

The Future Indo-Pacific Order

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The Indo-Pacific region is transforming as the world's centre of gravity shifts from west to east.¹ It is becoming clear that the region's future will differ greatly from its past, but significant uncertainty remains regarding the path forward. Unfortunately, there is no obvious method to determine how geopolitics will evolve in the next few decades, but this short essay describes several possible regional orders and attempts to identify the major variables that will determine the region's path.

In particular, this essay argues that the future regional order will depend on three critical questions: First, will China's rise continue? Second, will America remain engaged in Asia? Third, will regional states pursue autonomy from the United States and China? These questions may be simple, but their answers are complex and together they can yield significant insights about the Indo-Pacific's future.

Before addressing these questions in detail, it is necessary to identify the most likely potential futures in the Indo-Pacific. Four futures now appear possible: an American-led order, a Chinese-led order, a bipolar order, and a multipolar order. Each of these orders could be described in great detail — and have been elsewhere—but a brief description of each follows below.

American-led order: An American-led order would largely resemble the existing order. The United States would continue to develop and advance regional rules and norms, along with its allies and partners. The United States would largely be free to exercise power without significant constraints, permitting Washington to shape the Indo-Pacific region according to its interests and desires.²

Chinese-led order: A Chinese-led order would represent a fundamental break from the existing order.³ Beijing would take the leadership role from Washington, allowing the Chinese Communist Party to shape the region's development.⁴ Beijing would likely attempt to increase its political, economic, technological, military and cultural influence in the region and beyond.

Bipolar order: A bipolar order would meld elements of these two orders. The United States and China would compete across the Indo-Pacific, with each seeking to shape an order favouring its own interests.⁵ As in the scenarios described above, regional states would have limited agency; they would be forced to choose sides. A bipolar order would put a premium on the alignment decisions of regional states, but also put them at greater risk.

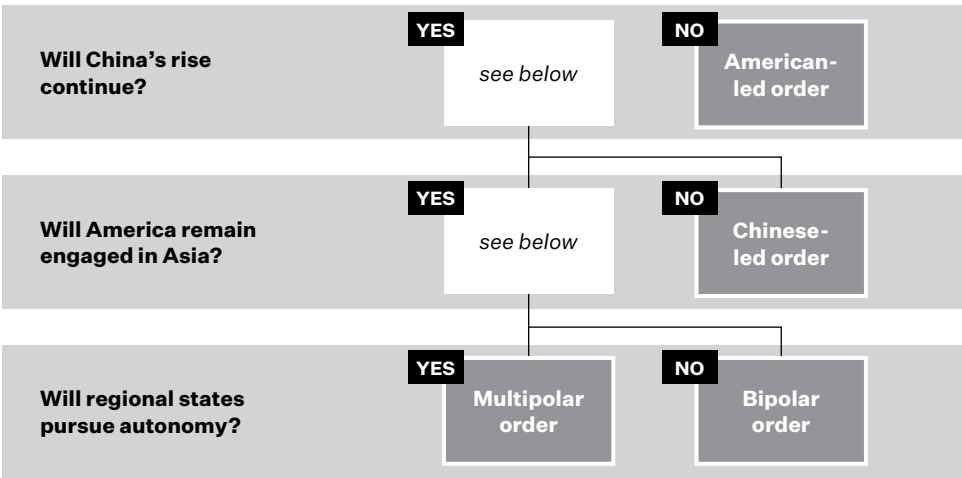
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- 1 Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond* (New York: Other Press, 2016).
 - 2 G. John Ikenberry, 'China and the Rest Are Only Joining the American-Built Order', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3 (June 2008), pp. 18–21, doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.00995.x.
 - 3 Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, 'After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline', *International Security*, vol. 36, no. 1 (July 2011) 41–72, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00044.
 - 4 Feng Zhang, 'Chinese Visions of the Asian Political-Security Order', *Asia Policy*, vol. 13, no. 2 (30 April 2018).
 - 5 Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Multipolar order: A multipolar order would include three or more states competing for regional power and influence.⁶ Potential poles in this system could include not only the United States and China, but also India, Japan, Indonesia, and others. In such an environment, regional states would have greater opportunity to remain non-aligned. Yet, regional rules and norms might also be more contested as the number of poles increases.

Simply identifying these orders is of limited value without some method to assess the likelihood and indications of each occurring. Although there is no doubt that many factors will be critical to determining the Indo-Pacific's future, three questions stand out. First, will China's rise continue? Second, will America remain engaged in Asia? Third, will regional states pursue autonomy from the United States and China? By asking these questions in this order, it is possible to chart the region's likely path in the years ahead.

As shown in Figure 1 below, if China's rise stalls, then the United States will likely continue to lead the regional order. If China's rise continues and America disengages from Asia, then China will likely inherit the mantle of regional leadership. If China's rise continues and America remains engaged, then the order will depend largely on the actions of regional states. If regional states choose to align with the United States or China, then a bipolar order will emerge. If regional states pursue autonomy from these two powers, then a multipolar order is more likely.

Figure 1: Three Questions about the Indo-Pacific's Future



Knowing which questions to ask is quite different from knowing the ultimate answers to those questions. And yet, although the future will always remain opaque, it is possible to begin identifying the issues that will determine the region's future path. In so doing, scholars and policymakers can decide how to best devote their time and resources to study and shape the Indo-Pacific region. With this in mind, the sections below briefly outline the key issues related to the three questions raised above.

6 Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, 'Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?', *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 1 (July 2010), pp. 7–43.

Will China's rise continue? Many observers assume that China's rise will continue, largely unabated, into the future. After all, the Chinese Communist Party has successfully engineered forty years of rapid economic growth using a mix of single-party rule and state-directed development. Yet there are many reasons to believe that China is likely to face severe challenges in the years ahead.⁷ Beijing must contend with domestic discontent, significant demographic constraints, massive economic expectations, and substantial opposition from neighbouring states. Moreover, Xi Jinping's decision to extend his reign indefinitely introduces greater fragility into the Chinese Communist Party. If Beijing encounters serious challenges — as seems inevitable — it will now prove more difficult to chart a new direction through an orderly succession process.⁸ Moreover, simply assuming that rising powers will continue their rise unabated has proven unwise in the past — one need look no further than the Soviet Union's downfall or Japan's economic stagnation. Thus, observers would be wise to consider the possibility that China's rise might stall, while planning for the possibility that Beijing's success could continue.⁹ Of course, if China's rise did stall, the outcome could have a severe negative impact on not only the Chinese people, but also China's neighbours, which could be harmed by either a major economic downturn or greater Chinese reliance on nationalistic sentiment.

Will America remain engaged in Asia? For seventy years, the United States has underwritten security and prosperity across much of the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁰ Yet, under Donald Trump, concerns have grown that the United States might pursue a more nationalistic 'America First' strategy. Facing substantial political and economic challenges, leaders in Washington might choose to focus on domestic priorities in place of foreign policy objectives. Similar debates about preferencing domestic goals over foreign priorities arose in the 1950s, 1970s and 1990s, so President Trump's efforts to refocus US attention at home are not unprecedented. Yet there is good reason to believe that the United States will remain deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ After all, the United States is a resident power in the Pacific, with people, territory and forces spread across the region. Moreover, concerns about the Chinese Communist Party are driving renewed interest in Asia among policymakers and politicians in Washington. Although political leaders in the United States do not agree on much, there is a growing bipartisan consensus on the need to refocus US attention and resources on the challenge posed by the Chinese Communist Party.¹² The American public lags behind its politicians in this regard, but the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy has altered the debate. Therefore, although multiple scenarios are possible, it would be unwise to assume that the United States will withdraw from the Indo-Pacific.

7 David M. Lampton, 'China: Challenger or Challenged?', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2 July 2016), pp. 107–19, doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1232638.

8 Alanna Krolkowski, 'Brittle China? Economic and Political Fragility with Global Implications', *Global Policy*, vol. 8, no. S4 (2017), pp. 42–53, doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12434.

9 David Shambaugh, 'Contemplating China's Future', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2 July 2016), pp. 121–30, doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1232639.

10 Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

11 Kurt M. Campbell, *Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York, NY: Twelve, 2016).

12 It should be noted, however, that this consensus may not extend beyond politicians in Washington, as the American public and a large portion of the academic community remain unconvinced that tougher policies are warranted. See, for example, M. Taylor Fravel, J. Stapleton Roy, Michael D. Swaine, Susan A. Thornton and Ezra Vogel, 'China Is Not an Enemy', *Washington Post*, 3 July 2019, <www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html> [Accessed 1 May 2020].

Will regional states pursue autonomy from the United States and China? Many observers discount the importance of the choices of other regional states in determining regional orders. This instinct is partially due to the fact that the Indo-Pacific order has been bipolar or unipolar for most of recent memory, thereby limiting the choices available to other regional players. Yet, the power trajectories and alignment decisions of regional states should not be overlooked. If the United States and China continue to be major players in the Indo-Pacific, then regional states will have a choice to make. They will be forced to either choose to align with one of the great powers, or to seek to maintain autonomy.¹³ Asian leaders are fond of saying that they do not wish to choose between the United States and China.¹⁴ After all, bandwagoning with one of the great powers would provide a security guarantor, but risk angering the opposing side. Maintaining autonomy would provide leverage and agency to regional states, while also increasing the likelihood that a multipolar order would emerge.¹⁵ Moreover, if the United States and China appear focused on a bilateral confrontation and unwilling to take into account the interests of third parties, then regional states may not see the benefits of alignment. Therefore, leaders in Beijing and Washington should not assume that the Indo-Pacific order will become bipolar. It may be more likely that regional states opt for autonomy to maximise their freedom of action.

What does the future hold for the Indo-Pacific region? As is noted above, wise observers will admit that the region's path has not yet been determined. But there is enough evidence to suggest some early indicators of the likely future path. In particular, there is reason to believe that the answer to each of these three questions is likely to be a qualified yes. Yes — China will continue rising, albeit at a slower pace. Yes — the United States will stay engaged in Asia, although distracted by domestic and global challenges. And yes — regional states will favour autonomy over alignment, as they have increasingly done in recent years. If this assessment is correct, then the most likely outcome in the Indo-Pacific is a multipolar order.

A multipolar order would fully satisfy neither the United States nor China, each of which would prefer to lead a unipolar regional order. However, a multipolar order would be largely acceptable to states across the Indo-Pacific, many of which appear to see this configuration as increasingly advantageous given Beijing's assertiveness and Washington's unpredictability.

Although American policymakers might not desire a multipolar order, they would enjoy real benefits if one emerges. Most other possible regional poles are democratic and share significant interests with the United States. From an American perspective, India, Japan, Indonesia and others could therefore prove valuable balancers to China's rise.¹⁶

13 Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, 'Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia', *Security Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2 October 2015), pp. 696–727, doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1103130.

14 Lee Hsien Loong, Speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 31 May 2019, CNA, Mediacorp, <www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/lee-hsien-loong-speech-2019-shangri-la-dialogue-11585954> [Accessed 1 May 2020].

15 Evelyn Goh, 'How Should Southeast Asia Respond to the South China Sea Ruling?', East Asia Forum, 17 July 2016, <www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/07/17/how-should-southeast-asia-respond-to-the-south-china-sea-ruling/> [Accessed 1 May 2020].

16 Thoughtful expositions on regional views of Asian order are included in the roundtable 'Contending Visions of the Regional Order in East Asia', *Asia Policy*, vol. 13, no. 2, 30 April 2018.

Washington would be forced to sacrifice some agency in regional decision-making, but it would also be allowed to shed some of the burden for maintaining the existing regional order. This analysis does not suggest that a multipolar order is inevitable, but it does imply that experts should think more carefully about the contours of such an order in the Indo-Pacific region.

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