

How to Think about Geopolitics in East Asia

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Some of you may think that the title of my talk, “How to Think about Geopolitics in East Asia”, is somewhat provocative if not pretentious. Let me assure you that my intention is not to educate anyone’s grandmother about eggs. My intention is only to draw attention something that I think has received insufficient emphasis. This is what could be termed the binary fallacy.

This 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’. The binary fallacy pervades far too much analysis of geopolitical developments in East Asia, whether in the media, academia or by some governments.

Such a mode of thought is so prevalent because US-China relations are undoubtedly the major axis of the East Asian geopolitical equation. The US 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 US-China relations clearly and clinically. But binary thinking is simplistic, ahistorical, inaccurate, and hence inappropriate. Under some circumstances, it could be dangerously misleading.

For a start, US-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. In different degrees, ambivalence also characterizes Sino-Japanese relations, Sino-India relations, Sino-ROK relations, Sino-Australian relations, and the attitudes of smaller countries such as the members of ASEAN towards all the major powers.

Moreover, the US and China while extremely important actors, are not the only actors. They operate in an increasing

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

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 we stood, and even if we pretended to be non-aligned, there was never much doubt about how we should position ourselves. That clarity is gone and it 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 inauguration as the 45th President of the US, 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 US-China relations in binary, deterministic terms in which anything regarded as adversely affecting the US must necessarily rebound to China's advantage. A particularly egregious example was a Foreign Policy article published online the day after the 2016 election under the absurd headline "China Just Won the US Election". More than a year later, too much of that attitude still persists.

The US and China are both changing, and changing the world. A more symmetrical US-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. Neither's future development is going to be described by a straight line trajectory up or down.

Simply put: The US under Mr. Trump is not as bad as the American media and large parts of the American establishment – still seething with frustration over his unexpected victory – portrays; China under Mr. Xi Jinping 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 Mr. Trump’s election and the confidence with which Mr. 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 presents almost everything Mr. Trump does as wrong because they want him to fail to vindicate themselves. China presents ambition as 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 certainly reinforce each other.

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. 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 political system that has always been subject 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. Mr. 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.

We should not let Mr. Trump's outsized personality and his penchant for extravagant statements, 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 US has not eschewed leadership or has 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 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 US policy before Mr. Trump.

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. The ensuing wars in the Middle East exhausted Americans, discredited the American political establishment, and set the stage for Donald Trump’s election and that of 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 -- President Trump is a symptom not a cause. The pressures on the ‘liberal international order’ have deeper roots than Mr Trump’s administration.

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

The Trump administration has reaffirmed its alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia. It has given the 7th Fleet greater latitude to conduct FONOPs in the SCS to challenge China's claims, and done so without quasi-metaphysical public debates about whether a particular action was really a FONOP or not that undermined their effect and highlighted divisions between the White House and Pentagon during the Obama administration. I do not see any sign that the US is preparing to withdraw from East Asia. The Guam Doctrine of 1969 was a far more serious reorientation of US security policy in East Asia than anything Donald Trump had said during the campaign or done since.

The cancellation of the TPP 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. President

Trump's decision to bomb Syria while at dinner with President 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 denuclearisation and preparing to deal with a nuclear armed North Korea by deterrence. President Trump uses extreme language, but it 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 US. 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 will 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 weapon 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 Strategy and National Defence Strategy can be criticised for placing too much emphasis on competition. But this is perhaps an over-correction to the second Obama administration's somewhat naive belief that to secure China's cooperation on issues such as climate change, it was necessary to deemphasize competition. Democracies almost always over-correct.

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 US-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 US 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 honoured in its breach than its observance. The norm of sovereign equality nevertheless maximises the scope for smaller states to exercise agency, provided no vital US interest is at stake. The term ‘rules based order’ or more recently, the broader concept of a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ are short-hand terms to describe the American goal.

China wants its new status acknowledged. This is a reasonable and legitimate aspiration. But China holds 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 recognising a geopolitical fact. China now insistently promotes the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) as an over-arching vision in which all roads lead to Beijing.

A third idea of regional order representing the aspirations of the smaller countries of Southeast Asia, 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. Southeast Asia lies at the intersection of major power interests and hence of major power competition. ASEAN Centrality is best understood as a means of coping with this uncomfortable reality. 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 Defence 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 so strong as 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 SCS was concerned, ASEAN was not central. The Vice-Minister was perhaps rude, but 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 US 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 an 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 ideas of regional order will prevail in their entirety.

America's friends and allies do not have exactly the same conception of what should constitute a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. The US, Japan, India and Australia may all harbour concerns about a rising China, but I do not think that they are exactly the same concerns or held with the same intensity. Anxiety about 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 SCS has become something of a proxy for the contest between American and Chinese ideas 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 the disputes in the SCS. This is a big boy's game.

At the strategic level, the SCS is a stalemate. Nobody can make the Chinese drop their claim to almost the entire SCS or make them dig up the artificial islands it has 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 the US and its allies operating in, through and over the SCS without risking war. If war breaks out, those islands and the military assets on them are only targets.

Overall, the US is still militarily dominant and will remain so for the foreseeable future. China cannot prevail in a war. A loss or even a draw, will 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 SCS 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 -- stalemate preserves manoeuvre space for smaller countries. As long as the US is present as a hard-power, off-shore balancer, no ASEAN claimant can be forced to give up their claims or accept subordination.

Much of the commentary on President Xi's China and in particular, on 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 President 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 needs for a better life" and consequently, on the urgent imperative of revitalising the CCP 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: Moving industry up the value chain, cutting overcapacity, promoting innovation, improving the environment, revitalising the rural sector, promoting balanced regional growth, dealing with an aging population, healthcare and social security, promoting social mobility, improving education, housing and food safety, dealing with corruption, defusing social tensions, and expanding “orderly political participation”.

Each issue is in itself a major challenge, and this list is only partial. Moreover, the 19th Party Congress speech referred only obliquely to a key issue left over from the 18th Party Congress in 2012: What is the appropriate balance between market efficiency and communist party control? The 19th Party Congress offered no clarity, and indeed there are no clear answers. President 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.

The challenge is fundamental – perhaps even existential -- because there is no practical alternative to Communist Party rule for China. The BRI is as much about dealing with this central challenge as it is a new global strategy or a manifestation of ambition.

The BRI is essentially the externalisation of a growth model heavily dependent on SOE-led infrastructure investment. The 18th Party Congress had recognised that this model was unsustainable within China itself. But a new growth model requires structural changes that Beijing is unsure how to make without risking internal instability that could jeopardise party rule. By exporting that model, the BRI buys time for Beijing to deal with this fundamental question. It remains to be seen how it will be dealt with by President Xi.

It is however 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 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 push-back even in countries highly dependent on China.

In January this year, the Governor of Preah Sihanoukville in Cambodia wrote a letter to the interior ministry complaining about how Chinese investment had increased crime “causing insecurity in the province”. The letter was a highly unusual event in Cambodia. Equally unusually, the Chinese Embassy in Cambodia publically acknowledged that there were problems, although it argued that overall Chinese investment was positive. Laos is a fellow Leninist state and 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 reportedly was overly pro-China.

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 summarised 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, Former State Counsellor and now Politburo member, Yang Jichi, called upon the 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 and a deliberate blurring of the distinction between the *huaqiao* (PRC citizens) and the *huaren* (ethnic Chinese). 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 President Xi and has raised concerns, even if they are not always articulated in public. Concerns are particularly serious in Malaysia and in Indonesia, where both the TNI (military) 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 we cannot compromise.

I do not think that Chinese diplomats in Southeast Asia are 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 a crisis which would be extremely damaging to China's position in Southeast Asia.

In drawing your attention to these issues, my point is *not* that China will fail. I do not think that China will fail. But the BRI

in Southeast Asia, as in other regions, is going to face competing demands on Chinese resources which are vast but not infinite, going to pose problems both for China and recipient countries, and its implementation will therefore be patchy and will not unfold along a smooth trajectory: 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 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 one is going to accept a relationship with China that curtails the autonomy to pursue other interests and other relationships. The US, 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 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 for manoeuvre, they will use what room exists. The basic diplomatic instinct of Southeast Asia was best summarised 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 relationship with China, but despite his penchant for anti-American rhetoric, he retains the alliance with the US 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 7th Fleet still calls at Malaysian ports and American aircraft still fly missions over the SCS from Malaysian air-fields. 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, but going its own

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

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 conception of regional order that it is never going to subsume in anyone else's ideas, be it China or America.

The main risks that have emerged under the Trump administration are in trade. The greatest weakness of the Trump administration's emerging strategy is the failure to make the connection between security and foreign policies and trade policy. In East Asia, trade *is* strategy.

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

China cannot replace US leadership. The US led by being open and generous. 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 more or less voluntarily link themselves in one way or another with the US, 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 last year, and again at the APEC Summit in Vietnam in November last year, President Xi Jinping delivered eloquent defences of globalization, suggesting that

China was ready to lead if the US was not. President 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 US-led, post-Cold War globalisation and the international multilateral trading system. It could also be the main loser if that order descends into further uncertainty because of lack of leadership. China's rise and the BRI are built on the foundations of the current open US-led order. Can an open order be maintained on the basis of a still largely closed model? It is precisely how much more and how China should open up that Beijing has yet to decide. The BRI is not a practical alternative to the current order. Can the BRI succeed if the US and China stumble into a trade war or the world turns protectionist?

Even though China criticises the US alliance system as a Cold War relic, in so far as that system is an inextricable component of the broader global order, China's attitude is in reality more ambivalent. If we keep this firmly in mind, one of the most prevalent perceived binary choices – between the US as security provider and China as a major economic partner – will appear less stark or daunting. In any case, trade is not a favour 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 China will certainly play an increasingly important role in global institutions like the UN, the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. It has created its own supplementary institutions such as the AIIB. My argument is only that for the foreseeable future, it is far more credible to envisage China playing a bigger role within the existing order,

than see China displacing the US as leader, or China replacing the current order with its own order.

China is not happy with every aspect of the current order. It has no reason to whole-heartedly embrace an order it regards, not without justification, as successor to the order responsible for ‘a hundred years of humiliation’ and 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 stabilise its relationship with the US 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 SCS, for example, a ritualised pattern of FONOPs and interceptions seems to be emerging. Admiral Harris, Commander of PACOM, said in 2016 on the side-lines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, that unsafe incidents were in fact rare.

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 US-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 a 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 is 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 will 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 manoeuvre space for small countries. 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 I have said enough to persuade you that this is so, particularly in periods of uncertainty. I also said that under some circumstances, the binary fallacy could be dangerous. Let me conclude by elaborating that statement.

As this leads me into sensitive territory, let me make the standpoint from which I speak absolutely clear. I am retired. I stand before you as a pensioner who speaks only for himself. Moreover, I speak analytically and not from any moral pulpit.

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 US – 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 big 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.

To deal with it, we have to understand the nature of major power competition. China better than any other major power understands that the competition for influence is as much – and perhaps more – psychological as 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 instil a sense of fatalistic inevitability about 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 East Asia should therefore place itself on the right side of history.

This is a powerful narrative, but so grossly oversimplified as to be a grotesque distortion of reality. The binary mode of thought which over simplifies complexity and is strongly deterministic, sets up an almost perfect framework for promoting false choices within this overall narrative, particularly when coupled with unbalanced criticism of American policy under the Trump administration such as we are now experiencing.

I am not arguing that we should not criticise 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 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 warranted, and may well stampede some countries into accepting false choices. But so

far not, I confess, with any discernible success in changing their behaviour. On that note, I shall end, but not before thanking you for the patience and courtesy with which you have listened to the ramblings of this pensioner. [End]

