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GEOPOLITICS OF CONFUSION HOW LONG CAN THIS LAST?



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THE BINARY FALLACY

HOW *NOT* TO THINK ABOUT GEOPOLITICS IN EAST ASIA

Bilahari Kausikan

THE BINARY fallacy pervades far too much analysis of geopolitical developments in East Asia, whether in the media, academia, or the considerations of some governments. The binary fallacy is a mode of thought in which something must be one thing or another: If not 'A' then it is 'B.' Its corollary is a mechanistic determinism: if not 'A' it must necessarily be 'B' and *only* 'B,' and never 'C,' 'D' or 'Z.'

Such a mode of thought is so prevalent because U.S.-China relations are undoubtedly the major axis of the East Asian geopolitical equation. The United States and China are groping towards a new *modus vivendi*. The adjustments underway between these two major powers, and between them and other countries in East Asia, will preoccupy our region for decades to come. This is precisely why we must think about U.S.-China relations clearly and clinically. But binary thinking is simplistic,

ahistorical, and inaccurate—and hence inappropriate. Under some circumstances, it could actually be dangerously misleading.

For a start, U.S.-China relations defy facile characterization. They are neither natural partners nor inevitable enemies. Their relationship is simultaneously profoundly interdependent and infused with strategic mistrust. Such ambivalence is in fact the most salient characteristic of post-Cold War international relationships. To differing degrees, ambivalence also characterizes Sino-Japan relations, Sino-India relations, Sino-South Korea relations, and Sino-Australia relations, as well as the attitudes of smaller countries, like the members of ASEAN, towards all the major powers.

Moreover, the United States and China, while extremely important actors, are not the only ones. They operate

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Bilahari Kausikan at the 2017 Concordia Annual Summit

Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

in an increasing complex regional (and, of course, global) environment which influences, and is influenced by, many other bilateral relationships in ever more complex dynamics. Freed of Cold War imperatives, even the closest American ally does not now define its interests in exactly the same way as the United States; even small countries that are economically dependent on China are not without voice and agency, and will exercise that when given any opportunity.

The binary mode of thought perhaps represents an unconscious hankering after the simplicities of Cold

War international relations. It was a perilous period. But, irrespective of which side of the ideological divide a given state stood on, and even if one such state pretended to be non-aligned, there was never much doubt about how it should position itself. That clarity is gone and cannot be recreated by imposing simplistic mental frameworks on a complex reality.

All this ought to be obvious. However, two developments in 2017—Donald Trump's election as the 45th President of the United States, and Xi Jinping's consolidation of power evident at the Chinese Communist Party's 19th Party

Congress, and recently underscored at the National People's Congress—threaten to overwhelm the obvious and cloud our capacity for dispassionate analysis.

These developments reinforced the tendency to think about U.S.-China relations in binary, deterministic terms in which anything regarded as adversely affecting the United States must necessarily rebound to China's advantage. A particularly egregious example was a *Foreign Policy* article that was published online immediately after the American presidential election, under the absurd headline "China Just Won the U.S. Election." More than a year later, too much of that attitude still persists.

The United States and China are both changing themselves and changing the world. A more symmetrical U.S.-China relationship is certainly emerging in East Asia. But international relations are not sporting events in which a 'win' for one side is necessarily a 'loss' for the other. China's rise is not America's decline, except relatively. In absolute terms, both are and will remain substantial powers. Neither is without weaknesses, and neither's future development is going to be de-

scribed by a straight-line trajectory up or down.

Simply put: The United States under Trump is not as bad as large parts of the mainstream American media and large parts of the American establishment—

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still seething with frustration over his unexpected victory—portray; China under Xi is not the juggernaut the Communist Party's propaganda apparatus would have us believe. This again ought to be obvious, but the obvious is clouded by the emotional shock of Trump's election and the confidence with

which Xi proclaimed China's ambition for a 'new era.'

There certainly have been serious disruptions to American policy, particularly in the area of trade. And Mr. Trump's unpredictability has created new uncertainties. China's rise and ambition are real; but the idea that China's rise is necessarily America's decline is advocacy, not balanced analysis. The American media and establishment present almost everything Trump does as wrong, because they want him to fail in order to vindicate themselves. China presents ambition as an already existing reality, because persuading others that it is so goes some way towards making it so.

There is a curious coincidence of agendas between the Chinese Communist Party and at least some sections of the American media and establishment. I am not suggesting conscious collaboration, but their arguments are certainly mutually reinforcing.

An example is the trope—so pervasive in the Western media and academia as to be taken as almost axiomatic—that the Trump Administration's retreat from leadership globally and in East Asia has undermined the so-called "liberal international order" and given China an advantage.

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This supports the insistent Chinese line that America is an unreliable partner, and that America is the past and China the future. These are superficially persuasive arguments. But they do not stand up to close examination.

It cannot be denied that the Chinese political system is better placed to consistently pursue long-term goals than the American one, which has always been subjected to disruptions—some very major—every four years, even if the same president or party remains in office. But it is not as if the Chinese system has not also been subjected to major disruptions or is somehow now immune to future disruptions. Xi Jinping's consolidation of power,

the move away from the post-Deng Xiaoping principle of collective leadership, the greater emphasis on Party discipline, and the discarding of the two-term limit has been compared to Mao Zedong. The comparison is false. But the potential for something akin to a neo-Maoist single point of failure may have now been reintroduced into the Chinese system.

Moreover, we should not allow Trump's outsized personality and penchant for extravagant statements to exaggerate the extent of discontinuity that his administration represents.

The Trump Administration's National Security Strategy, published in December 2017, and the Summary of the National Defense Strategy, published in January this year, are largely mainstream documents that made clear that the United States has neither eschewed leadership nor entirely disavowed the current global order. However, the Trump Administration has a different—narrower and less generous—concept of leadership that puts "America First" and stresses both a more robust approach to competitors and a return to an old strategy of "peace through strength."

How and whether this strategy will work is, of course, yet to be determined. One may well have serious reservations

about the concept of leadership these documents embody. But they cannot really be accurately described as a “retreat” from leadership. And it would be a mistake to place too much responsibility on a single administration. It is not as if all was milk and honey in American foreign policy before Trump won the election.

There is nothing that has been as disruptive of the post-Cold War international order as President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003. This was the denouement of the hubris that began to infect American foreign policy in the immediate post-Cold War under the Clinton Administration, when America was portrayed as the “indispensable nation”—to recall Madeleine Albright’s notorious phrase.

The ensuing wars in the Middle East exhausted Americans, discredited the American political establishment, and set the stage for Trump’s election and that of Barack Obama before him. A similar trajectory from hubris to dysfunctionality can be traced in Europe. If the “liberal international order” is under stress—and I think it is—Trump is a symptom not a cause. The pressures on the “liberal international order” have deeper roots than Donald Trump.

Setting aside trade policy for the moment, continuity in foreign and security policy has been as evident as disruption. There have been improvements over his predecessor’s policies in some essential aspects.

The Trump Administration has reaffirmed its alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia. It has given its Seventh Fleet greater latitude to conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, to

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challenge China’s claims, and has done so without quasi-metaphysical public debates about whether a particular action was really a FONOP or not—something that un-

dermined their effect and highlighted divisions between the White House and Pentagon during the Obama Administration. I do not see any sign that the United States is preparing to withdraw from East Asia. Richard Nixon’s Guam Doctrine (1969) was a far more serious reorientation of American security policy in East Asia than anything Trump said during the campaign or has done since.

The cancellation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement was undoubtedly a grievous blow to American credibility. But no less serious was Obama’s failure to enforce the “red line” he drew in Syria. Trump’s decision to

bomb Syria while at dinner with Xi Jinping did much to restore the credibility of American power. Without credible power, there can be no leadership.

On North Korea, the Trump Administration is shifting away from a quarter century-old failed policy of denuclearization and preparing to deal with a nuclear armed North Korea by deterrence. Trump uses extreme language, but nevertheless expresses the essential logic of deterrence. His willingness to meet Kim Jong-un is a risk, but I think it is a risk worth taking.

I do not think North Korea can be dissuaded from acquiring the capability it believes it needs for regime survival: nuclear armed ICBMs able to reach the continental United States. It is impossible to dissuade a country from a course of action it believes to be existential, since any cost that can be imposed is necessarily lower than the cost of proceeding. The alternatives are therefore pre-emption, in which the horrendous cost of American security would be paid by America’s closest East Asian allies. Unilaterally putting South Korea and Japan at serious risk to make America safe would irrevocably

destroy American credibility in East Asia. The only alternative is the means by which all relationships between nuclear-armed states have been managed: deterrence. To be stable, deterrence must be coupled with diplomacy.

Competition and cooperation have always coexisted. The Trump Administration’s National Security

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Strategy and National Defense Strategy can be criticized for placing too much emphasis on competition. But this is perhaps an over-correction to the second Obama Administration’s somewhat naïve belief that it was necessary to deemphasize competition to secure China’s cooperation on issues such as climate change.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union freed China from the constraints of its *de facto* membership of the American-led anti-Soviet alliance to relentlessly pursue its own interests. There are now three main competing visions of East Asian order.

Faced with a rising China, the United States has sought to preserve as much as possible of the East Asian status quo built around its ‘hub and spokes’ system

of allies and friends, in which America is clearly dominant—but dominant within the Westphalian norm of formal sovereign equality. This is a norm always more honored in its breach than its observance. The norm of sovereign equality nevertheless maximizes the scope for smaller states to exercise agency, provided no vital American interest is at stake. The term “rules-based order” or, more recently, the broader concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” are shorthand terms to describe the American goal.

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China wants its new status acknowledged. This is a reasonable and legitimate aspiration. But China considers the concept of sovereign equality lightly, if at all, and seems to want its status acknowledged not merely as a geopolitical fact, but as a new Sinocentric or hierarchical *norm* of East Asian international relations—with China at the apex. This is an entirely different matter from recognizing a geopolitical fact. China now insistently promotes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an overarching vision in which all roads lead to Beijing.

A third idea of regional order—one that represents the aspirations of Southeast Asia’s smaller countries—is encapsulated in the concept of “ASEAN Centrality.” This is a term more often

used than understood, so let me explain it in some detail.

ASEAN Centrality is not a reflection of ASEAN’s strategic weight in the East Asian geopolitical equation. ASEAN Centrality is best understood as a means of coping with the uncomfortable reality that Southeast Asia lies at

the intersection of major power interests and hence of major power competition.

Unlike ASEAN’s earlier aspiration—the unkind would say delusion—to make Southeast Asia a

Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality, ASEAN Centrality does not futilely seek to exclude or limit the major powers. Instead, it tries to leverage on the unavoidable. By inviting all the major powers to participate in ASEAN-created forums, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting Plus, and making all the major powers its Dialogue Partners, ASEAN can be useful—that is to say “central”—because these forums, and ASEAN itself, are coherent enough for the major powers to regard them as occasionally useful, while not strong enough to be able to stymie their most important interests.

All the major powers have professed support for ASEAN Centrality. But in

2016, a Chinese Vice-Minister bluntly told the ASEAN foreign ministers that, as far as the South China Sea was concerned, ASEAN was not central. The Vice-Minister was perhaps being rude in his frankness, but he was not wrong. Nor was he expressing a position unique to China. For more than two decades, ASEAN was certainly not “central” to the American approach towards military-ruled Myanmar, although the United States was usually more polite about it.

The concept of ASEAN Centrality, as I have explained it, nevertheless preserves at least some autonomy in the midst of great power competition by promoting an omni-directional Southeast Asian balance of major powers around ASEAN. This gives ASEAN some degree of voice and agency. The degree of “centrality” varies from issue to issue, and ebbs and flows over time. This is not ideal, but the ideal is only to be found in heaven.

Any effort to perpetuate any status quo indefinitely is futile. China’s rise cannot be denied. The East Asian status quo has already changed. But I do not think that either the American or the Chinese notions of regional order will prevail in their entirety.

America’s friends and allies do not have the exact same concept of what a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” should constitute. The United States, Japan, India, and Australia may all harbor concerns about a rising China, but I do not think that they are exactly the same concerns, or that they are held with the same degree of intensity. Anxiety about

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China is too narrow a basis for the concept to attract wide support. In all countries in East Asia, concern is coupled with recognition of the need for a close, or at least stable, relationship with China. In any case, the concept awaits clearer definition and has so far generally been

regarded with agnosticism by other countries. However, it is improbable that China will be able to impose its preferences on East Asia either.

The South China Sea has become something of a proxy for the contest between American and Chinese notions of regional order. It must be admitted that ASEAN has not covered itself with glory on this issue. But it is beyond ASEAN’s capabilities to resolve disputes in the South China Sea. This is a big boy’s game.

At the strategic level, the South China Sea is at a stalemate. Nobody can make the Chinese drop

their claim to almost the entire sea, or make them dig up the artificial islands they have constructed and throw the sand back into the sea. Beijing will certainly deploy military assets on the islands—perhaps only periodically, perhaps in time permanently. But, crucially, China cannot stop America and its allies from operating in, through, and over the South China Sea without risking war. If war breaks out, those islands and the military assets on them only become targets.

Overall, the United States is still militarily dominant and will remain so for the foreseeable future. China cannot prevail in a war.

A loss, or even a draw, would put the rule of the Chinese Communist Party at risk. The preservation of Party rule is the most ‘core’ of all of China’s core interests. I doubt Beijing will gamble. The stakes are too high. Stalemate in the South China Sea is not ideal, and militaries must plan for worst-case scenarios. But in most situations short of war—that is to say, for the purpose of day-to-day diplomacy—a stalemate preserves room for smaller countries to maneuver. As long as the United States is present as a hard-power, off-shore balancer, no ASEAN claimant can be forced to give up its claims or accept subordination.

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Much of the commentary on Xi Jinping’s China and, in particular his 19th Party Congress speech, focused on China’s global ambitions and the abandonment of Deng Xiaoping’s policy of biding time. There is nothing unusual about a big country having big ambitions. But the overwhelming focus of the speech was in fact domestic.

Insufficient emphasis has been given to Xi’s definition of the new “principal contradiction” facing China. This is, to quote his 19th Party Congress speech, the contradiction between China’s “unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing need for a better life” and, consequently, on the urgent imperative of revitalizing the Party to meet those needs.

The new “principal contradiction” prescribes an extremely complex domestic economic, social, and political agenda, which, as the speech made clear, is connected to the continuation of Party rule. These issues include: moving industry up the value chain, cutting overcapacity, promoting innovation, improving the environment, revitalizing the rural sector, promoting balanced regional growth, dealing with an aging population, healthcare and social security, promoting social mobil-

ity, improving education, housing and food safety, dealing with corruption, defusing social tensions, and expanding “orderly political participation.”

Each of these issues is a major challenge in itself, and the list provided above is only a partial one. Moreover, the 19th Party Congress speech referred only obliquely to a key issue left over from the 18th Party Congress in 2012, namely the question of how to strike an appropriate balance between market efficiency and communist party control. The 19th Party Congress offered no clarity, and indeed there are no clear answers. Xi reaffirmed the commitment to economic efficiency, but his stronger insistence on Party discipline and the Party’s leading role may have sharpened the challenge.

Indeed, the challenge is fundamental—perhaps even existential—because there is no practical alternative to Communist Party rule for China. The Belt and Road Initiative is as much about dealing with this central challenge as it is a new global strategy or a manifestation of ambition.

BRI is essentially the externalization of a growth model that’s heavily dependent on infrastructure investment led by state-owned enterprises. The

18th Party Congress recognized that this model was unsustainable within China itself. But a new growth model requires structural changes that Beijing is unsure of how to make without risking internal instability that could jeopardize Party rule. By exporting that model, BRI buys time for Beijing to deal with this fundamental question. It remains to be seen how it will be dealt with by Xi in the years ahead.

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However, it is becoming evident that transplanting the Chinese model overseas can result in serious liabilities for both China and the recipient countries—the “debt trap” among them. The Chinese presence often evokes as much resentment as admiration or gratitude. China suffers from a persistent deficit of soft power.

In Southeast Asia, concern over the terms of BRI-related agreements have led to delays in several projects. Anecdotes about the overbearing Chinese presence and its undesirable consequences are in fact common throughout Southeast Asia. There is resentment and pushback even in countries that are highly dependent on China.

For instance, in January 2018 the Governor of Preah Sihanoukville in Cambodia wrote a letter to his interior

ministry complaining about how Chinese investment had increased crime, which in turn was “causing insecurity in the province.” The letter was a highly unusual event in Cambodia. Equally unusually, the Chinese Embassy in Cambodia publicly acknowledged that there were problems, although it argued that the impact of Chinese investment was positive overall.

Another example is Laos—a fellow Leninist state that has a close relationship with China. Still, in 2016, at the 10th National Congress of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, Somsavat Lengsavat, Politburo Member and DPM, lost his positions. He is ethnic Chinese and was reportedly excessively pro-Beijing.

China’s activities amongst overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia leads Beijing into very sensitive, indeed dangerous, territory. The goal of such activities was neatly summarized by the title of a 2014 speech by President Xi to the 7th Conference of Overseas Chinese Associations: “The Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation is a Dream Shared by *All Chinese*” [emphasis added]. In plain language, overseas Chinese should identify their interests with China’s interests. In January this year, at the National Overseas Chinese Affairs Conference, State Councilor and now Politburo member Yang Jiechi called upon the Chinese government to expand and strengthen “overseas

Chinese patriotic friendly forces” in the service of the “Great Rejuvenation” of the Chinese Nation. Overseas Chinese affairs have now been brought under the purview of a strengthened United Front Work Department.

This is clearly in effect, if not formally, a significant shift away from the PRC’s overseas Chinese policy that has held since 1955, as well as a deliberate blurring of the distinction between the *huaqiao* (citizens of the People’s Republic of China) and the *huaren* (ethnic Chinese living in the diaspora). That policy began to change as early as 1998, when vicious anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia forced Beijing to gingerly admonish Jakarta. But the shift of policy has become more pronounced under the Xi Administration, and that has raised concerns—even if they are not always articulated in public. Concerns are particularly serious in Malaysia and Indonesia, where both military circles and political Islam remain deeply suspicious of China. Concerns also exist in Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand. For Singapore, it raises existential issues of national identity on which the country cannot compromise.

Chinese diplomats in Southeast Asia are neither particularly obtuse nor oblivious to the complications and dangers. But since the reorientation of policy towards the overseas Chinese has been linked to President Xi’s “China Dream” and the “Great Rejuvenation” of

China, there is reason to wonder what exactly is being reported upwards in the context of President Xi’s firmer insistence on Party discipline. A return to the previous overseas Chinese policy may not be easy or timely. It may take the sort of crisis that would be extremely damaging to China’s position in Southeast Asia to provide a context for reconsidering the policy.

These issues do *not* imply that China will fail. I do not think that China will fail. But BRI in Southeast Asia, as in other regions, is going to face competing demands for what are vast but not infinite

Chinese resources; BRI’s implementation—which will be patchy and will not unfold along a smooth trajectory—will also pose problems for both China and recipient countries. Inevitably, some BRI projects will work better than others; some will succeed; some will stall; and some will fail. This is a normal state of affairs for a strategy—if it is a strategy—of such vast scope.

Every country in East Asia wants to benefit economically from China’s growth. We would be foolish not to. But no state is going to accept a relationship with China that curtails its autonomy to

pursue other interests and other relationships. The United States, Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea are not going to suddenly disappear from East Asia. They are all substantial economic partners. Contiguity and strategic weight will

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always give China significant influence in Southeast Asia and, indeed, in East Asia as a whole. But significant influence is not exclusive influence, or even dominant influence.

As in the previously mentioned cases of Cambodia and Laos, while some small and dependent countries may not have much room to maneuver, they will use what room ex-

ists. The basic diplomatic instinct of Southeast Asia was best summarized by what a senior Vietnamese official once told me. I had asked him what a change of leadership in Hanoi meant for Vietnam’s relations with China. His reply: “every Vietnamese leader must be able to get along with China and stand up to China, and if anyone thinks this cannot be done at the same time, he does not deserve to be leader.”

In the Philippines, President Duterte has recalibrated the bilateral relationship with China. But, despite his penchant for anti-American rhetoric, he retains the

alliance with the United States and has cultivated a stronger relationship with America's principal East Asian ally, Japan.

China has reportedly bought huge amounts of Malaysia's 1MDB debt. But the Seventh Fleet still calls at Malaysian ports and American aircraft still fly missions over the South China Sea from Malaysian airfields.

As a big country, Indonesia has its own vision of its role in the region and globally, and a *"bebas dan aktif"* (free and active) foreign policy is an integral part of its national identity. Jakarta has a history of taking aid from major powers whilst going its own way.

Vietnam only exists because it has refused subordination to China throughout its history.

Similarly, in Northeast Asia, a core element of Japanese and Korean national identities is the refusal over many centuries to accept permanent incorporation in the Chinese regional order.

India is as big a country as China, and as ancient a civilization. It has its own concept of regional order that it is never going to subsume in anyone else's notions, be they Chinese or American.

The main risks that have emerged under the Trump Administration are in the domain of trade. The great-

est weakness of its emerging strategy is Washington's failure to make the connection between trade policy and security and foreign policy. In East Asia, trade *is* strategy.

The Trump Administration's de-emphasis of multilateralism in favor of bilateralism as well as the emphasis on "fair" not "free" trade, as well as its declared intention to retaliate robustly against what it perceives as "unfair" trade, carries serious risks for *all* East Asian countries. But the main target is China.

China cannot replace American leadership. The United States has led by being open and generous. Certainly, the universality of the American—or the general "Western"—model, and the inseparability of its political and economic aspects, was a delusion. But American openness allowed adaptations of its economic aspects to develop around the world and enabled countries to, more or less voluntarily, link themselves to the United States in one way or another, while retaining considerable political autonomy. China is itself an example.

America under the Trump Administration is now less prepared to be generous. But, despite its "win-win" rhetoric, the Chinese approach is far too transactional to replace American leadership. It engenders resistance

as well as compliance. Moreover, the "Chinese model" is built around the structure of a Leninist state—of which only five remain in the world—and is too deeply *Chinese* in its characteristics to be widely replicable elsewhere.

At Davos in January 2017, and again at the APEC Summit in Vietnam in November the same year, President Xi Jinping delivered eloquent defenses of globalization, suggesting that China was ready to lead if the United States was not. Xi's speeches were rhetorical extensions of his "Great Rejuvenation" narrative rather than settled propositions. They were as much indirect expressions of anxiety about what it may mean for China if the current order should unravel as they were expressions of confidence or leadership. Contemporary China is defined both by great confidence and deep insecurity.

China was the main beneficiary of the American-led, post-Cold War globalization, and the international multilateral trading system. It could also be the main loser if that order descends into further uncertainty due to a lack of leadership. China's rise (and BRI) is built on the foundations of the current open American-led order. Can

an open order be maintained on the basis of a still largely closed model? Beijing has yet to decide precisely how much more China should open up. BRI is not a practical alternative to the current order. Can BRI succeed if the

United States and China stumble into a trade war or the world turns protectionist?

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attitude is more ambivalent in reality. If we keep this firmly in mind, one of the most prevalent perceived binary choices—between the United States as security provider and China as a major economic partner—will appear less stark or daunting. In any case, trade is not a favor one country does to another. If there is no mutual benefit, there will be no trade. All recent attempts at economic coercion have not had the intended effect, or have had unexpected consequences.

Again, I am *not* suggesting that China will fail or never exercise global leadership. China certainly ought to bear a greater share of the burdens of a global order from which it has benefited. And

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China will certainly play an increasingly important role in global institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. It has created its own supplementary institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. My argument is only that, for the foreseeable future, it is far more credible to envision China playing a bigger role within the existing order than to see China displacing the United States as leader—much less replacing the current order with its own.

China is not happy with every aspect of the current order. It has no reason to wholeheartedly embrace an order it regards—not without justification—as the successor to the order responsible for ‘a hundred years of humiliation,’ and, additionally, which it had no say in establishing. But I do not see China as a clearly ‘revisionist power.’ I do not think Beijing is eager to kick over the table. It is content to let Russia take the lead in confronting the West in Europe, while it tries to stabilize its relationship with the United States in East Asia.

This does not mean that China will not pursue its own interests, at times

very assertively. Still, it is not looking for trouble. In the South China Sea, for example, a ritualized pattern of FONOPs and interceptions seems to be emerging. Admiral Harry Harris, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, said in 2016, speaking on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, that unsafe incidents were in fact rare.

The future East Asian security architecture is likely to consist of multiple overlapping frameworks. This will be messy. But East Asia is a messy region, and in messiness there is greater resilience than in any single framework.

East Asia is a complex and diverse region. Complexity and diversity make for a natural tendency towards multipolarity—not bipolarity, let alone unipolarity. The period when there appeared to be only one American-led regional order was, in historical terms, brief and exceptional. We are now in a period of transition to a more historically normal situation. There is good reason to believe that East Asia’s future will be multipolar.

I believe that the future East Asian security architecture is likely to consist of multiple overlapping frameworks. This will be messy. But East Asia is a messy region, and in messiness there is greater resilience than in any single framework—if a single framework can in fact be imposed on a diverse region, which I doubt. Any single framework would be brittle.

An architecture of multiple overlapping frameworks is in line with the omni-directional balance embedded in the concept of ASEAN Centrality, and provides greater room for small countries to maneuver. In the meantime, however, we will have to navigate a period—how long no one can tell—of more than usual major power competition, more than usual complexity, and more than usual uncertainty.

I began by stating that a binary framework is an inappropriate mode of analysis. I trust my argument has persuaded the reader that this is so, particularly in periods of uncertainty. I also said that under some circumstances, the binary fallacy could be dangerous. I will conclude by elaborating on that statement.

All major powers compete for influence. They do so in the same way as natural disasters occur: it is just a fact inherent in the structure of an international system of sovereign states, and perhaps inherent in human nature. Singapore has had to deal with influence operations by the United States—

it was not too long ago that we had to expel an American diplomat for interfering in our domestic politics—as we have to deal with influence operations by other major countries.

It is as pointless to complain about attempts by major powers to acquire and exercise influence by any means available as it is to complain about earthquakes or floods or typhoons or other natural disasters. We just have to prepare for the eventuality and deal with it. And if we do not prepare ourselves, it is our fault—not that of the major power.

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To deal with it, we have to understand the nature of major power competition. China understands better than any other

major power that the competition for influence is as much—and perhaps more—psychological as it is material. Sun Tzu, the great Chinese strategist, wrote: “to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

China’s insistent diplomatic tactic, simple but effective, and deployed with great creativity, is to pose false

choices and force choices between false choices. It seeks to instill a sense of fatalistic inevitability regarding the choices presented.

The general narrative within which this tactic is used is of China's inevitable rise and America's inevitable decline, and that therefore East Asia should place itself on the right side of history.

This is a powerful narrative, but one that is grossly oversimplified and a grotesque distortion of reality. The binary mode of thought which oversimplifies complexity and is strongly deterministic sets up an almost perfect framework for promoting false choices within this overall narrative, particularly when coupled with the kind of unbalanced criticism of American foreign policy that we are now experiencing in the age of Trump.

I am not arguing that we should not criticize American policy when criticism is due. Safe navigation of complexity requires a critical appraisal of the policies of all major powers, and America should not be exempt. Trade is certainly one area that requires criticism. The Islamophobia that seems to infuse some sections of the Trump Administration is another.

But safe navigation of complexity also requires calm detachment. I have tried to persuade my American friends that their unbalanced and sometimes emotional criticisms may be taken far more seriously than they warrant, and may well stampede some countries into accepting false choices. But so far not, I confess, with any discernible success in changing their behavior. ●