

# Concert of Asia: How the World Should Deal with the Rise of China

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## **ABSTRACT**

*As the China rise rapidly and aggressively, the world continues to be vulnerable due to the uncertain geopolitical environment and detrimental great powers gesture. This happens roughly at the global stage but more ominous to the regional politics in Asia Pacific. The region needs to spend more effort to deal with the rising China and somehow also required to alter the US primacy in global politics. To assure regional stability and security, this article proposes the model of the 'concert of power' inspired by the Concert of Europe to be carried out in Asia, precisely in Asia Pacific. The Concert of Asia enables more powers, great or mediocre, who are keys to the regional stability to perform checks and balances to one another, not only China itself. There are at least two great powers involve, China and the US. Also, there are few key players in the region that needs to be considered, not so powerful, but still have significant role, namely ASEAN and Japan. With this model, none of great powers could dominate the region and allowing states to secure themselves. Otherwise, great power rivalry is at stake.*

*Keywords: Rising China, Asia Pacific, Concert of Asia*

## **ABSTRAK**

Bangkitnya Tiongkok yang sangat cepat dan cukup agresif membuat dunia menjadi rentan karena ketidak pastian situasi geopolitik dan sikap negara adidaya yang cukup mengintimidasi. Ini terjadi seara umum pada tataran dunia namun lebih berdampak serius

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pada politik kawasan Asia Pasifik. Kawasan ini membutuhkan upaya lebih untuk beradaptasi dengan bangkitnya Tiongkok namun tetap ingin mengubah pola dominasi tunggal Amerika Serikat. Untuk memastikan keamanan dan stabilitas kawasan, tulisan ini menawarkan model 'concert of power' yang terinspirasi oleh *Concert of Europe* untuk diimplementasikan di Asia, khususnya Asia Pasifik. *Concert of Asia* ini memungkinkan lebih banyak kekuatan, adidaya maupun tidak, yang menjadi pemain kunci dalam stabilitas kawasan untuk melakukan *checks and balances* satu sama lain, bukan hanya pada Tiongkok semata. Setidaknya ada dua adidaya yang terlibat, Tiongkok dan AS. Ditambah beberapa pemain kunci di kawasan yang perlu di pertimbangkan, bukan adidaya, namun perannya tetap signifikan, yaitu ASEAN dan Jepang. Dengan model ini, tidak ada adidaya yang bisa mendominasi kawasan dan memberikan kesempatan negara-negara untuk mengamankan dirinya. Jika tidak, rivalitas adidaya akan dipertaruhkan.

Keywords: Kebangkitan Tiongkok, Asia Pasifik, *Concert of Asia*

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## INTRODUCTION

Over thousands of years ago, Asia has been, in many times, a central power of the world. Across the ancient China lied many great dynasties who governed both its domestic and, at least, regional politics through the incorporation of many political influences (Kang 2007, p. 27). In India, Mughal Empire had successfully ruled most of today's South Asia region and supposedly as the greatest Empire across the world at that time (Pardesi 2017, p. 250). Or another example of Ottoman Empire whose border transcend Asia's mainland through part of Europe and Africa. Those examples highlighted the centrality of Asia as a region

where great powers were born. For Asia, this legacy of great power has not ended yet, China is now taking part in present-day global politics to reclaim its status as global power.

In only two decades, China has drawn global attention through its vast development that has successfully brought the country from periphery to the centre of international system. China turns to play significant role in managing world politics and thus any exposure of international issue must entail China as its participating actor (Shambaugh 2013, p.4). Beijing expands its engagement from the very high politics issue of global power rivalry with the US by putting Asia as its backyard (McDougall 2016) or escalate its

influence in India's native environment of South Asia (Rehman 2009), to the low politics issue of soft power such as to unfold Chinese extraordinary public diplomacy of 'peaceful rise' to the world through the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Hunter 2009, p. 373) and its vaccine diplomacy amid the Covid-19 global pandemic.

From China's perspective, its rising is a peaceful process. The term 'Peaceful Rise' itself was first coined in the late 2003 by Beijing's prominent policy adviser Zheng Bijian. This foreign policy believes that China has limited resources and plentiful of challenges that have to be figured out before its economic take-off (see Bijian 2005). The same policy was echoed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 to assert China's placid behaviour that offer a harmonious relation with others and establish a more constructive manner for the maintenance of domestic and regional development, but still with a firm stance of self-determination and national-interest oriented (Zhang 2015: 9). Even if China believes that the country is taking a peaceful path towards development, it should not necessarily mean that the rise of China shall not be understood oversimplified (Buzan 2010, p. 7) as the country in recent years has been seriously showing a very disruptive behaviour to the regional stability.

The rising of China in global politics is seen as precarious by many actors whose lives

have been threatened by the so called assertive foreign policy of China. Avery Goldstein (2003) noticed that the change of China's grand strategy from the Cold War era to the current 'global hegemon' reflects significant changes in the international system. China's advancement of military and economic capabilities put many powerful actors in danger and necessitates them to take further action in response to this power escalation in Asia Pacific region.

The capacity of China as the global power is real as its neighbours now are becoming more aware with China and attempt to readjust their relations with Beijing (Shambaugh 2005, p. 24). Not only at the regional level, China has also circulated its threat to other countries across the globe. At least the US had received China's threat since long time ago and had been preparing well to counter China's aggressive moves in the Asia Pacific, or specifically East Asia. Of course, there are plenty countries might feel worried of the rising China same as the US, but, with all due respect, do they have the capacity to challenge China? Beside the fact that only the US has power on par to China, the interwoven relations between China and the US is also underpinned by the great power diplomacy of Beijing that is straightforwardly addressed Washington to maintain a workable relationship, regardless Washington's

unwavering opposition against Beijing (Yunling & Shipping 2005, p. 50).

Amitav Acharya (1999) introduces 'concert of Asia' in the late 90s as the term to explain Asia as the fighting arena where strong countries are able to participate, namely US, China, Japan and Russia. Acharya's idea has been echoed by Hugh White (2010) who believes that Asia is a stage for the 'concert of powers' which only invites great powers and neglect middle and weak power countries. By this restriction, undoubtedly only limited countries might enter the concert, leaving others as either neutral or bandwagoning.

Since the US has been involved in counterbalancing the rising of China, it does not necessarily mean that the region now is only maintained by two powers. There are possibilities for any parties to join the concert, but the question to ponder is that 'does Asia really need this concert of powers?'. In response to this key question, this essay argues that Asia needs this concert of powers to deal with the China's aggressive strategy in the region. At this point, the essay would explore actors that potentially have a constructive contribution to the concert. For this, we might step in to assess individual factors, such economy and military as key drivers for a particular actor to plausibly join the concert. In the end, we might see that the

'concert of powers' is fundamental to restrain China's ambition at regional and global level.

There is very limited discussion related to Asia and the concert of power, the two prominent researches were composed by Amitav Acharya and Hugh White. Perhaps Hugh White has extraordinarily explored this issue through his number of articles which conclude that if we wish a stable and peaceful region, then the answer is to generate the concert of Asia. White's idea of power sharing in Asia is remarkable, his argument clearly exposes why do Asia really need such model. However, his chapter does not explicitly notice how such model could possibly work in Asia where great powers left are only the US and China. This article intends to fill this gap and explore on how this model work in Asia through the lens of security dilemma and to unfold the untold story of who are the remaining powers involve in this concert.

#### **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

With China and America as our locus of research, this article would examine the chance of Asia, as a region, to have a concert of power through the lenses of security dilemma and concert of power. Concepts used in this article is essentially needed to help reader understand the whole idea this article tries to observe. Both security dilemma and concert of power play their own role to unfold

the phenomenon we are trying to examine, and their existence in this writing is indivisible. Beginning with security dilemma, the concept will reveal the root cause of the escalated conflict in Asia Pacific, particularly the conflict that continue to grow between China and America. The latter concept of concert of power leads the discussion to our core issue of whether it is critical for Asia to have such 'concert of power'.

The dominant paradigm that underpins the whole chapter of this writing laid in the very realist perspective, to be specific, of the structural/neo realism. The analysis rests in the underlying assumptions of anarchic international system and incompatibility of goals among power holders. These two assumptions then inspire Robert Jervis to develop a concept of 'Security Dilemma' in 1978, while the concept was first coined by the German Scholar John Herz in 1951. Jervis imagination of anarchical world was struck by the fact that states were only faced two options while they are in the game: cooperate or defect, a theory developed by J. Rousseau namely 'Stag Hunt' (see Jervis 1978). Jervis (1978, p. 169) describes security dilemma is essentially a strategic model of a state tries to increase its security by decreasing the security of others.

Long and short, this circumstance sets off what so called as 'spiral model' which describes how the interaction between states

that are seeking only security can fuel competition and strain political relations (Glaser 1997, p. 171). According to Jervis in many of his tremendous works on 'Security Dilemma', this spirals of arms races and hostility entrenched in the nature of states' behaviour against their rival. The dilemma begins to occur when a state situated in a conflict and decided to take a further step named High security requirements which disable the state to capitalize common interest due to its established danger of threat (Jervis 1978, p. 175). On the contrary, if a state agrees to cooperate with the aggressor, then Low security requirements avoid this trap, but of course with the payoff from the increasing risk.

Explanation on security dilemma might spend the whole part of the article if we decide to continue to expound the concept. However, to scrutinize our topic, we only need to apprehend the generic argument of security dilemma. Perhaps the most essential of the security dilemma stands upon the state of anarchy in international system. This anarchic setting enables states to compete to pursue the status of hegemon or superpower, but it also left a barbaric climate of international politics where there is no single higher authority to impose international law while incompatible goals rise to be inevitable conflict. Such environment is normal under realism. For scholars, such as Shiping Tang (2009), since

there is no superlative authority in international system, then security dilemma generates a good strategic posture for states to confront their foes but not to strike. Whether states in favour to defect or to cooperate with the aggressor, the strategy remain a defensive model. Robert Jervis (2017, p. 66) in his works note that all unintended and undesired consequences of actions meant to be defensive, echoing what Butterfield (1951, p. 20) says that the dilemma is a condition of absolute predicament which lies in the very geometry of human conflict that inherit the structure of any given episodic tensions. Similar with Jervis and Butterfield, Shiping Tang (2009) argues that security dilemma is a theoretical linchpin of defensive realism, he says that security dilemma makes possible genuine cooperation between states.

Herbert Butterfield (1951, p. 21) argues that the security dilemma develops by exploiting fear as its ultimate source. Fear that exists among states is derived through the threat of others. When aggressor tends to escalate its capacity, its rival is in a threatened situation and attempts to increase its security as response to the aggressor's first move. As arms keep racing, the established system cannot forecast for what is going to happen between these two states, what intentions they are trying to deliver, and thus uncertainty presents (Tang 2009, p. 592). To predict what is going to be really happen after the spiralling

processes is something beyond our ability, but to conclude what ends security dilemma either in the far or near future is the high possibility of war. Jervis (2017, p. 67) sees that security dilemma not only create conflict and tension but also provide the dynamics triggering war.

The orchestrated system of international relations work in the way realists have proposed. Rivalry between China and the US posits security dilemma as a system that works to counterbalance one another's threat. The development of security dilemma as the response of defensive strategy flourishes potential menace of war if the conflict and tension are disregarded and so provide the dynamics triggering war. If so, Asia Pacific is in the peril. Not only to the region but essentially to both China and the US.

To manage this spiralling dilemma, both China and the US must work with the given architecture of international politics through the concert of power. The system enables both countries to take advantage from the security dilemma to checks and balances one another. However, this is not the only way the concert of power works. The involvement of other countries or regional bodies are profoundly needed to help both China and the US to establish an effective structure of check and balance, and to establish a peaceful climate in the status quo. The distribution of power through such multipolar system implies a flat

hierarchy in which no state is unambiguously number one (Wohlforth 2009, p. 54).

The concert of power itself was originally appeared from the European system of power sharing to regulate the rising tension among European major powers. It prevailed from 1813 to 1823 to prevent war in Europe. The system works to prevent all the great powers becoming superior towards others, not to contain a single specific state of achieving hegemonic status. However, it is believed to some historians that the system was built to constrain aggressive powers such as France and Russia to acquire hegemonic status (Sheehan 1996, p. 129). And the result of the system was successful, at least until before the outbreak of Crimean War in 1954. The system brought foundation for Europe's remarkable growth and expansion after the Industrial Revolution (White 2011, p. 86). The concert of power requires mutual understanding of all great powers in the system to lower their intention of being hegemon among others. If any of them exert hegemony, the rest will collectively response to this by rising their arms preventing, or even confronting, the challenger. This collective response then creates a structure where status quo is worth to maintain than turning into a challenger that latter will cost everything.

But does the concert of power prevent war? The answer is an absolute 'no'. Jervis (1978, p. 363) argues that the concert does not

banish the conflict. He brings the example from Europe where Crimean War broke out and ended the system that sustain peace in Europe for couple of decades. What the concert aspired to achieve was the regulation of international structure in Europe. At that time, war was very unlikely to occur because of experiences they inherit. That is the memory of European episodic wars that cost those powers many loses and destruction, it only destroys their security, not enhance it. Therefore, great powers sought to resolve difficulties through diplomacy whenever possible to avoid major war (Sheehan 1996, p. 128). Although the system could regulate such situations, but the use of force is still legitimate when desired as a tool to put sanction to great power who seek hegemony.

If concert of power has something to do with the consortium of major powers and maintenance of international structure through check and balance model, does not it sound similar with the balance of power regime? At glance, the objective of both balance of power and concert of power is similar which is to perform check and balance in the system. However, they are distinct in nature. The concert of powers does not simply mean as the balance of power which an adequately strong state exists to counterbalance the existing power and endeavour to gain supremacy in the region by any means, including war, while in the

'concert of powers' no one is seeking for supremacy, lowering the intensity of competition and likelihood of war (White 2013, p. 81). Balance of power derives from the basic logic of security dilemma where an extreme conflictual pattern takes place and provoke a major power to pursue hegemony while making others less secure as its unintended consequence (Jervis 1992). The natural structure of balance of power then becomes instable and outraged as less secured powers tend to escalate their arms to response the hegemon and provide check and balance. For Kenneth Waltz, the balance of power restrains actors from maximizing their power because that is the essence of international politics (Waltz 1979, p. 127). While concert of power rather gives states incentive to self-restrained (Jervis 1982, p. 369) to preserve peace. Referring to what Fay (Sheehan 1996, p. 123) writes that the concert aims to secure harmony and cooperation by conciliation and by minimising the tendency conflict.

These two concepts might be seen as opposite in some way, one produce escalation of conflict by arms race, the other preserve peace through harmonious arrangement of all major powers. However, these two concepts are interwoven in the sense that each theory plays its own rule in our case study of China-US rivalry. Firstly, the rivalry comes up from the China's spectacular leap on economy and military in the last decades, perceived by the

US as an existential threat for the region, and particularly a menace to the US primacy in global politics. The security dilemma then appear phenomenon while the US attempts to turn pivot to Asia and escalate its military in the region. Of course, as a response, China then increases its military, and it goes way round and round giving the environment of security dilemma exists in Asia Pacific region.

Having understood the strategic climate in the region, the concert of power then have purpose to analyse the possibility whether Asia Pacific, or specifically Asia, needs to contain China or other major powers with the collective actions of all the rest of major powers. The rising escalation of conflict between the US and China posits menace not only to their rival, but also to the stability of the region in Asia Pacific. It is true that both China and the US try to maintain their power as the major power, one seeks to achieve higher status, while the other one tries to preserve its primacy. Here lies the domain of concert of power as our core analysis. With this complexity of geopolitics, Amitav Acharya (1999) defines the 'concert of Asia' is a situation where many powers come into the game trying to influence the surrounding states. Karl Nesselrode has long before foretold the idea that the Asia is a venue for the tournament of the shadows of great powers (Raugh 2004, p. 151), he believed one



day that Asia would be a part of the world where many powers, global and domestic, strive to 'conquest' the region. For 'power' conception, this writing considers economic and military as our main discussion.

However, this concert of power in Asia is nothing like the European. While in Europe the concert was about a consensus of an orchestrated system among great reputable powers, like Austria, Prussia, the Russian Empire and the United Kingdom against Napoleon of French Emporium. While in the Asia, the concert goes slightly different with lesser great powers. Only the US and China are the key great powers that fight in the arena, the rest are those mediocre who feel neither safe if China goes superior nor satisfy enough if the US stand alone as the global hegemon. Although these mediocre seems insignificant in containing China, their role still have to be taken into account.

Before going to the main discussion, it is necessary to define what constitute as 'peace' in this context. In many parts of this manuscript, 'peace' appears as the ideal state of global politics. Peace we use here does not refers to the general definition of the absence of both physical violence and structural conflict (see Galtung 1996). But rather a classical and very common translation of the absence of war as what Quincy Wright (1942) has previously define war as a termination of the condition of peace (Eckhardt 1981). The

work on this classical view has been widely used in many researches across the discipline of international politics, not only works associated with the study of war, but also to the conflict studies that discuss settlement of violent conflict (see Wallensteen 2007) rather than exploring the potential of peace following the conflict (Höglund & Kovacs 2010, p. 371).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research is conducted through qualitative analysis with library research technique where data and evidence is finely observed through previous literatures and updates. For its methods of data analysis, this research develops inductive category construction of qualitative analysis in which data is extracted to produce overarching categories, and further analysis delivers the desired answer as presumed (Sarakantos 2005, p. 305).

As this research is post-positivist in nature, further discussion would assess phenomenon via subjective assessment of the author. However, it does not mean that this research is unacademic or bias in result. Rosenow (1992, p. 8) argues that postmodernism puts social sciences into a subjective discipline where knowledge and truth are subject to tentativeness, relative to time and space. As the consequence, this

research will be more understanding rather than only explaining in nature.

## **RESULT AND ANALYSES**

So, why concert of power is needed? What is going on in Asia? The short answer is the rising of China. Perhaps because the shifting foreign policy in China from Hu Jintao who focused on domestic politics and following the international relations' status quo to Xi Jinping who tend to be more aggressive in the region and ambitious to pursue the status of global power for China (Zhao 2015, p. 379). Under President Xi, Chinese diplomacy had been going so assertive in many ways, as if it attempts to challenge the status quo in the region via the escalation of tension in the South China Sea, making a firm position that the China is no longer comfortable to put this dispute under the table (Yahuda 2013). However, that is not the only move that China is recently taking, China ambition as a regional and global player is manifested through both security and economic means. In economy, China's 'charm diplomacy' allows itself to expand trade and economic partnership and increase engagement with regional institution (Zhang 2015, p. 8) and on the other side, China's investment is omnipresent within Asia through ADB and AIIB (Rudd 2015, p. 1), while its newly AIIB is now become a celebrity in the region due to its sort of

'unconditional' financial aid scheme (Peng & Tok 2016).

Perhaps the most intimidating behaviour of China in the region is its military capability. China military buildup is the genesis of this long conflict, exacerbated by China's assertive diplomacy in the South China Sea; those have created security concern for Asian countries. Over the last decade, China military capability raised 3.6 times to USD 129,000 million for military spending in 2014, becoming the second largest military expenditure next to the US with USD 581,000 million (Yamaguchi 2015, p. 291). In this respect, Yamaguchi argues that the vast disparity of military expenditure of the US and China should not be seen as inferiority in the military, but it must be tantamount, or at least slightly below the US, due to many factors. The point is that China's military spending might be quarter of the US but the terrifying thing is that China spurs its military capacity in just one night and in the morning is ready to take the South China Sea back, challenging many Asian countries that have been in a long hibernating dispute as well as putting regional stability at stake (Zhai 2015, p. 110)

Along with the rising China, more countries are under threat. Some might seek for other super powers' help, and the other might come as a newly self-claimed power. The point is that the concert of power in Asia

is taking place, and it is a necessity to bring equilibrium in the region, to keep China's behaviour away from assertiveness and lock the country from being a regional hegemon.

It is true that by China's rising power, many Asian countries are happy because it might be a hope for the power-shift from the Western-led world to the Eastern/Asian-led world. However, at the same time, the more aggressive the China, the more Asian countries feeling unsafe. Feels worried about China rise beside the new hope it gives is not hypocrisy. Once China's rise is unblocked, then the absolute hegemony power might take place across Asia. Therefore, the need to have this concert is essential. In this respect, many Asian countries informally form an anti-China alliance and send an invitation to the US to begin the concert in tandem with China to counter the expanding influence of China over the region (Zhai 2015, p. 111; Zhao 2015, p. 384). Asian countries are concerned primarily with economic growth, so dealing with China is the best option, but cooperating with the US is indispensable. Therefore, Asian countries see the US and China as a fact of life that must be accommodated, benefitted from, and adjusted to as much as possible (Kang 2007, p. 195)

The current presence of the US in the region is not for the first time. Zhao (2015, p. 383-384) identifies the US involvement in securing Asia Pacific region for, at least, three

times during the history of world politics, namely Cold War, Bush's War on Terror and the last Obama's pivot to Asia Pacific as well as the current Trump administration which expected to continue the pivot. For all those three, Derek McDougall (2016, p. 35) analyses that two of them, Cold War and Pivot to Asia, are manufactured primarily to rebalance China, and USSR primarily in the Cold War. Therefore, by historical bound, the US-China relation is inseparable, and possibly, they are born to rebalance each other. The good thing is that US-China rivalry in the region is a reciprocal relationship for the good of the region, to mutually balance each other and bring regional stability rather than predacious behaviour. Because a peaceful order in Asia Pacific necessitates a balance of power between the US and China to provide checks and balances (Morton 2016, p. 939)

There has been a model of the new great powers relationship that enables these two powers to interact in a more constructive way which might lead to the mutual benefits. However, it begins merely as a rhetorical result because both of their mistrust continues to worsen the regional rivalry (Zhao 2015, p. 377). China is slowly but sure flexing its muscle, becomes more proactive and coercive in the region via the acquisition of the South China Sea (Zhai 2015, p. 100). While the US simultaneously raise its strategic influence by

taking a long-term defence package with the Philippines and giving full support to Japan over Senkaku islands (Zhao 2015, p. 378) as well as increasing arms selling to Beijing's domestic rival, Republic of China's force in Taiwan (Saunders & Bowie 2016, p. 675). The strategy of the US also covers the overseas US' military base in Darwin and Guam which have been upgraded with the advance naval weapon system such as Patriot missiles and Aegis system (Arif 2015, p. 125)

These behaviours give impact to the infringement of the 'big power relationship model' because both parties' perception is incoherent. China perceives itself under the US containment policy because the US always blocks China's moves within the region (Zhao 2015: 382), such as building more integrated and strong economic ties with ASEAN and the exclusion of China in Trans-Pacific Partnerships (Marquina 2013, p. 76). Mistrust also apply within the society, while many Americans suggest China to decrease the conflict tension and its aggressive policies in the region, Chinese scholars believe that the regional stability in Asia highly depends on the US misperception and misleading policy towards China (Feng & He 2016).

Although in the later part you will find that China is somehow pursuing a peaceful development that is to say China really love a stable and non-conflicting environment, but if it comes to national interest, then no peaceful

development would be pursued. As president Xi Jinping ever said that maintaining China national interest is essential and have greater importance than running its *peaceful rise* foreign policy (see Zhang 2015, p. 9). Presiden Xi's realist view create a stimulus to establish a multipolar global system that implies a flat hierarchy in which no state is unambiguously number one (Wohlfort 2009, p. 54). China tries to create such environment to minimise the single state primacy where no power has exclusive claim to leadership, putting this world not solely stand upon America but with another alternative power such as China itself. This perplexing gesture, somewhen could be very aggressive, the other way turns to be very gentle and accommodative. Does not matter what gesture Beijing tries to display, the America's unwavering option is obvious, to block any China's move.

It is necessary for the US to join the concert, not only because of the invitation of many Asian countries and the need to protect its allies in the region but also because the US is willing to lock China's position at the regional level economically and strategically. It is true that the US has no direct link in South China Sea's dispute, the most salient issue that requires the US presence in the region, but it does have indirect interest over security and trade issues (Hossain 2013). Economically, the US aims to secure Asia as

its potential market for its business because of its significant growth, especially to its Asian allies, but the rising China undermines the US trade relations with many Asian countries due to the cheaper goods and faster shipping. Derek McDougall (2016, p. 35) identifies that the US hides economic motive which is to rebalance China's position in Asia in order to secure its trade and economic partnership with Asian countries by making a secure shipping access through military deployment as well as to coerce China from monopolising regional economic activities. Faigenbaum (2017) asserts the same argument by showing the data of the decreasing US trade in Asia and the US more assertive policy to both thwarting China's rising economy and challenging its monopolistic trade in the region.

In political and strategic military context, it is obvious that the US is attempting to hold China to its current position, deterring the country to moving forward into a more advanced status. For instance, the US policy of freedom of navigation is not merely to assure everyone's safety, but to secure the US trade and water transportation (Hosain 2013, p. 108). 'Freedom of navigation' is a legal framework for the US to set up naval forces patrolling around the maritime, showing to Asian countries that the US desires for a stable region. Concurrently, the US provides an unimpeded water way for its trade to Asia

vice versa. The US in this respect is an endeavour to shut down the China's monopoly over the South China Sea waterways and strategic ports that might speed up China's economic growth and maritime security (Morton 2016) shutting down the monopolisation of China over the South China Sea's maritime access.

More strategically, the US intends to deter the China nuclear capacity, as well as its ally North Korea (Mishra 2014, p. 59). This issue becomes critical both for Asia Pacific countries because only China, North Korea and the US possess nuclear weapons, while among them, only China and North Korea have geographical proximity with other Asian countries, and fortunately, their relationship is as close as 'lips and teeth' (Moore 2008, p. 2). This strong relationship, along with rising China, brings instability to Asia Pacific as a region, moreover to the US. If North Korea is considered as a politically unstable country (Marquina 2013, p. 73), then it is plausible if North Korea seeks to attack the US military base in Guam once it gets the support from China as its closest friend. Both China and North Korea possess a significant threat of nuclear weapons against the US, for this, the US has to mitigate first by setting up a concert of powers in Asia to put down the escalating tension between these two best friends via deterring China in the region (Christensen 2015, p. 104-105).

Both political and economic issues interplay within the US strategy in Asia to secure its interests and expand its influence under the narrative of ‘balancing the rise of China’ which is willing to contain China rather than balancing (Kang 2007, p. 189). The increasing US strategic partnership in Asia brings a relatively calm but convincing strategy for the US to balance China and maintain its influence over Asian countries. The US’ strategic partnerships contain comprehensive cooperation from developmental aid to security issues, e.g. joint military training, but with less binding commitment compared to ones who have formal ties to US alliance. By doing so, Asian countries are formally free from hedging with the US (Parameswaran 2014, p. 264). This smart move does not cause a significant escalation of conflict in the region and still sufficient enough to hold China’s position in the region. For the US, Asia is manageable, China is contained, and the US itself is maintaining its hegemony in the region, this benefit could have been any better than other option.

The relationship between the US and China dissimilar with what popularly known in history as the Cold War. We might presume Cold War pattern applies in today’s US-China relationship due to conflictual relation and deterrent model these two countries attempt to carry out. Whereas they likely to exercise

security dilemma, trying vigorously to convince their adversary that they are second to none through the robust show of power. The distinction of this model with the Cold War lies in the intention of both hegemons. Jervis (2001) identifies that Cold War is no like security dilemma because both sides should have been preoccupied with defending themselves rather than offensively threatening one another. While the US and USSR were terrified with the situation, they chose to settle the conflict through a peaceful mean. Yet in Asia Pacific, no one seems to give up and seek a peaceful conflict settlement. Instead of withdrawing themselves from the deadly conflict like Cold War, the US and China insist to display their capacity.

There would be only balancing if only the US and China play in the game. To be a lively concert, Asian needs more powers to include in the stage to make a harmonious orchestra against China. This essay would suggest Japan and ASEAN as the emerging power in the region that are potentially become dominant regional players in the concert. The following exploration would succinctly explain both Japan and ASEAN strategy to become potential regional players, but though the debate remains still is whether these two entities are ready enough to face China. Besides making a well-orchestrated concert, these two regional players are also

vulnerable with the rising China and presence of the US in the region. Their existence within the concert is not merely to invigorate the concert, but far beyond, they need to survive amid the great power rivalry. They can't let China go superior and ferocious, otherwise they will fall under Chinese control or suffer abusive treatment. Vice versa, they won't allow the single power, like the US, go abroad far from home just to dominate the region it does not belong to, so to endorse China is essential, both strategic and economic.

First, ASEAN is holding the most strategic position because it might be a venue for talk and pursue a peaceful dispute settlement over South China Sea's disputant and the US as involving external actor (Hossain 2013). The various political preferences within ASEAN members and the body's non-alignment policy provide a positive environment for discussion of this issue. Members of close ties with China, such as Myanmar and Vietnam, and those leaning on the US, like Singapore and Philippines, give this regional body a neutral but determining position.

More importantly, ASEAN has a close relationship with both China and the US via the two distinct cooperation, economy and strategic military respectively. ASEAN as one of China's key trade partnerships and the US' non-ally strategic partner might significantly bridge the two super powers interests and

misperceptions which result to the maintenance of regional stability. ASEAN put themselves as neutral, neither hedging nor challenging both the US and China's presence in the region because they do not want to sink in the conflict of the two great powers, but they do realise that this play-safe mode would benefit them in many ways. ASEAN, by default, rejects any dominance of a single player in the region, which is why ASEAN indirectly invite the US to balance China but still manage a good economic relationship with China to avoid further absolute dominance of China or the US if the situation turns around (Acharya 1999, p. 86). We should not imagine the powerful ASEAN would rise to claim the throne, but the great power they possess embedded within the neutral position they hold which enable them to play in the two sides simultaneously as well as building a stable region through internal consolidation (IISS 2016), controlling trade relation with China and bridge the US and China relation. For instance, Indonesia in strategic military partnership is undoubtedly leaning on the US capability, it includes joint military training (Murphy 2010, p. 377) or even deployment of mobile military power through the dummy military assistance, such as US maritime patrol in Malacca Strait (see Percival 2005). On the other side, though Indonesia fears of China's assertive military strategy, President Joko Widodo still insist to

expand Indonesia-China economic cooperation through what they call as a more comprehensive partnership, merely to fulfil President Widodo's ambition on Indonesia's gigantic economy and strategic priorities (Priyandita 2019).

Japan also holds a critical position in the concert. Unlike ASEAN, Japan would run a more strategic and active role in balancing China's strategy in Asia, if only Japan is fearless enough to release itself from the US' tight relationship. As White (2013, p. 85) suggests, that the concert would be livelier if Japan considers being independent. This essay sees that Japan is attempting to increase its capacity in against China and possibly able to be an independent regional power challenging China. For example, Japan intensifies activities surrounding Senkaku islands as a mitigation of China's assertive movement (Yamaguchi 2015, p. 290), of course with a confirmed support from the US (Zhao 2015, p. 378). The other example is the very competitive influence at the regional level between China and Japan in many key economic forums such as ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and East Asian Summit (Veronica 2014). For Japan is clear, the message it's trying to send to Beijing is that Japan is not badly afraid of China's rise.

More interestingly, Japan under Abe administration is willing to withdraw its constitution partially, explicitly to the notion

of the US protection over Japan and the restriction to establish its military power. If Abe's proposal is accepted, then Japan is going to have its military power and be slightly independent from the US. Analysts believe, though it is still debatable, that the proposal would open access for Japan to acquire nuclear weapons in order to rebalance China and its ally North Korea (Marquina 2013, p. 78), putting Japan as a regional power that should be reckoned not only economic, but also in strategic military affairs.

Japan's relationship with China does not always end in broke up. Veronica (2014) identifies that their relationship is something unique because they are very interdependent to one another, notably in economic sector. China has long become Japan's number one trade partner, surpassing its closest ally such the US. On diplomatic space, improvement has been made to reduce tension between the two countries even only through inducement speech at many multilateral stages where they discuss principal issues such as South China Sea and Senkaku Island dispute (Przystup 2016).

The complex relation of ASEAN and Japan with China do not solely be translated into a destructive cooperation, in some ways, they cooperate constructively. Positive cooperation reflects the needs of both ASEAN and Japan to China, vice versa. This



gesture conveys that both ASEAN and Japan do not really mean to oppose and even to hurt China. But what they really need is to confine China's assertive diplomacy in the region and to impede China becoming the hegemon in the region. Therefore, to call out the US is essential in order to help them dealing with such condition. Yet they truly putting a hope on the US, regional countries assume that submitting to one hegemon is unfavourable. Then to cooperate with China is essential to provide alternative superpower to follow, the hegemon which more Asian than the US.

Having seen the US strong involvement in Asia, the ASEAN strategic position and Japan's awakening, projecting a war in the Asia as the result of the concert of powers is justifiable. However, justifiable does not necessarily mean about to happen. The concert of powers works simply as deterrence made by many actors, preferring to have a judicious compromise rather than unrestrained competition (Gordon 2012, p. 39). Besides, China's ability to shape regional security is relatively limited because of its strong reliance on economic prowess and the inconsistent foreign policy over administrations (Zhang 2015, p. 7). This is why, though China is aggressive, it produces narrative of 'peaceful development' attempting to depress the rising tension of conflict in the region because China itself understands of its capacity (Zhang 2015).

Chinese scholars believe that it is unlikely for China to surpass the US in the next ten years (Christensen 2015, p. 63; Feng & He 2016, p. 707). This view is somehow controversial as some scholars, such David Shambaugh (2013, p. 14), conclude that Chinese mega-economy will eventually surpass the US at least by 2025. Of course, this is not only a figment of their imagination while we could identify an indisputable evidence of trade war between the US and China as the manifestation of the US' fear of Chinese mega-economy. However, optimists would say that the Beijing's grand strategy aims to secure and reshape a security, economic and political environment that is conducive to China's development, not the one that trigger market uncertainty (Yunling & Tang 2005, p. 48). So peaceful development with rhetorical behaviour would be the best option.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, a concert of powers in Asia Pacific would not trigger a war, and its fundamental goal is to block China's assertive strategy and keep China away as singular hegemony in the region. This essay considers that the single power existence is bad for the regional dynamics because it might generate a more assertive and intimidating environment toward other countries (see Zhao 2015). The US in this situation might be an

equal power to balance the China's position, but admittedly, the US is an external actor. It is highly demanding for ASEAN and Japan to take a further role in the region as the true-blood of Asians. Fortunately, these two actors are playing in the direction that this essay has suggested, be a strong neutral party for ASEAN and act as a real power country for Japan. All these powers are able to hold China's position in military and economic sectors by making the concert of power livelier.

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