

## **Power play risks dissent over accord**

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The idea that Asia's foremost strategic dangers could be removed if only the US would share power with China is an enticing one.

It holds special appeal in Australia, where many see their future at the mercy of US-China tensions, but there remains a worrying gap in the argument, advanced this week by former prime minister Paul Keating, that Australia should urge the US to set new limits to how and where it pushes back against a rising China.

It is one thing to counsel Washington to accept a no-go zone in parts of Asia for the sake of peace. It is entirely another -- and by far the harder task -- to nominate where the line should be drawn.

Keating was lending his reputation as a visionary leader to promote a new book by noted strategic thinker and former official Hugh White. At its core, this book -- *The China Choice* -- contends that the US must concede to China nothing less than a sphere of influence in Asia.

The argument goes that China's power will be likely to keep increasing while the US's relatively declines, yet Washington will refuse to give up its dominance in Asia.

This pre-eminence once kept the peace, but as China grows more able to stare down American deterrence, the result will be rivalry with a growing risk of massive conflict -- even nuclear war.

So the only real hope for peace is a new grand bargain in which the US unequivocally shares power with China.

The book is a bold and important one, by turns stark and eloquent. And the proposed solution can hardly be faulted for its neatness. The problem is, it is too neat.

It calls for a new order in which China's authority and influence grow enough to satisfy the Chinese, while the US role remains large enough to ensure China's power is not misused.

This elegant formula downplays the realities faced by the many other nations across Indo-Pacific Asia that place a premium on their own security and honour. All of this goes to the destiny, dignity and interests of hundreds of millions of people, who happen to be neither American nor Chinese.

White does not deny that it will be exceptionally hard for the US and China to negotiate mutually acceptable limits. And to avoid charges of appeasement and wars of miscalculation, Washington would need to be absolutely clear to China about these boundaries.

But what might those limits be? We are told that drawing these all-important lines will be a job for American statecraft.

This assumes, rather than proves, that some kind of stable demarcation of US and Chinese spheres of influence in 21st-century Asia will be possible.

In diplomacy, the devil is in the detail. Yet *The China Choice* remains guarded on some crucial details that would determine whether a new Indo-Pacific order would be stable or just a fresh recipe for strife.

What if peaceful, consensual reunification of Taiwan and China does not occur, despite the hope-based formula of assuming that one day it probably will?

Would, or indeed should, countries such as Vietnam or South Korea be expected to cope with their lot inside or at the edge of a Chinese sphere of influence?

How can China be persuaded to abandon its sweeping claims in the South China Sea, especially now it is reinforcing them by setting up an island city and garrison?

What of Japan? The White response is that Japan, along with India, should be entitled to join China and the US among the big four, a so-called concert of powers to set the rules of stability for everyone else in the new Asia.

To do so with confidence, especially with the US winding back its alliance, Japan would need its own nuclear weapons, an element of the White formula on which the bomb-banning Keating is keeping a tactful silence.

Of course, how China, South Korea or the global non-proliferation regime might cope with that atomic game-changer would be a whole new cascade of conundrum. Moreover, it is hard to tell how Washington loosening or terminating its guarantees to Tokyo would be received among other allies.

Equally, it remains unclear how a quartet of Washington, Beijing, New Delhi and Tokyo might form.

From the original post-Napoleonic concert of powers in Europe to the 1945 victors' club of the UN Security Council, such arrangements have coalesced only after cataclysmic war.

There is no question it will take smart and dogged statesmanship and bleak moments of crisis-management to steer Asia through the decades ahead.

By all means, nations such as Australia should press the merits of mutual respect, compromise and a focus on shared interests, but all the prospective players will need to see the full score before they can begin to imagine that an exclusive concert of nations is the only alternative to catastrophic discord.

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