

# Balance of power

**Andrew Leung** says a peaceful world order cannot be built on the assumption of a zero-sum game of rivalry; instead, nations should help rising China take its place as a key member

After months of tension over the South China Sea, Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping's (习近平) meeting with Natsuo Yamaguchi, Japan's envoy and leader of the junior party in the ruling coalition, sends an unmistakable signal that while neither side is persuaded by the other's territorial claim, both realise that escalating confrontations can only make matters worse.

Concurrently, a whiff of fresh air on America's "Asia pivot" strategy was evident during Senator John Kerry's confirmation hearing for his nomination to be secretary of state. At the hearing, he said he was unconvinced of the need for a US "military ramp-up" in Asia and called for fresh thinking in relations with China. In particular, he is conscious of growing Chinese suspicions of an American "containment policy". "You know, the Chinese look at that and say, 'What's the United States doing? They trying to circle us? What's going on?'" he was quoted as saying.

These are welcome signs. However, they are unlikely to change the resurgence of Japan's right-wing politics, or the US vigilance over China's intentions as the Asian giant regains its global influence.

According to a recent survey of US public opinion on their country's foreign policy, conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, most Americans continue to see US leadership as desirable but want a more co-operative stance. Towards China, while they are equally divided between thinking of it mostly as a partner (48 per cent) and mostly a rival (47 per cent), the percentage saying that China is mostly a partner has grown.

China's growing economic clout and muscularity in the South China Sea are, however, a clear concern. Most people (54 per cent) support the shift of military and diplomatic resources towards Asia.

We are likely to see less talk of an "Asian pivot" and more of "rebalancing". However, America's redoubled military and diplomatic ties with China's neighbours are empowering some countries to be more assertive, making America's efforts to rebalance the region more complicated.

A recent *Asia Times* article, by columnist Francesco Sisci, argues that a "G2" détente between the US and China may be a better approach to regional stability, even though China's response to such an overture has been lukewarm. Professor Hugh White of the Australian National University floats the idea of a "concert of Asia" to avoid a possible "deadly strategic rivalry". America is to partner and share



regional power with China, along with India and Japan.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, a doyen in American foreign policy, has advanced a US worldview comprising a "larger West", by embracing Russia and Turkey in an enlarged European Union, and a "complex East", where the US would act as "regional balancer", similar to the role played by Britain in European politics before the early 20th century.

While each of these strategies has merit, they all assume a zero-sum game, which is unlikely to guarantee regional harmony, or stability. Perhaps it's time for some fresh thinking, as Kerry suggests.

First, admittedly, China will have to reform politically, sooner rather than later, as both party and national stability are at risk. It is clear that China remains unconvinced that the Western model of multi-party democracy could safely be copied at home, where circumstances are different.



**Working with China to overcome these problems is likely to yield mutual and common dividends**

However, Beijing appears amenable to a raft of reforms in its economy and society, as highlighted in a World Bank report co-authored with the Development Research Centre of China's State Council. These include financial liberalisation, reform of state-owned enterprises, development of a green economy and promotion of civil society. Helping China to deliver on these reforms is likely to transform the country into a more welcome member of the global community, while a "containment" policy is bound to result in the opposite.

Second, as the world has become not only multipolar but much more interdependent, it raises the question of whether the traditional thinking of fixed alliances remains fit for purpose. It is conceivable that diverse groupings of states and non-state actors, across ideological or political divides, could co-operate on an ad hoc basis to address common problems. These include climate change, resource depletion, water scarcity, poverty alleviation, piracy and terrorism.

On these issues, China has a crucial role to play. By now, it has grown too big and prominent for Deng Xiaoping's (邓小平) old dictum of maintaining a low profile to remain workable.

Third, it is instructive that Senator Kerry also refers to a bigger role for America in Africa, where China's engagement has thrown up important lessons for all.

On the one hand, as Deborah Brautigam points out in her book, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*, emerging from decades of Western aid addiction, many poor African countries have achieved real economic progress, thanks to China's infrastructural investments. On the other hand, China's African footprint has aroused local antagonism against the perceived lack of social responsibility, including encroachment of local informal economies, environmental disregard, want of local job creation, and poor labour relations.

Working with China to overcome these problems, perhaps in co-operation with the UN Development Programme and other non-state actors, is likely to yield mutual and common dividends.

No doubt there are many other examples for engagement with China in a similar vein. The Sino-US relationship will define the shape of the 21st century, and a soft-power strategy of partnership to address global issues promises to achieve the ultimate aim of bringing China into a more sustainable and harmonious world order, built on multilateral co-operation instead of confrontation and rivalries. This is what a hard-power pivot or rebalancing strategy is unlikely to deliver.

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## War games?

**Yoon Young-kwan** says the parallels between today's East Asia and volatile 19th-century Europe should persuade leaders to redouble efforts for peace

Whether East Asia's politicians and pundits like it or not, the region's international relations are more akin to 19th-century European balance-of-power politics than to the stable Europe of today. Witness East Asia's rising nationalism, territorial disputes, and lack of effective institutional mechanisms for security co-operation.

While economic interdependence among China, Japan, South Korea, and the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations continues to deepen, their diplomatic relations are as burdened by rivalry and mistrust as relations among European countries were in the years prior to the first world war.

One common characteristic, then and now, is a power shift. Back then, Britain's relative power was in decline, while Germany's had been rising. Similarly, at least in terms of economic capability, the United States and Japan seem to have begun a process of decline relative to China.

Major power shifts define eras in which leaders are likely to make serious foreign-policy mistakes. Indeed, poor management of international relations at such junctures has often led to major wars.

Historically, rising powers tend to become too confident too soon, leading them to behave imprudently, which frightens their neighbours. For example, Kaiser Wilhelm II dismissed Otto von Bismarck as chancellor in 1890, less than 20 years after the formation of the Second Reich, and began to destroy Bismarck's alliance network. His rough diplomacy frightened France, Britain and Russia, making it easier for them to unite against Germany.

China's new diplomatic assertiveness recalled that of Wilhelmine Germany. In both cases, insecurity resulted not from an external threat, but from top policymakers' own actions.

The extent to which policymaking by China's new leader, Xi Jinping (习近平), takes into account the insecurity felt by its neighbours – and abandons a quest for absolute security for China – will be one of the key variables influencing East Asia's security environment in the years ahead.

America's foreign policy will be another key factor. If it pursues a predominantly confrontational approach, East Asian politics will inevitably become polarised, just as multipolar 19th-century Europe gave way to an increasingly bipolar order in lockstep with rising tensions between Germany and Britain.

A confrontational US approach towards China, moreover, would imply an additional destabilising factor: Japan might become much bolder than necessary in its foreign policy. US diplomacy will need to be dexterous. It must ease Japan's sense of insecurity, while persuading its leaders to refrain from excessively nationalist behaviour. Frankly, with two decades of economic stagnation behind it, Japan has more important matters to pursue.

There is much to learn from the diplomatic failures that led to the first world war. A new history, by Christopher Clark, of the diplomatic prelude to that war is called, fittingly, *The Sleepwalkers*. The question for the US and East Asia's leaders today is whether they will wake up and develop effective multilateral mechanisms for security co-operation before doing themselves serious harm.

Yoon Young-kwan, South Korea's foreign minister from 2003 to 2004, is currently professor of international relations at Seoul National University. Copyright: Project Syndicate

## Officials taking the wrong approach to resolving infant formula shortage

As the saying goes, "Those whom the gods wish to destroy first make mad". This applies to the way Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying and his administration are handling the latest scandal involving one of his formerly staunch supporters, Lew Mon-hung. His government is attempting to ride out the scandal by diverting attention to the shortage of infant formula. But it won't work.

Leung and his top officials, such as Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, Secretary for Food and Health Ko Wing-man and Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development Greg So Kam-leung are all putting on a show. Let's look at their shoddy diversion tactics.

On January 23, following a meeting with health officials, baby formula suppliers stressed there was adequate supply for locals while retailers said they would limit each purchase to four cans.

On January 25, Ko called a second meeting with suppliers. After the session, suppliers again reassured the city of their commitment to ensure adequate supply. Ko once again held off taking action and said the government would monitor the situation. The next day, the only so-called measure introduced was the setting up of an inquiry hotline for the public.

Then, on January 27, the one-man show by Ko continued. This time, he said that although the government would not rule out taking more severe measures, it was worried that they could have negative effects.

Elaborating on his policy address on RTHK's *Letter to*

**Albert Cheng** says instead of putting controls on the export of milk powder, the government should supply it for free to local parents



Hong Kong programme, Leung took the credit for being the main advocate of the individual visit scheme that allows residents of more affluent mainland cities to come to Hong Kong as tourists without having to join tour groups. He said that, because of this measure, the mainland has now become



**Let's be clear: parallel trading is not illegal. It is a legitimate activity the world over**

Hong Kong's biggest source of tourism income. But, of course, he did not mention how some of these travellers are buying up infant formula here, causing a severe supply shortage for locals.

On Tuesday, Leung ignored Lew's allegations and addressed the baby formula problem; he pledged the government's support to resolve the issue by setting up an interdepartmental working group.

The commerce department then joined in the chorus, with So saying that the government would review and assess the situation.

The government then finally

said it was considering action, such as whether to make infant formula a reserved commodity, which means setting a price ceiling and restricting its exports. This may mean limiting sales to two to three cans per traveller.

The problem is in fact not difficult to resolve. Hong Kong could learn from other governments that help pay for the costs of raising a child. For example, the government could supply each local infant five to six cans of baby formula each month for three years. The distribution could be handled by maternal and child health centres.

Let's be clear, though: parallel trading is not illegal. In fact, it is a legitimate and common economic activity the world over. This practice exists due to the difference in taxes imposed on the same commodities in two areas. Hong Kong people are actively involved in parallel importation, bringing goods in from Japan years ago. Now the popular destination is South Korea. Many small fashion boutiques rely on this trading practice to survive.

It's understandable why so many drug stores near the border in Sheung Shui and Fanling are hoarding products such as infant formula and selling them to mainlanders in mass quantities. It's no different from the way our property market works.

Moreover, the majority of people involved in the parallel trading of baby formula are Hongkongers. This kind of economic activity does help to stimulate the economy. Imposing restrictive measures will bring no positive outcome.

The idea of making baby formula a reserved commodity is naive. The Reserved Commodities Ordinance is outdated, and rice, a staple food in Hong Kong, is the only food product scheduled as a reserved commodity under the related regulation.

Hong Kong's success relies on being a free port that thrives on free trade and its open-door policy. Controlling the import and export of certain products such as baby formula would risk making Hong Kong an international laughing stock.

There are many solutions available – the only problem is that the government is incompetent and the mainland's customs officers are too lax.

Leung would do well to draw inspiration from our national leader Xi Jinping (习近平), who said that as long as our spirit remains unbroken, there will always be more solutions than problems. The problem is, our chief executive seems more interested in keeping his own power intact.

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## No one benefits from this incessant hounding of Leung

**Lau Nai-keung** says a sore loser's complaints shouldn't be taken seriously

Hong Kong really is going backwards these days; there seems to be no moral ethics or sense of decency any more. Just look at the scandal brewing after Lew Mon-hung's attack on Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying.

Imagine if, during his election campaign, Barack Obama had told Hillary Rodham Clinton that, should he get elected as US president, he would invite her to be his secretary of state. Would anyone call that a bribe? Common sense would say it isn't. As a matter of fact, how could he assemble his team after the election if he was not forming it during the campaign?

Yet, this is the argument legislators are using and a complaint has now been filed with the Independent Commission Against Corruption following Lew's comments in a magazine article. Lew claimed that Leung lied over unauthorised structures at his home and also failed to honour a promise to appoint him to the Executive Council as a reward for his support during the election campaign.

Lawmakers have threatened to invoke the Powers and Privileges Ordinance to force Leung and Lew to testify.

Is all this really necessary, given the thus far unsubstantiated and uncorroborated allegations? Where will the media, our fourth estate, lead us now? Can you trust the judgment of some so-called legal experts? And will you vote for these lawmaker fools the next time, to make laws and

decisions on your behalf? Will the ICAC continue to entertain these frivolous charges and turn itself into a political tool? What is happening to Hong Kong?

The reactions I got (admittedly from a somewhat biased sample) were that Leung made the right decision by not appointing Lew to the Exco. Since Lew gave his magazine interview, it has been revealed that he is on bail after being arrested in a separate ICAC case involving his listed company



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Pearl Oriental Oil. And reports claimed Lew sent a letter asking Leung to block the probe. He has also been axed from membership of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

So, really, it's irrelevant whether Leung actually made a promise to Lew about an Exco seat; even if he did, as a responsible chief executive, he should renege on it.

However, I have known Leung since 1984 and it is just not in his character to pledge political favours. Making deals is what politicians in the West do. In that sense, Leung isn't a good

politician; recent events have demonstrated this amply.

There is a lesson for us all in the Lew fiasco. In Western-style politics, show me a politician, and I will show you a liar – but that's alright, as long as he does his job for the people who elected him.

Here in Hong Kong, there are so many real issues crying out to be tackled that, even if Leung were a liar – as some of his obsessive opponents want us to believe – we should at least give him some room to perform the job he has been asked to do, after gaining his seat through an acknowledged process.

Right now, it's obvious that Leung and his team are not doing their job properly. But it's easy to say that; the entire administration has been under siege since even before it took office and officials have been busy defending themselves against one charge after another.

If the community continues to be duped into indulging in this meaningless game of unceasingly bullying Leung and his administration, we will all end up losers. Some people will follow in Lew's footsteps and become bad losers, and so will begin another loop in the vicious downward spiral, until we are all suffering in hell.

We have to seriously ask ourselves: is this what we want? If the answer is "no", then it's time to make a U-turn.

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