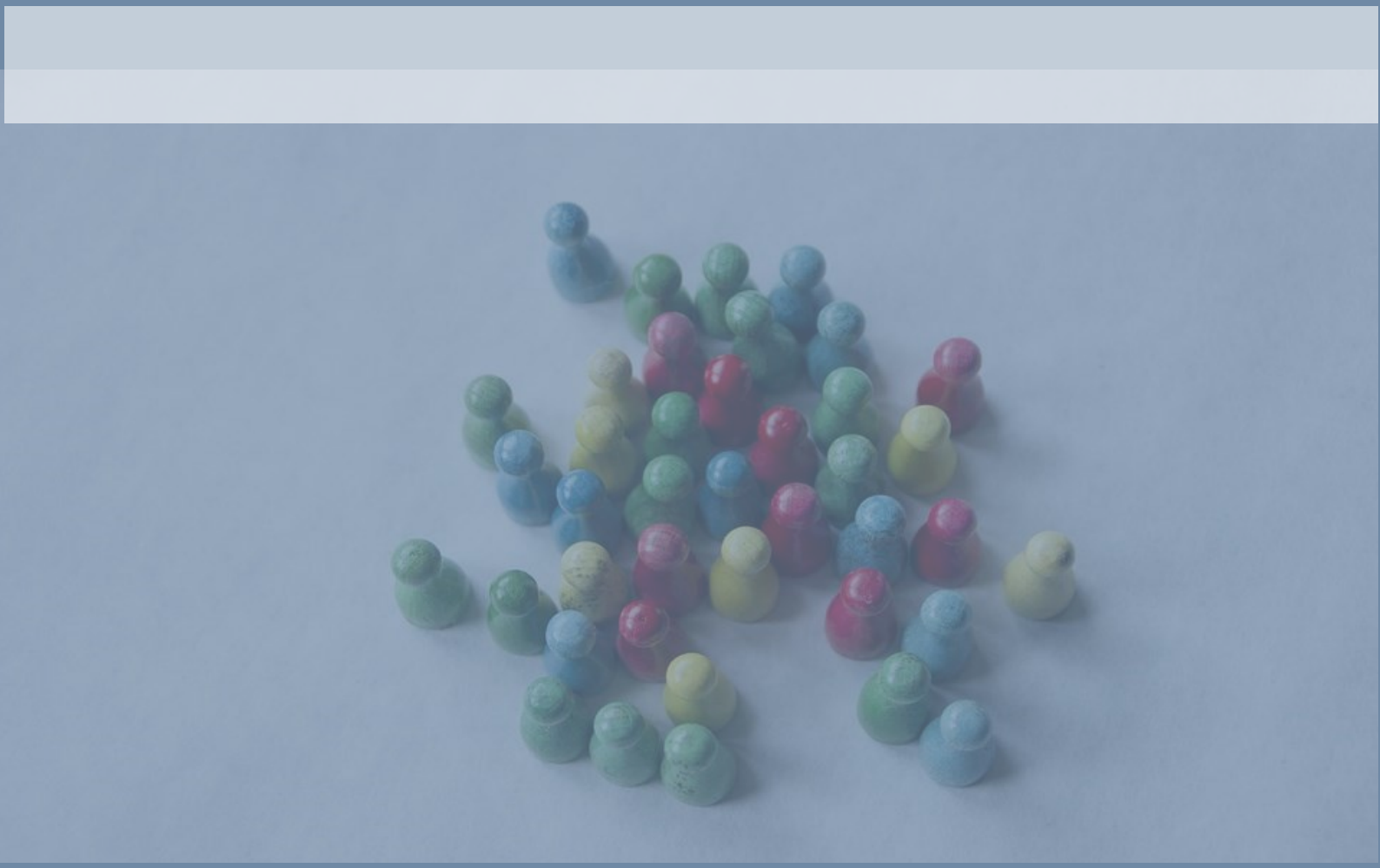
ISSN 2737-7504

School of Politics & International Relations
Working Paper Series: WP19/2019



China's Resurgence and US Power: Is the Asia-Pacific Political Order Being Renegotiated?

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This paper should be cited as Foot, Rosemary (2019) China's Resurgence and US Power: Is the Asia Pacific Political Order Being Renegotiated?, SPIRe Working Paper WP19, School of Politics and International Relations, UCD, Ireland.

Transcript of lecture given at UCD, 2 October 2019, 4pm, University Club.

This is part of a lecture series on Chinese Politics & International Relations: Perspectives & Frontiers in Social Science Research organised by Dr Alex Dukalskis and funded by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange.

This lecture is the first in this series and I'd like to thank the School of Politics and International Relations at UCD for putting this timely series together.

I'm going to talk for about 40 to 45 minutes and I would like comments and questions because the topic that I raise today is one that is in some senses a moving target. There are elements of it that I still need to think through so I would be very grateful for your questions.

"Is The Asia-Pacific Political Order Being Re-negotiated?", as reflected in my title, is a central question of our time, and it involves consideration of a number of different issues. For example, how wisely or how well is China managing state-to-state relations in the Asia-Pacific region; to what degree are others willing to follow Beijing's objectives; how fundamentally is the U.S. role in the region undergoing a transition; and is the relationship with America being reappraised by a number of Asia-Pacific countries?

And then finally, I want us to reflect on a slightly more abstract question which is about the implications of exercising power (that is, of the Chinese exercising power) as authority, or exercising power as dominance. That last point, I raise right at the start of the lecture because I want to make a distinction between the exercise of power to include ideas of consent to the leadership role of the powerful and contrast that with the idea of exercising power through coercion or generating a coerced acquiescence to the leading role of the powerful. I'm going to make that kind of distinction in what follows.

I'm thinking about the difference between political legitimacy or legitimate authority, and the idea of dominance. I'm also thinking about the difference between the notion that we are in the midst of a political transition, which I don't think anybody would disagree with as an idea, but asking too whether that means we have in place a new political order and, if so, what kind of order it is.

I define order as referring to the agreement on the patterns of action and values that are required to sustain the survival of regional society. For those of you studying international relations, you will know that the definition derives from an English School or International Society approach to international relations. This particular grouping of theorists has paid a great deal of attention to questions of order and to transitions in regional and global order.[1]

[1] Notable among these is the work of Ian Clark and Evelyn Goh.

To go quickly through the structure of what I'm about to say, there are four main parts to it. The first section deals with the difference between a more consensual form as opposed to a coercive form of power.

Secondly, I want to say something about China's material resurgence and, again, use a social lens for saying that this isn't necessarily simply about objective material possessions that China has, but also is about the expectations of the role that it should play in the Asia-Pacific as a result of its material resurgence.

Thirdly, I want to talk about China's levels of success in managing relations with states of the Asia-Pacific, and also with the incumbent major power in the region: that is the United States. Despite the disruption of the Trump presidency – and I will say something about that too – I want to talk about the US in slightly more generalized terms.

Finally, I'm going to say something about whether I think a transition in political order has in fact taken place and, if so, what kind of transition it is.

If I just give you my argument in telegraphic form, I want to say that China's attempts to renegotiate the regional order in the Asia-Pacific have been held back by a mismatch between the vision of order that it has propagated and some of the policy actions that Beijing has actually undertaken. As a result of this mismatch, the current, or future, Chinese search for political legitimacy in the region has met various forms of resistance including the promotion of new forms of defence cooperation. If you look at the policies of states such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, India, Vietnam, and so on, there are things going on that are worth observing and clearly involve attempts to build the capacity of weaker states in the region in order to resist the effects of China's growing dominance.

There is also some debate within China itself among Chinese scholars on these questions. Indeed, there are two main bodies of scholarship on these matters. There are those that would argue that there is genuinely a tension between the promulgation of Chinese normative ideas about what the region should look like and actual outcomes, and that's important because it could mean that there will be a course correction, that in fact, policy will shift, it will adapt, if that realization is taken on board. There are also Chinese

commentators that have unwisely, in my view, regarded the promotion of Beijing's regional supremacy through underlying coercive means as a sufficient basis for ordering the region in ways that help to achieve China's policy objectives.

So the first section of my talk is about the concept of power: I ask what is political legitimacy or legitimate authority as some would term it? It is a different form of power from that equated with dominance or with primacy. More exactly, it is an idea that encompasses the notion of the creation of a distinctive and acceptable pattern of order, something that essentially is attentive to the needs and the values of others within the region. It's not simply about the distribution or redistribution of power. Legitimate authority is a form of power that embraces the needs of others.

The crucial question for China is whether it can convert its very impressive increases in material power into a discursive and behavioural framework that others wish to follow, and that attracts others. Otherwise, you have material strength that's primarily used in the form of leverage, and that form of leverage, I'm suggesting, is going to be ineffective in creating a stable regional order. I am not suggesting that order would not emerge, but it would not be a stable one. An acceptance that the old order should be rejected or modified will be far more difficult for China to obtain.

Thus, this leaves China with something of a dilemma. If it wishes to be recognized as a legitimate creator, or reviser, of regional order, it needs to promote something that resonates broadly with values that are held within the regional society. It needs to be normatively attentive, if you like, to the ideas of others. It can't simply expect an automatic entitlement of followership as a result of its rising material power.

This idea of legitimate authority versus the idea of primacy or dominance sets a very high bar. It implies that the rising power (the dominant material power) accepts some form of strategic restraint on its behaviour; and that it will search for negotiated outcomes to issues in dispute. So the powerful, in a sense, will bind their power in some way in order to reach a consensual order. Legitimate authority also requires the powerful to provide a normative vision of order that while it might offer much that's new, is also recognizable to others as part of the value system that has protected them to date as relatively autonomous, if somewhat weaker states, within the Asia-Pacific.

Turning to the second section and referencing China's material resurgence: how do we think about this resurgence? Obviously, it has led us to regard China as a great power, but if you approach that through a social lens, then great power status also entails a responsibility to be able to manage relations in your own region productively, if not actually beyond that geographical space.

Markers of China's great power status are many: second largest economy in the world; second largest defence budget in the world; a nuclear arsenal; an extensive range of missile capabilities; a Security Council seat. It has become the largest trading partner of many countries in the world, and especially in Asia, and a major source of loans, grants, and investment.

China also, in the last few years, has provided economic public goods. We think of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, up and running very quickly, having been announced in about 2013. The Belt and Road Initiative is a major infrastructure and connectivity project particularly geared to the developing world but also to China's Asian neighbours, and beyond through to Africa, the Middle East, to European ports. All of this suggests China is a great power with great power status and willing to take on some of the responsibilities that are associated with that great power status.

Part three: let me turn to China's management strategy for the Asia-Pacific. What does it look like? Here I'm going to present a pretty mixed picture. I'm going to talk about deterrence, coercive diplomacy, as well as China’s re-assurance strategies. It's not just one thing, this management strategy, and there are different ways in which you can interpret parts of the management strategy. That is one reason why this makes this such an interesting question to explore but also a very difficult question to explore.

For example, we associate China very strongly with the norm of state sovereignty traditionally defined – with the Westphalian characteristics of state sovereignty. The Chinese leadership would describe it, and others would too, as the foundational norm of the international system. Now, on the one hand, this norm can be seen as very reassuring to other states. It includes the idea of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states. It includes the idea of the legal sovereign equality of nations, so it gets rid of notions of

hierarchy in some ways, and that's obviously a matter of some comfort to China's weaker neighbours.

But the attachment to this norm of state sovereignty is also one that has a different bearing on the question that I'm investigating today because China relates its own territorial claims in the region very strongly to the idea of state sovereignty traditionally defined and that implies a level of threat. To quote State Councillor Yang Jiechi, he says, “No country should expect us to swallow the bitter fruit that undermines our sovereignty, security and development interests”. The sovereignty norm, thus, is both something that can be reassuring, but also something that can be potentially threatening.

If I give you some examples of coercive diplomacy, the deterrent side, I have to talk about the contested space of the South China Sea. The installation by China of anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles, on three of its claimed features -- the northern, the western, and the eastern edges of the contested Spratly Group -- has led to a perception that China can control all air and sea movements in this part of the Spratly’s. We know also that there is a great deal of patrolling going on. China's naval acquisitions have been rapidly increasing, and in the South China Sea, the use of paramilitary Coast Guard forces has been a very prominent part of the Chinese patrolling activity. This doesn't involve China in outright uses of force, but it does suggest a potential willingness to use war, or conflict, as a management strategy. This can involve -- as we see in one of the issues currently in the news – the prevention of Vietnamese oil exploration activities in its exclusive economic zone – or the use of paramilitary forces to block the access of Southeast Asian fishing fleets to traditional fishing grounds.

What China has sought to do is to try to establish a distinction between the grey zone coercion in the South and East China Seas and more traditional types of inter-state aggression. Beijing is trying to remain below the threshold of overt uses of force, but nevertheless acting in a coercive diplomatic way as an indication that violence could result. These sorts of elements that I'm talking about have some reassuring properties but they also have elements of coercion attached to them and that invites uncertainty and distrust.

As I've suggested already, China does also engage in various re-assurance strategies. In this realm of the paper I would point in particular to its diplomatic involvement in regional

multilateral organizations. It plays and has played over time, quite a prominent role in the major multilateral organizations in the Asia-Pacific. I'm thinking of bodies such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, APEC, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus arrangement. China has signed free trade agreements with ASEAN as a whole as well as on bilateral levels. It became one of the early signatories to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation -- an important signal that China wanted to be bound by a multilateral framework. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation includes within its terms a reference to the protection of state sovereignty, and to non-interference in internal affairs, but also contains a categorical statement about the non-use of force for settling issues in dispute. China is also engaged with Japan and South Korea in establishing a trilateral dialogue mechanism and the three states are in the process of trying to establish a trilateral trading agreement.

China is thereby signalling in a rather reassuring way a commitment to multilateralism as well as a willingness to be embraced in a networked security architecture that can even include America's major allies such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand. This can help transform China, if it's serious about this, from being an object of security to actually being an actor within a broad security framework. These moves can be taken as important signals of reassurance and of its commitment to regional norms of co-operative security.

China has also not been idle when it comes to setting up other institutions in the region. I'm thinking of bodies such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia – that has 26 member states involving all sub-regions, of Asia and China has chaired that forum and tried to put forward a vision of security within it – a vision I shall discuss in a moment.

I mentioned the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. This body obviously fills a very important vacuum in the funding of projects where China has a good track record of success. It's an institutional forum also that has evolved over time. Initial concerns about the form that the AIIB would take have reduced because it's not dissimilar from other major multilateral economic organizations that we are familiar with, such as the Asian Development Bank or the World Bank.

The Belt and Road Initiative is the most ambitious of all China's recent institutional enterprises and it underpins, alongside the AIIB, I would suggest, China's support for

economic development, economic advancement, as a primary norm of importance for Asia-Pacific states. I have argued elsewhere that economics is a security matter for most, if not all, of the states of the region. So promoting this form of assistance, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, is addressing something of particular importance to these states.

What other forms of reassurance are there? Well, Beijing has engaged in military confidence-building measures. If you look closely, you'll see that there are regular defence exchanges; there's a certain amount of joint exercising at sea and on land; there is signature with ASEAN of communication hotlines. There's the establishment of the code for unplanned encounters at sea. Importantly, in 2018, the agreement for a single negotiating text for a code of conduct on the South China Sea was reached. That code of conduct has not reached a successful conclusion, but it is being negotiated. Many of these confidence-building measures are ways of managing state-to-state relations that we would recognize from earlier eras as well as our current era. These are recognized modes of inter-state behaviour and they're designed to manage state-to-state relations and to prevent the tensions that exist in this part of the world from dissolving into violence. This is what I mean by a mixed picture of political transition and political order in the region. We have coercive behaviour, but we also get some forms of re-assurance.

A further major component of China's regional strategy is trying to manage relations with the United States, the recognized hegemon in the region. China is using a mix of methods here too: the traditional mode of deterrence, balancing, and gaining military equipment that is going to make it more difficult for the United States to contemplate certain forms of military action or coercive diplomacy of its own. I would also argue that China has managed to maintain an ambiguity about whether it wishes to eject the United States entirely from the region or is willing to tolerate some continuing American presence in the Asia-Pacific.

China has also sought acceptance on America's part of China's equal status in global and certainly in regional politics. That again is another way of contesting America's role as prime creator of regional order in the Asia-Pacific. It's a form of contestation that others actually would see as a perfectly acceptable request on China's part. The idea that there is a new era of great power relations, or to use other Chinese phraseology, "a new model of major country relations." Does that sound unrealistic, unacceptable a request on China's part? Not to every state in the region or global system.

The United States, of course, is very unwilling to accept that language: the implicit idea of equality that is found in those phrases. Nevertheless, even though the US has been unwilling to accept that language in earlier eras – pre-Trump I'm thinking of – America has sometimes sought to emphasize that although the US-China relationship is a competitive one, there are areas of cooperation within this particular relationship. This was a particularly prominent feature during the Obama period when both sides talked about their rivalry and competition. But they also pointed to coincidences of interest where they could work together, whether that was in Afghanistan, or Iran, or over climate change. They frequently referenced their economic interdependence, and the deepening of military-to-military ties that were taking place with the intention of trying to build military confidence between the two states.

That approach is now largely gone under the Trump presidency. Many of those stabilizing elements have disappeared either because of the rejection of various agreements by President Trump: like the Iran nuclear deal, or over climate change, changes in direction that have caused a degree of uncertainty in terms of China's great power management strategy in the Asia-Pacific. How does it deal with the United States in this new era? Does it have the tools? Does it have the flexibility to be able to find coincidences of interest with a very disruptive Trump administration? There is a great deal of uncertainty for China, but there is also a great deal of uncertainty for the Asia-Pacific states.

On the one hand, what we see is a change in the level of US commitment, this growingly disruptive role of the United States in the region, which has provided opportunities for China to present itself as the state that is going to provide stability and some form of regional order. On the other hand, there is a sense in the region, I would suggest, that many of the complaints that the United States administration has put forward with respect to China’s policies are ones that Beijing should have dealt with a long time ago and indeed had promised to deal with on a number of earlier occasions. There is this mixed set of responses: on the one hand, there's great uncertainty associated with the Trump presidency, but on the other hand, there is a sense that China has brought some of this uncertainty on itself.

What about China's levels of success in attempting reconstruction of the region's normative order? What I said earlier is that the Chinese capacity to contribute to a re-negotiated regional order means that they have to put forward an attractive normative vision. They have

to try to generate followership in some ways. They have to generate a set of compelling reasons to contest and renegotiate some of the features of the old order.

How is China attempting to do this? Well, first of all, it's using discourse power. This idea of a “shared community of human-kind,” the “Asian community of common destiny”, the “win-win” language that we see everywhere: Beijing realizes that an ability to actually frame the narrative in this way is a way of building influence among its neighbours. Vice foreign minister Liu Zhenmin, put it like this: “for China to realize its dream of national rejuvenation, it first needs to acquire identification and support from other Asian countries to tie the dream of the Chinese people with those of the Asian nation.” So it's looking for linkages, for normative convergence in many ways.

The other approach that China is adopting is to try to de-legitimize the old order -- in particular, the extant ordering project that has been built around the US bilateral alliance system and Washington's other forms of alignment with states that are not actually in formal alliance with it, but nevertheless have close relations: for example, Singapore and Malaysia to some degree. The Chinese have taken two main tracks here, and again discursive elements are important. The United States’ constant refrain for 70 years or more that it has been the US presence in the Asia Pacific that has played the vital role in undergirding peace, security and stability in the region and which has provided the conditions for tremendous prosperity, and for economic growth to take off, has attracted Chinese criticism.

China has decided that it would vigorously try and undercut that particular narrative. Beijing has argued instead that rather than offering stability and security, America's military surveillance, its naval manoeuvres, its reinvigoration and strengthening of alliances with countries like Japan and Australia in particular are disruptive of the regional order. And that these actions are directed at China in particular. They are designed to polarize the region. They divide the region, therefore, into friends and enemies. They embolden countries like Japan to threaten China in terms of their own sovereignty disputes with the country. They promote reckless behaviour in the region, and thus in China’s view the United States is playing a disruptive role.

The Chinese are also arguing that their country has to take more of a lead because there's an enormous political vacuum, because the West and the United States, in particular, is finished

or severely weakened. To quote State Councillor Yang Jiechi: it is “increasingly difficult for Western governance concepts, systems, and models to keep up with the new international situation.” In Yang’s view, the western-led global governance system had “malfunctioned” and was “beyond redemption.”

In other words, Beijing argues that China has to step in if there is going to be any kind of ordering project for the Asia-Pacific, and China has made some effort to offer an alternative vision. China has referenced the need for common, comprehensive, cooperative, sustainable security, of the need to build a security framework that is for all and not based on alliances that make distinctions between friends and enemies. China’s leaders have argued that it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia. These positions represent what it sees as an alternative to the Cold War alliance structure established in the 1950s by the United States. The final plan is to emphasize the centrality of the Asia-Pacific region to China and that China is not going to go away. The United States might go away, but China is involved and is in and of the region. It wants to strengthen, as I said earlier, this degree of alignment between the Asia-Pacific states and China.

China has selected support for state-led development projects as the key to consolidation of ties with its neighbours. And it links economic development with the idea of sustainable security. It is identifying development as the primary ordering principle for the Asia-Pacific region and it is connecting China's economic public goods provision -- like the AIIB that I’ve talked about, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative -- to this idea of development as the primary mechanism that will provide for a new political order in the region.

This vision is one that has widespread appeal within the region. Economic development and growth are viewed as major contributions to the building of domestic security, inter-state security, and regional security; the economic and security domains are not seen as separate domains in large parts of the Asia-Pacific. There is no privileging of one domain over another; instead, they are seen as interconnected. China is trying to build a new reality around this idea of Chinese economic power, and the potential result is a new security order that is more strongly rooted in the sources of Asia's power.

Let me turn next then to this question: is China building coalitions of support? Is it actually generating followership in the region? Beijing has set out this alternative vision, and I've

given you some indication of that vision. But what is the result? In many senses, it is putting forward these ideas at a time when there is an absence of alternative ideas. There is a questioning of the old models at a time when the United States and the Western powers more broadly have lost their attachment to, have lost their confidence in, the liberal normative model associated with the 1990s: in particular, democracy, human rights promotion, and a belief in the power of the market to deliver benefits to the majority. Trump in particular – a unilateralist who makes no distinction between allies and non-allies; is not bound by past agreements; and intervenes directly in the market via tariffs to obtain political goals – these developments provide an opportunity for accelerating the transition in political order.

But how far is that going and how large is China's constituency of support? I'm going to argue that that constituency of support looks restricted and I suggest several reasons for that.

First of all, as I started this talk by outlining very briefly, while China's material attributes impress, they are not all put to benign purposes. They are used often as a source of leverage. For example, China has used coercive sanctions against Japan and South Korea, among others.

I would also say that the bar is always set very high anyway for the rising challenger. It's inevitable that the rising power's actions are going to be investigated or examined in far closer detail; the scrutiny of its behaviour and statements is going to be much higher. It is going to invite a level of suspicion that is not accorded to the incumbent hegemon in the region.

Then there is the US factor again: despite what I've said about Trump, Asian elites, (I don't necessarily extend to the full society) have been part of a region where the dominant power, in this case the United States, has largely been regarded in the post-Cold War era at least as a benign, powerful, and an acceptable political actor. I would argue that this is partly because it is off-shore in some respects, (of course, it has bases, but it's off-shore). It has no territorial ambitions in the region. It has acted as a stabilizing force that allows the serious matter of economic development to continue, it has offered public security goods such as the protection of the sea lines of communications, has emphasized adherence to the rule of law including UNCLOS (despite US failure to ratify the treaty), and has rejected any use of force for settling regional issues in dispute.

Now, the Trump administration may not be offering this level of reassurance that I've outlined here, but I would argue that past U.S. behaviour has given regional elites a conception of what a benign hegemon actually should look like and that's their benchmark, if you like, for thinking about China's role. Neither do Chinese criticisms of the US alliance architecture in the region carry much weight among regional elites. Beijing emphasizes that the US bilateral alliance structure is a relic of the Cold War. But regional states don't think of that alliance structure in that way. These alliances may have been established in the 1950s, but that's not how they are perceived these days. What Asia-Pacific leaders see is that U.S. relations with its allies in the region have moved well-beyond this idea of distinguishing between enemies and friends and warfighting capacities, and actually have been part of an "ordering" framework for the region.

Then there's the unwillingness on China's part to offer compromise solutions to the sovereignty disputes in which it is engaged. This is particularly troubling for Southeast Asian states. They're particularly worried about militarization of the South China Sea. If you look at Prime Minister Mahathir's statements, despite the very close economic ties between China and Malaysia, he has called on China to respect free movement throughout the South China Sea. He has urged that no country should permanently station warships in the region.

I was recently reading Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue this year, given in June 2019. Let me just quote him because he actually makes the case very clearly. He's making a very similar argument to the one I've been trying to unfold here. He states, with respect to the South China Sea and the overlapping sovereignty claims, that "China should resolve these disputes peacefully in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS. It should do so through diplomacy and compromise rather than force or the threat of force, while giving weight to the core interests or rights of other countries. Then over time, it will build its reputation as a responsible and benevolent power that need not be feared. Instead, China will be respected as a power that can be relied upon to support a stable and peaceful region". Not everyone would put it quite as openly and eloquently as Lee Hsien Loong has in that speech, but nevertheless, I would argue, it's a sentiment that you can find elsewhere within the Asia-Pacific region.

While policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative are a very attractive proposition to large numbers of Asian states, especially those that are inadequately endowed with infrastructure, there are fears that it is less of a Chinese public good and primarily, or will be used by Beijing, as a way of restricting the policymaking space of those that get enveloped in this Belt and Road Initiative. Again, to quote Mahathir in 2018, “we do not want a situation where there is a new version of colonialism happening because poor countries are unable to compete with rich countries”.

Some aspects of Beijing's behaviour, then, suggests a disregard for another vital goal, another norm, that is prominent in the Asia-Pacific and that is protecting the strategic autonomy of these states, protecting their diplomatic room for manoeuvre. Very often this is termed a “hedging policy”, where they've attempted to keep the United States engaged in the region particularly in the area of security support, but also to keep a friendly and productive economic relationship with China. They've tried to keep the two features in play – very difficult to do– and these states do this because they value (weaker, smaller states value) maintaining as much strategic autonomy as they possibly can.

Let me turn finally to some of the debate in China on these issues. There are some Chinese analysts that are emphasizing that China has every right to use the leverage that comes from its dominance in the region. They expect a degree of deference in recognition of China's material strengths. But by adopting this standpoint, I'm suggesting, these same Chinese analysts and officials are reinforcing this sense that there's a larger geostrategic objective behind China's recent policies and that it will use leverage and coercive forms of diplomacy to get its way. It implies that dominance is enough to secure the political transition to a new political order.

There are also Chinese scholars – you could find them in the literature, in English and in Chinese – who understand the difference between power as dominance and legitimate authority, the phrases that were used at the start of this lecture. They argue that the undercutting of resistance in the region requires China to use something more than “leveraging power”. For political legitimacy (legitimate authority) to accompany the power transition requires a degree of attention to the interests of China's neighbours. I would say that's across three dimensions: ensuring regional stability, maintaining policy and strategic autonomy for these states, as well as economic advancement.

These Chinese scholars also argue that specific policies with respect to the sovereignty disputes in the region are damaging this vision of Asian win-win cooperation, of a common destiny and so on. These policies are increasing the risk of a major state conflict. This damages the idea that China is actually operating as the prime stabilizer of the regional older and damaging the idea that it would be a better regional power than the United States in terms of providing for the three norms that these states wish to maintain.

Even the Belt and Road Initiative has attracted some criticism inside China itself. Many Chinese are only too aware that this “project of the century” associated very directly with Xi Jinping involves participation with countries whose credit ratings are extremely poor. For example, Pakistan, a key participant in the Belt and Road, stands at the highest level of risk at a score of 7 according to OECD calculations. Thus, the logic runs, given this level of risk, this project must be about something larger. It must contain a larger geostrategic objective directed by the central leadership.

It leads some Chinese analysts, therefore, to advocate a return to the Deng Xiaoping maxim of China keeping a lower profile than it has in recent years, concentrating particularly on its domestic economic development goals which are extraordinarily difficult to sustain. They recommend a less ambitious, less threatening, a more positively worked out, set of relations with the Asia-Pacific states. These analysts offer a vision of China from an earlier era. If you go back to the early 2000s, you saw the re-assurance strategies that I talked about earlier: the participation in multilateral organizations, the signing of multilateral trading agreements, the signing of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and so on. I am suggesting that that was an era of reassurance when the perception of China's rise as a threat was undercut quite successfully, and that China has moved away from that in the current era.

So in conclusion: true, China only selectively contests the regional order. It continues to operate as a major trade, aid, and investment partner. It's not engaging in overt uses of military force, but it uses coercive diplomacy and uses paramilitary forces. Its negative reaction to the UNCLOS ruling in the South China Sea raises issues about legal constraint, about the power of legal norms to constrain China. The decision to militarize parts of the islands it occupies undermines trust in its ability to maintain strategic restraint.

China's focus on development assistance particularly in the field of infrastructure is very welcome but the decision to finance many risky projects in various parts of the world, to be non-transparent about the agreements that are signed, leads to speculation about its motives, and the BRI potentially, as I suggested, challenges an important central norm. It can be complementary to the norm of economic advancement but it also is a challenge to the idea of a state's ability to maintain strategic diplomatic policy autonomy.

A political transition is clearly in train but a transition to political order is incomplete, I would suggest; it doesn't bear the hallmarks yet -- I'm not saying it will never bear the hallmarks but it does not bear the hallmarks yet -- of legitimate political authority which attracts un-coerced followership on the part of the states of the region.

I look forward to your comments and questions.