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## Playing the US-China balancing game

By Sean Foley

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Having warm ties with Western nations, the Islamic world and the many nations of Asia has put Malaysia in a good spot to take advantage of China's growth and the emerging Asia-Pacific regional security framework, writes SEAN FOLEY

FOR a quarter of a century, leading academics, policymakers, journalists and others have gathered annually in Kuala Lumpur at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable to explore the challenges facing the Asia-Pacific region. This year's roundtable, organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia (Isis) and Asean Isis, came at a critical juncture for the region and the world.

Not only is the Asia-Pacific the emerging heart of the global economy but it is also undergoing a geopolitical shift in which the United States gradually yields its hegemonic position to China and other emerging powers. This reality will determine how and when conflicts are resolved and if Asia can fulfil its tremendous economic, political and social promise.

From the start of the conference, the chief question for discussion was whether the Asia-Pacific region could continue to benefit from its unprecedented economic development starting in the 1970s. Beginning at that time, China transformed itself from an agricultural backwater to the world's manufacturing hub. Chinese trade and aid helped the region deal with the 1997 Asian financial crisis and emerge quickly from the global recession caused by the 2008 world financial crisis.

Two additional factors that promoted growth were India's economic reforms and the transformation of the Indian Ocean into what Robert Kaplan termed the "energy superhighway of the world", in which petroleum travels from the Middle East to Asia. In his eyes, the Indian Ocean's transformation heralded the reemergence of that area as a pivotal region of global commerce -- a position it had held before the 16th century.

Indeed, Kaplan noted that India and the Indian Ocean are now sufficiently integral to the Asia-Pacific's prosperity that US officials refer to the region by a new name: the "Indo-Pacific".

Since World War 2, the US navy has kept the region's many naval chokepoints and sea lanes open. American naval power helped to buttress ever increasing volumes of trade, virtually all of which travels by sea. That role, however, is eroding because of the US financial problems and the skyrocketing costs of maintaining a modern naval fleet deployed around the globe. The US fleet is now close to a third of the size it was in the 1980s, and the US, in the words of Brian Job, has become "the largest minority stockholder" in the global community.

In this new role, Washington cannot dictate to the rest of the world as it did in the past, but neither can anything major occur in global (or Asian) politics without its approval. As Susan Shirk and others noted, American officials are aware of the limits of their nation's power and are seeking ways to partner with Asian nations and regional organisations such as Asean.

In particular, they understand that Washington cannot contain China as the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. Washington signalled its commitment to regional organisations in Asia this year by appointing a permanent representative for the first time to Asean, ambassador David L. Carden.

Strikingly, one saw a similar approach in the remarks of Admiral Robert F. Willard -- head of the US Pacific Command -- who stressed the US commitment to Asean and collective security repeatedly in his speech to the conference. He was equally clear in his warning to nations that were developing "anti-access" or "area denial" technologies, which are meant to deter navies from deploying in sensitive regions of the Pacific.

While these technologies could limit the ability of the US navy to freely navigate the Asia-Pacific region, it could hurt the nation deploying the technology as much as the US since it would produce higher insurance costs for commercial shipping and reduce trade.

To illustrate this point, the admiral noted how low-scale piracy in the Gulf of Aden had disrupted commerce in the region, forced global trade routes to move eastward, and forced up insurance rates for all seaborne trade. A similar scenario in the Pacific would not be in the interests of the US or any other nation.

Declining US power is most important for China, a new global superpower with international interests but which still has significant domestic challenges to address. As multiple speakers noted, Beijing must assert its growing international power and meet the rising expectations of its population without pushing Washington or its Asian neighbours into confrontations or into forming alliances outwardly opposed to China.

While these nations have benefited from trade with China, they have no desire to antagonise China or to have to choose between China and another power. Nor do they want to be completely beholden to Beijing. At the same time, they have substantial economic, military and political resources of their own. Many have launched ambitious programmes in recent years to create technologically sophisticated militaries with defensive and offensive capabilities.

Furthermore, many states also have long-standing security ties with Washington (i.e. Japan and South Korea) or are developing new ones (i.e. India and Vietnam). And US military power in Asia -- although reduced -- is still substantial. As Willard noted, 50 to 60 US vessels operate in the Pacific on a daily basis. The US also has assets in Guam, South Korea and Japan, along with access to naval facilities in several states.

How Asian nations coordinate their policies with Beijing, Washington and among themselves will determine how old disputes (i.e. North Korea) and new ones (i.e. the South China Sea) are resolved. Like the global system generally, Asia appears to be heading to a multipolar world in which China (and multiple other states) will have a say in how the region is governed.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind Malaysia's role in the region discussed at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable. Few countries are better positioned to take advantage of China's growth or the emerging regional security framework in the Asia-Pacific than Malaysia. The nation maintains warm ties with Western nations, the Islamic world and the many nations of Asia. It is a full member of Asean, one of Asia's most vibrant regional organisations.

Malaysia possesses a dynamic modern economy, a multi-ethnic society that comprised people from

across the Asian landmass and a geographic position at Asia's East-West crossroads. Indeed, it is only fitting that a premier conference on the region should be annually held in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur.

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