirk (1997, p. 270) argued that despite the challenges in Asia, “an effort to forge a concert should be undertaken even if it is unable to reach the ambitious standard of the 19th-century Concert of Europe and achieves only ad hoc multilateralism or regular consultations among the powers”. Around the same time, Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto was calling for a four-power summit on security issues, a process that never eventuated, largely due to a subsequent cooling of Russo–Japanese relations and the US focus away from East Asia following the 9/11 attacks.

The concert-like diplomacy of the Six Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue held between 2003 and 2008 appeared to demonstrate the potential for second-order great power management in Asia. In terms of the different readings of the Concert of Europe discussed above, this would appear to align more with institutionalising a balance of power than with some form of collective hegemony, given that even those within the US foreign policy establishment now admit that Washington invested in these talks out of a recognition that it could not have created a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula on its own

(Hill, 2015). Some analysts have outlined ideas about an Asian concert based on a renewal of the Six Party Talks (Ayson, 2009; Howlett, 2006),² although as Michael Wesley (2009, p. 65) points out, this would require some change in membership if it were to be expanded to cover issues beyond Pyongyang's nuclear program. Like the broader question of a concert of powers to manage nuclear weapon issues more generally, the difficulty of membership is that these talks included both great and non-great powers (or in this case states that would not even pass as regional powers) including North and South Korea. The former is not a major regional player, but the latter would be a potential member. If South Korea was included in an Asian concert of powers, however, there is little reason not to include Singapore or for that matter Australia. While the Six Party Talks framework certainly does point to a degree of openness to both the concept of great power management in general and of great power concerts as a specific diplomatic format for dealing with regional security crises, it is unlikely that this particular example can provide an effective basis for a new concert.

While one might presume that a regional concert might be less problematic in terms of membership than a global one, the various proposals for a "Concert of Asia" demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case. While the three states that are generally thought of as the region's indigenous powers (China, India and Japan) and the major external player (the US) are all reasonably uncontentious choices, others are more problematic. While Wesley (2009, p. 65) advocates renovating the East Asia Summit (which includes states such as Australia, the Philippines and Thailand) for this purpose, others point out that states such as Australia are "simply not big enough to qualify for a seat at the really big table that a great power concert would involve" (Ayson, 2009, p. 65). The danger of "upgrading" an existing organisation to a concert level in Asia is that institution-building in the region has been one of the avenues that China and Japan have used to play out their rivalry over the last 15 years (Goh, 2014, p. 176). Equally, the growing rivalry between the US and China can be said to have already found expression in regional institutional contexts and there is every reason to think that this is likely to continue (Beeson, 2016; Le Thu, 2019; Tow, 2017). This means not only that any existing regional body brings with it the difficulty of including members that do not qualify for membership at the concert level, but also that all the debates from this period of "institution racing" would be carried over into the new "Concert of Asia".

This raises the issue of the distinction between regional and great powers. Both terms are used frequently by scholars and practitioners to describe various states, but rarely with precision or consistency. Jack Levy (1983) and Barry Buzan (2004b; see also Buzan & Wæver, 2003) have attempted to provide definitions of each category in order to clarify the distinction between them. For Buzan (2004b, pp. 69–70), "what distinguishes great powers from merely regional ones is that they are responded to by others on the basis of system-level calculations, as well as regional ones, about the present and near future distributions of power". While it is surely correct to apply a relational and behavioural definition to what are ultimately social categories, this also alerts us to the problem that such definitions will not always be applied uniformly. Where some may treat a state as a regional power, others may consider it a global one given that outside the world of formal modelling in academic articles, there simply is no objective threshold over which a state moves out of one category and into the next. Buzan (2004b, pp. 111–113), for example, refers to Japan as a great (rather than regional)

power and even discusses the possibility of, and barriers to, it moving into the higher category of superpower (see also Schirm, 2010). Yet Lindsay Black (2017) discusses Tokyo's mere "aspirations" for regional leadership (see also Flesmes & Nolte, 2016, p. 7).

Beyond the difficult issues of membership of a concert and the distinction between different grades of powers, proposals for a regional concert also presuppose that it would be possible to separate the rivalries of global powers into discreet regional arenas and that global powers would be content to settle for an equal standing with (merely) regional ones. The first of these is problematic: proponents of an Asian concert, such as Hugh White (2013, p. 147), argue that spheres of influence "remain an important feature of the international order" and that concert arrangements can assist the powers to come to at least a tacit agreement on each other's spheres of influence. That may be possible in a specific regional setting, but the interests of at least two of the players in any Asian concert, China and the US, are not limited to the immediate region. To take one example, Washington has long played a uniquely influential role in the Middle East in which, since the early 2010s, China has had increasing aspirations and interests (Evron, 2017). Increasing competition between these two has also been identified in Africa (Campbell, 2008) and Latin America (Ellis, 2017). The problem of the global-regional nexus was one of the factors that eventually undermined the Concert of Europe. The arrival of the two "Pacific powers" – the US and Japan – in particular posed serious questions about membership of the concert. Throughout the second half of the century, Britain (one of the concert's founding and most influential members) began to recognise that the relative power of these rising states was increasing as they slowly learned to translate their increasing material capabilities into diplomatic strength.³ The more Washington and Tokyo were able to act and, more importantly, be treated as if they were great powers, the more the concert system appeared to be in need of reform.

Both the global-regional nexus issue and the challenge of asking truly global powers to sit alongside mere regional ones in an Asian concert are compounded by the fact that a debate now exists over how Asia's strategic geography should be conceived (see Beeson & Murray, 2020). On the one hand there are those who believe strategic questions should be thought of in terms of a wider "Indo-Pacific" region, and on the other are those who argue that a more limited conception of "Asia-Pacific" makes more sense.⁴ Yet more complexity is added by those who advocate instead for a strategic geography based around the older idea of a continental Eurasia (Mações, 2018). While debates over "what is Asia?" may seem arcane, a "Concert of Asia" would need to address this question directly if the major powers that are able to affect issues of peace and stability in the region are to take part.

In a post-US "pivot" period in which China has swapped its "peaceful rise" for the realisation of a "Chinese dream", and other large or growing powers such as Japan, India and Indonesia look to ensure their own aspirations are not overshadowed by a bipolar Sino-US competition, the time for a "Concert of Asia" may have finally come. But such an arrangement is unlikely to be effective without an equal degree of leadership from these powers (and others) at the global level, given that, like the idea of issue-specific concerts, it is difficult to translate the analytical distinction between regional and global domains into real-world diplomatic action.⁵

Great Power Management and Regionalism in Asia: Complementary or Competitive?

The slow but steady trend towards an ever-greater regional institutional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region continues to create opportunities and space for the mitigation of security dilemma dynamics between the small and medium-sized powers of the region. The increasing strategic competition and perhaps even rivalry among the region's largest economic and military powers, the US and China, threatens simultaneously to overshadow this progress and to undermine it.

Attempts at fostering maximalist versions of great power management in the region risk being turned into a form of great power condominium or collective hegemony in which the interests of Beijing and Washington dominate the Asia-Pacific. Alternatively, a lack of effective great power management leading to increasing crises in which US-Sino rivalry makes choices of alignment with one or other power steadily starker risks undermining the ability of regional actors to hedge and perhaps even “soft balance” against either Beijing or Washington, or both. The separation of the existing Asian institutions such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit from the difficult and fragile practice of great power management will mean that the former do not become the victims of failures in the latter. As Odd Arne Westad has argued in relation to ASEAN-China relations (2018, p. 154), “both sides must emphasize those aspects of interaction that bind them together rather than those that force them apart”.

Therefore, developing avenues for minimalist great power management, in which the relatively modest goal of conflict avoidance between the US and China becomes the limited but ultimate goal, would appear to hold great promise. Whether this requires a region-wide concert arrangement (with all the difficulties in terms of formality and membership that this entails), when the number of great powers in the region is so low, is not clear. In this sense, keeping a degree of separation between regional multilateral institutions and institutionalised forms of minimalist great power management (such as US-Sino summits and ministerial meetings) may ensure that great power management becomes a complementary rather than competitive process in the Asia-Pacific. As the distribution of power in the region continues to become more diffuse with the relative rise of states such as India and perhaps, in time, Indonesia, maintaining this separation is likely to become more complicated.

Therefore, three priorities to ensure that effective great power management becomes a complementary rather than a competitive force in regard to existing regional arrangements in the Asia-Pacific can be identified. The first, based on the theoretical and historical discussion above about the need to disaggregate the different forms of great power management, is to ensure that minimalist or first-order management initiatives are prioritised. This means focussing directly on US-Sino relations. These two states have unique capabilities and overlapping ambitions for regional dominance, which makes the fast and effective management of crises in their relationship more important than any other security concern that might be addressed on a regional basis. The lessons relating to the cultivation of a purposive balance of power and the transformational aspects of security regimes discussed above in relation to the 19th-century Concert of Europe might be most appropriately applied. For questions of peace and order, something akin to a “Concert of Asia” need not involve a wide array of actors if, in a regional context,

there are two states whose strategic relationship looms disproportionately large. The exclusivity associated with the unique role played by the great powers in the European concert may sit uneasily with contemporary notions of an egalitarian global order based on sovereign equality (Bisley, 2012, p. 182), but such notions are unlikely to last long in the face of the genuine possibility of war between the great powers (White, 2008). This does not simply mean that regional organisations such as ASEAN have no role to play in relation to great power management. The region's small and middle powers can play central roles as the two great powers take action to create a balance of power between themselves by agreeing or refusing to host foreign forces and military bases, or joining formal military alliances. One of the factors that contributed to the relative success of the Concert of Europe was the degree to which the regular meetings of the great powers were treated as a natural response to the flashpoints and crises of the day that, if not managed carefully, threatened to drag the major powers into conflict with each other. While concerns about a US-Sino condominium (Bisley, 2017, p. 9; Ferguson, 2016) will likely accompany any attempts at formalising and expanding the existing summit-level meetings between US and Chinese leaders aimed at addressing tensions in their relationship, doing so allows for the possibility of drawing a clear distinction between this relationship and wider regional tensions and crises. This crucial distinction can only work if the great powers themselves accept the practical distinction between themselves and merely regional powers. In the short term, the US has an obvious interest in attempting to elevate the role of regional powers such as India and Japan, both of which perceive a more immediate threat from China's rapid rise than from the continuation of American power in the region. Yet this would only blur the distinction between otherwise clearly separate processes of minimalist great power management on the one hand and security regionalism on the other.

Second, and over the medium to long term (but not before), the development of regional power summits on an ad hoc basis may be one way of navigating the longer-term shift from an essentially bipolar regional order to a multipolar one. While this conclusion may seem to sit in tension with the previous point, this is simply a matter of timing. As discussed above, the question of which states can and should be involved in any institutionalised forms of great power management in the region is exceedingly difficult. The distinction between great powers (with global reach and ambitions) and merely regional powers is not always as straightforward as it may seem, and formal diplomatic initiatives that rest on this distinction require some degree of agreement on which states count in what category. Yet addressing this issue will be important for ensuring that enough space exists between attempts to foster regional great power management and Asia's already complex and overlapping multilateral forums. To put it simply, given the likely power trajectories of a number of states in the region, an avenue will need to exist for regional powers whose material capabilities and associated social status are on the rise to ascend to the ranks of those states that adopt both the special rights and responsibilities of the "great responsables" (Bull, 1980). As discussed above, one of the factors that helped bring about the European concert system's demise was the rise of non-members such as the US and Japan (Zala, 2017, pp. 378-379). Therefore, it will be important to navigate the medium to long-term shift from a US-Sino-dominated region to one in which a number of regional powers (India, Japan, Indonesia and so on) play increasingly important roles that distinguish them from the small and middle powers of the region.

This is particularly so when it comes to crisis management during moments of increased tension, where the prospect of military conflict is high. At such times, as Coral Bell (1971, p. 8) once warned,

it is essential to distinguish between the management role of the dominant powers in crises of the central balance, and their power to intervene in or manipulate crises of local balances (as for instance Soviet manipulation of the early stages of the 1967 Middle East crisis).

The third priority is one of avoidance rather than cultivation. While the development of an effective means of great power management will require a focus on complementary minilateralism alongside the established multilateral forums in the region (Tow, 2019), avoiding competitive minilateralism will be essential. Past practices of great power management have relied upon what Bull (1980, p. 446) referred to as informal structures of cooperation aimed at accommodating each other's power. Attempts at fostering minilateral initiatives (i.e. those typically involving three or four states; see Tow, 2019) that include some but not all of the great powers are likely to work against the goals of stability and order-building associated with great power management. The kind of informal minilateralism, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that brings together Australia, India, Japan and the US as a thinly veiled attempt at balancing China's rise, would appear to push in the opposite direction (see contributions by Pan and Zala in Graham et al., 2018).

Conclusion

It has now become commonplace for both analysts (Bisley, 2017) and governments (Australian Government, 2017, p. 21; White House, 2017, p. 27) to observe that great power competition has returned in global politics in general and in the Asia-Pacific in particular. Due to their material capabilities and social standing in regional and global orders, the great powers have the unique ability to both foment and mitigate instability and insecurity. They can therefore act not only as order-makers (rather than takers) but also as order-breakers. Whether the role that the great powers play results in greater levels of stability and order or in crisis and disorder rests on the degree of managerial responsibility that these states accept. Therefore, developing and promoting the concept of great power management in the Asia-Pacific can be a powerful form of order-building. But more than this it can be a way of not overloading existing regional institutions already characterised by complexity and limited effectiveness (Beeson, 2019).

If great power management is to be fostered in the Asia-Pacific region, there are lessons to be learned from the history of previous attempts in other regions. This includes thinking carefully about the minimalist and maximalist goals of great power management and therefore also the different forms that it might take. The formulation discussed above of splitting this practice into first-, second- and third-order forms of management allows us to suggest and even advocate for particular initiatives or policies with greater precision than, for example, some of the calls for a "Concert of Asia" have done thus far. When discussing institutionalised forms of great power management, the Concert of Europe stands as almost the sole example of a great power concert in history, making analysis of the Vienna system inescapable. Yet, as discussed above, the multiple and sometimes even competing interpretations of what the concert was and what its legacy

has been make its dominance in this strand of IR literature somewhat problematic. While drawing inspiration from this particular institutionalised form of great power management, there is no reason why we must be beholden to it as a model. Minimalist great power management in the Asia-Pacific in the immediate future need not require an artificial commitment to a multipolar balance of power arrangement. While the US and China continue to dominate the region in terms of power and influence, the minimalist goal of fostering first-order management aimed at resolving crises between these two states exclusively should be given top priority. This is particularly so given the problems associated with distinguishing clearly between regional and great powers discussed above. By almost all accounts, China has now moved from merely the former and into the latter category (Huang & Patman, 2013; Shambaugh, 2013). Therefore, encouraging both Washington and Beijing to treat each other as states with special rights and responsibilities for crisis management in the region, separate from all others, while ultimately helping to perpetuate power inequalities that may seem inimical to the interests of non-great powers, may help to give more inclusive regional bodies such as ASEAN and the ARF the space they need to function effectively.

Emphasising the need for a minimalist approach to great power management may hold the promise of turning the increasing strategic competition and even rivalry between the US and China in on itself as states in the region look to these two powers to carefully manage their relations with one another more directly. A stronger culture of great power management, in which the special responsibilities associated with the role of the great powers are explicitly linked only to crisis management, would open the space for regional integration and coordination to be de-linked from great power competition. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the best way to avoid the return of great power competition in Asia dividing regional states into competing camps may be to formalise the exclusive rights and responsibilities of the great powers in leading the maintenance of the regional order.

Fundamentally the history of great power management and great power concerts in particular tells us that form should follow function. Attempts at formalising the exclusive role of the great powers in diplomatic form should not be prioritised over the more difficult task of finding ways to encourage the development of shared views about the underlying structure of regional order and the respective places of the great powers within it. Even a minimalist aspiration for a renewed great power management that can work hand-in-hand with Asia's regional security architecture must be based on the fundamental *quid pro quo* of the acceptance of rights and responsibilities on the part of the great powers. No less important is some degree of readiness to confer these rights (as well as responsibilities) upon these powers by the other states of the region. A peaceful order in the Asia-Pacific tomorrow may therefore require a greater commitment to exclusivity and sovereign inequality than many would be willing to admit today.

Notes

1. The labelling of the Concert of Europe as pluralist uses the pluralist-solidarist distinction found in English School writing on global order (where a pluralist view privileges state and inter-state stability over human security and emancipation). This is a different usage of the

term from that employed by authors such as Gerry Simpson (2004, pp. 249–250), who describes the counter-revolutionary aims of the Holy Alliance as anti-pluralist.

2. While the Six Party Talks have been dormant since 2009, all six members revived official talks (at the bilateral level) in 2017, making a return to this multilateral formulation, at least in principle, a possibility.
3. See, for example, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, who observed in 1857 that “We have given way Step by Step to the North Americans on almost every disputed matter, and I fear that we shall have more or less to do so upon every other Question except the maintenance of our own Provinces and of our West Indian Islands” (quoted in Little, 2007b, p. 81). In relation to Japan, this recognition occurred much later in the century, but by 1902 Britain and Japan had signed a treaty establishing an alliance between the two, explicitly recognising one another’s special interests in Northeast Asia.
4. On this issue in the specific context of the US “pivot”, see Bisley and Phillips (2013).
5. For a sceptical view of the value of an Asian concert of powers given the global nature of many of the issues with which it would be required to deal, see Phillips (2011).

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