

How America Can Shore Up Asian Order

A Strategy for Restoring Balance and Legitimacy

By Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi

Throughout the half century of Asia's unprecedented rise, Henry Kissinger has been a pivotal figure, orchestrating the United States' opening to China in the early 1970s and then going on to author tomes on Chinese strategy and world order. But at this transitional moment in Asia, Kissinger's most relevant observations may be found in a more surprising place: a doctoral dissertation on nineteenth-century Europe that struggled to find a publisher when Kissinger wrote it, years before his rise to prominence.

That book, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–22*, explored how two European statesmen—one British, the other Austrian—worked to bolster fraying relations among leading continental states at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Their efforts laid the groundwork for the continent's so-called long peace—100 years of calm and prosperity between 1815 and World War I. The book's insights have special resonance for today's Indo-Pacific, with its intensifying great-power politics and strained regional order.

The key implication today of *A World Restored* is not that the Indo-Pacific requires its own version of Europe's great-power condominium or a modern U.S.-Chinese concert. It is instead that regional orders work best when they sustain both balance and legitimacy and that Washington should work to advance both in Asia. Kissinger argues that it was Lord Castlereagh's focus on balance combined with Klemens von Metternich's focus on the order's legitimacy in the eyes of member states that established a stable system.

A strategy for the Indo-Pacific today would benefit from incorporating three lessons from this episode of European history: the need for a balance of power; the need for an order that the region's states recognize as legitimate; and the need for an allied and partner coalition to address China's challenge to both. Such an approach can ensure that the Indo-Pacific's future is characterized by balance and twenty-first-century openness rather than hegemony and nineteenth-century spheres of influence.

EUROPE'S PAST, ASIA'S FUTURE?

The question of whether "Europe's past will be Asia's future," as Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg memorably put it two decades ago, remains a pressing one. Both nineteenth-century Europe and the Indo-Pacific today featured a rising state, rivalrous great powers, multiple paths to conflict, growing nationalism, clashes between liberalism and authoritarianism, and fragile regional institutions.

The differences, though, matter too. Unlike prewar Europe, the Indo-Pacific is not emerging from revolutionary upheaval and ruinous great-power war. Instead, the region has enjoyed its own 40-year "long peace." Asia as a whole is also far more economically, financially, and technologically interdependent than Europe in the nineteenth century. The majority of Indo-Pacific trade, for instance, is conducted internally, and the region itself is central to American

prosperity and growth. The challenge for U.S. policy is not to create order out of chaos, as it was for nineteenth-century European leaders, but to modernize and strengthen elements of an existing system.

Another distinctive element of the Indo-Pacific is that its evolved “operating system,” unlike the order forged in prewar Europe, is as much about promoting commerce as preventing conflict. Constructed in the aftermath of World War II, the region’s system is a combination of legal, security, and economic arrangements that liberated hundreds of millions from poverty, promoted countless commercial advances, and led to a remarkable accumulation of wealth. At its heart are time-tested principles: freedom of navigation, sovereign equality, transparency, peaceful dispute resolution, the sanctity of contracts, cross-border trade, and cooperation on transnational challenges. The United States’ long-standing commitment to forward-deployed military forces, moreover, has helped underscore these principles.

Two specific challenges, however, threaten the order’s balance and legitimacy. The first is China’s economic and military rise. China alone accounts for half the region’s GDP and military spending, a gap that has only grown since the COVID-19 pandemic. And like any rising state, China seeks to reshape its surroundings and secure deference to its interests. The way Beijing has pursued these goals—**South China Sea** island building, East China Sea incursions, conflict with India, threats to invade Taiwan, and internal repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang—undermines important precepts of the established regional system. This behavior, combined with China’s preference for economic coercion, most recently directed against Australia, means that many of the order’s organizing principles are at risk.

The second challenge is more surprising because it comes from the original architect and longtime sponsor of the present system—the United States. Despite determined efforts by the Trump administration’s Asia experts to mitigate the damage, President Donald Trump himself strained virtually every element of the region’s operating system. He pressed allies such as Japan and South Korea to renegotiate cost-sharing agreements for U.S. bases and troops and threatened to withdraw forces entirely if he was unsatisfied with the new terms. Both moves undermined alliances the Indo-Pacific needs to remain balanced. Trump was also generally absent from regional multilateral processes and economic negotiations, ceding ground for China to rewrite rules central to the order’s content and legitimacy. Finally, he was cavalier about support for democracy and human rights in ways that weakened the United States’ natural partners and emboldened Chinese authorities in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

This combination of Chinese assertiveness and U.S. ambivalence has left the region in flux. The contemporary Indo-Pacific feels like prewar Europe—drifting out of balance, its order fraying, and with no obvious coalition to address the problem. If the next U.S. administration wants to preserve the regional operating system that has generated peace and unprecedented prosperity, it needs to begin by addressing each of these trends in turn.

RESTORING BALANCE

“The balance of power,” Kissinger writes in *A World Restored*, “is the classic expression of the lesson of history that no order is safe without physical safeguards against aggression.” Applied to the Indo-Pacific, such a warning is prescient: China’s growing material power has indeed destabilized the region’s delicate balance and emboldened Beijing’s territorial adventurism. Left unchecked, Chinese behavior could end the region’s long peace.

The growing material imbalance between China and the rest of the region is notable. Beijing spends more on its military than all its Indo-Pacific neighbors combined. China has invested in anti-access/area-denial weapons (including supersonic missiles and “smart” mines) that threaten the viability of U.S. regional intervention. It has also invested in blue-water, amphibious, and power-projection capabilities that Beijing could employ for offensive missions against India, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and others.

In response to these threats, the United States needs to make a conscious effort to deter Chinese adventurism. Washington can start by moving away from its singular focus on primacy and the expensive and vulnerable platforms such as aircraft carriers designed to maintain it. Instead, the United States should prioritize deterring China through the same relatively inexpensive and asymmetric capabilities Beijing has long employed. This means investing in long-range conventional cruise and ballistic missiles, unmanned carrier-based strike aircraft and underwater vehicles, guided-missile submarines, and high-speed strike weapons. These developments would complicate Chinese calculations and force Beijing to reevaluate whether risky provocations would succeed.

Real regional balance, however, also requires action in concert with allies and partners. The United States needs to help states in the Indo-Pacific develop their own asymmetric capabilities to deter Chinese behavior. Although Washington should maintain its forward presence, it also needs to work with other states to disperse U.S. forces across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. This would reduce American reliance on a small number of vulnerable facilities in East Asia. Finally, the United States should encourage new military and intelligence partnerships between regional states, while still deepening those relationships in which the United States plays a major role—placing a “tire” on the familiar regional alliance system with a U.S. hub and allied spokes.

RESTORING LEGITIMACY

Military and material balance alone, however, will not sustain a renewed regional order. The stability of any international system, wrote Kissinger, ultimately relies on what he termed “generally accepted legitimacy.” Any international framework needs buy-in from the powers within it. Here, the United States will again need to play a central role.

Unlike prewar Europe, legitimacy in the Indo-Pacific is not only a matter of international politics and security. Trade, technology, and transnational cooperation are also vital. As Evan Feigenbaum argues, there are “two Asias” that together constitute the region’s order: one focused on politics and security and the other on economics. China’s territorial adventurism undermines the former, its coercive economic policies undermine the latter, and U.S. ambivalence under Trump undermines both. If those trends continue and Indo-Pacific states begin to view the current order as illegitimate, they may drift into China’s shadow—pushing the region in a nineteenth-century rather than a twenty-first-century direction. Were that to occur, the dynamic region might split into spheres of influence: outside powers shut out, disputes resolved through force, economic coercion the norm, U.S. alliances weakened, and smaller states without autonomy and freedom to maneuver.

Reversing these trends will be challenging and require diplomatic finesse, commercial innovation, and institutional creativity on the part of U.S. policymakers. In the political and security realm, bolstering the present order’s legitimacy will, at minimum, require serious U.S. reengagement: an end to shaking down allies, skipping regional summits, avoiding economic

engagement, and shunning transnational cooperation. This new posture will give the United States a greater regional role and empower Indo-Pacific states in the face of China's growing clout.

In the economic realm, strengthening the present order means ensuring the system continues to deliver material benefits for its members, even as China grows more sophisticated in its use of economic carrots and sticks. In contrast to prewar Europe's negotiations, which emphasized borders and political recognition, those in the Indo-Pacific will inevitably revolve around supply chains, standards, investment regimes, and trade agreements. Even as the United States works to reshore sensitive industries and pursue a "managed decoupling" from China, it can reassure wary regional states that moving supply chains out of China will often mean shifting them to other local economies, creating new growth opportunities. Moreover, as China provides infrastructure financing through the Belt and Road Initiative, the United States should develop ways to provide alternative financing and technical assistance.

Negotiating Beijing's role in this order is the most complex element of the overall endeavor. Although Indo-Pacific states seek U.S. help to preserve their autonomy in the face of China's rise, they realize it is neither practical nor profitable to exclude Beijing from Asia's vibrant future. Nor do the region's states want to be forced to "choose" between the two superpowers.

A better solution would be for the United States and its partners to persuade China that there are benefits to a competitive but peaceful region organized around a few essential requirements: a place for Beijing in the regional order; Chinese membership in the order's primary institutions; a predictable commercial environment if the country plays by the rules; and opportunities to jointly benefit from collaboration on climate, infrastructure, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Marginal buy-in from China has played a central role in the region's success thus far. It will remain important in the years ahead.

Still, in other areas, Beijing's behavior will inevitably clash with U.S. and Asian visions for an Indo-Pacific order. In response, Washington will have to work with others to strengthen the system, provide Beijing with incentives to engage productively, and then collectively design penalties if China decides to take steps that threaten the larger order. Doing so, however, will likely grow more challenging as China's strength increases. Preserving the system's balance and legitimacy will therefore require strong coalitions of both allies and partners—and a degree of acquiescence and acceptance from China.

FORGING COALITIONS

Although the idea that the United States should "work with allies" is almost a cliché, the challenges to doing so are significant. Maintaining the existing Indo-Pacific order will inevitably require a broad coalition, and the very members that might join may not see the value of such a combined approach until the present system is irreversibly damaged. The need for allies and partners is often evident only after the status quo is overturned.

Kissinger observed this dynamic in nineteenth-century Europe, but it applies equally well today. Distant European leaders are inevitably less concerned about China's assertiveness than the Indo-Pacific states next door. Accordingly, the principal challenge facing the United States is to bridge European and regional approaches to Chinese challenges. That task is made more difficult by Beijing's economic power: last month, China used last-minute concessions to successfully

pull the EU into a major bilateral investment agreement despite concerns that the deal would complicate a unified transatlantic approach under the Biden administration.

Given these limitations, the United States will need to be flexible and innovative as it builds partnerships. Rather than form a grand coalition focused on every issue, the United States should pursue bespoke or ad hoc bodies focused on individual problems, such as the D-10 proposed by the United Kingdom (the G-7 democracies plus Australia, India, and South Korea). These coalitions will be most urgent for questions of trade, technology, supply chains, and standards.

Other coalitions, though, might focus on military deterrence by expanding the so-called Quad currently composed of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, infrastructure investment through cooperation with Japan and India, and human rights through the two-dozen states that criticized Beijing's internment camps in Xinjiang and its assault on Hong Kong's autonomy.

The purpose of these different coalitions—and this broader strategy—is to create balance in some cases, bolster consensus on important facets of the regional order in others, and send a message that there are risks to China's present course. This task will be among the most challenging in the recent history of American statecraft.

Two centuries ago, Metternich and Castlereagh were pessimists worried about a system under strain. Even in their cynicism about the darker ambitions of states and men, however, the two statesmen succeeded in erecting a durable and flexible system that extended peace and prosperity beyond what many thought possible. The United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific and across Europe need a similar sense of anxiety and ambition today. If they find it, they can ensure that a region home to roughly half the global economy, half of global greenhouse gas emissions, and half of all nuclear-armed states remains prosperous, peaceful, and open—for the benefit of all.

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