

Review - The China Choice

Written by Huw McKay

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HUW MCKAY, NOV 26 2012

The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power

By: Hugh White

Collingwood, Victoria: Black Inc., 2012

Hugh White's *The China Choice* is an extraordinary work. A book whose central argument precipitates immediate public responses from Australia's four most recent ex Prime Ministers, the incumbent Foreign Minister and two of his three most immediate successors, is clearly no ordinary offering.

White's book unashamedly asks the wholly inconvenient questions, the answers of which will define the present age. He also attempts to provide answers via a path of relentless logic flowing from a set of transparently stated assumptions. It is accordingly an invaluable contribution to the policy debate within and across nations in the Asia and Indo-Pacific – and further afield. Not all will agree with White's assumptions and the solutions he derives from them. In that regard, he has opened the debate in a most productive fashion (and the policy community owes him a profound debt for doing so) but he has not simultaneously closed it. There is still some work to do.

White's title and sub-title admirably convey his central prescriptions for the path for Great Power relations in the

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Asian region in the twenty first century. America must make a choice very soon regarding China; and that choice ought to be to relinquish primacy to share power with China in a concert of Asia.

White's argument is multi layered, but at its core are two basic observations. The first is that the rise of China's economy, coupled to the acute Chinese sense of national self worth, represents a force that has already matured to a point that is incompatible with any status below 'Great Power'. The second is that the traditional basis for American primacy in Asia has been undermined by China's vastly increased ability to deny the American navy access to Chinese waters. These points are balanced by the argument that China is in no position to achieve primacy in Asia in its own right, even in the case of American withdrawal. White feels that from this starting point, the organic path for Sino-US relations is one of growing strategic rivalry with non-trivial risks of damaging, unscripted escalation. A pre-emptive effort to build a lasting détente is therefore in order – a concert of Asia – and the United States must relinquish its longstanding objective of primacy in Asia to bring it about.

To get to this point, White attempts to convince the reader that a) China's economic rise is not a forecast subject to potential disappointment, it is a reality b) America does not have to be in absolute decline for a genuine challenge to its primacy to emerge c) Kantian notions of a self reinforcing relationship between economic interdependence and stable power relations are a valuable check against explicit rivalry, but they are not to be relied upon where the relevant players both exhibit such acute senses of their own exceptionalism.

How well does White succeed in these tasks? On the first and second questions, that of China's economic rise and on the non-essential nature of American decline to accommodate a genuine great power competition, he leans heavily on the compelling arithmetic of population and productivity levels per worker: given population differentials, China must only reach one quarter of US productivity levels to equal the US economy in size. Following an exposition of the data as it stands, White attempts to systematically address the major stylized positions that refute China's ability to compete economically with the United States. There is nothing in this section of the book to surprise the specialist. Equally there is nothing to take great exception to. One suspects that White adopted a small target strategy on the economic narrative, which is outside his usual metier, to prevent the debate getting 'bogged down' prior to the introduction of his other assumptions and the important conclusions derived there from.

White's argument that political and/or nationalistic impulses will at some point override material imperatives and drive escalations of rivalry contrary to each nation's commercial interests will convince some – but not all. White's position is basically that "Ultimately, faith in the power of interdependence boils down to faith in the power of money to trump other emotions and motivations. That is a risky proposition" (p. 55). Further, "... there is always something a little strange about the assumption, implicit in the interdependence argument, that our economic desires will suppress the urge to strategic and political competition when our desire to avoid the horrors of war will not" (p. 56).

While the historical record on these points is chequered, with the *belle époque's* descent into world war perhaps the most striking example in White's favour, imperfect historical analogies are not a sound basis for effective forecasting. White also tells us that "... most often people see it as shameful to put economic concerns first when issues of power and status are engaged" (p.54). That is of course opinion, not fact, and therefore it may or may not convince. The most recent illustration of a major choice of this nature – America's early 21st century engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan – were certainly motivated by nationalism. But the American people were not asked to bear an economic sacrifice to finance this nationalist concern – taxes were actually reduced substantially over the course of the decade. So the electorate was never asked to balance a contemporaneous economic-nationalistic trade-off. Does the failure of the US administration to ask the US people to pay, even for initially popular conflicts, hint that nationalist wars are too expensive because – ashamed or not – people will put money first? And if so, would not one's confidence in the interdependence argument be strengthened?

Looking at the book from a literary perspective, the argument is built up through meticulous phraseology, in a style that is bureaucratic without being terse. One hesitates to say it is aphoristic in parts – as it is not strictly so – but at times the impression is that one is consuming kernels of wisdom dripping with philosophical import. Early career public servants seeking a 'voice' that will both persuade and lead their elected masters could do worse than to adopt White's 'algorithmic-bureaucratic' style as a model. Algorithmic in the sense that White is relentless with his 'if-and-or-

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then' logic; bureaucratic in the sense that the work is systemic, thorough, hedging and precise.

White eschews obvious attempts at rhetoric, but he has utilised a novel literary device to conclude the book. The final chapter is the text of a hypothetical speech by an American President – given the urgency that White ascribes to the US' China choice, one can only assume he envisages that it would be delivered by the incumbent – outlining a new approach in Asia that aims to promote a stable order for the region where China will be henceforth regarded as the equal of the United States. The text of the speech is masterful and conveys a command of the language of political persuasion to which few can aspire.

Finally, from the Australian perspective, the nuances of the argument have been a little lost in the flurry of public debate on the deep questions White has raised. White does not argue that Australia must immediately choose between the friendship its security ally and cordial relations with its main trading partner. Unfortunately, a great deal of commentary on the book in the Australian media seems to assume that the title refers to Australia and not to the United States. What White does say is that Australia will have to choose if the Sino-US rivalry escalates and one or other of the two rivals explicitly asks us to. As former Australian ambassador to China Professor Ross Garnaut has remarked, White's book "... helps Australians to move beyond today's sentiment and wishful thinking" (Back cover matter). Australia, like other countries in the region that have benefited from the geopolitical stability sponsored by American primacy in Asia, while simultaneously being lately drawn into China's economic orbit, has no wish to be confronted by such a fateful choice. White's solution, that a regional concert structure accommodated by America's discretionary relinquishing of their position of primacy is the only sure road to avoiding this unpalatable outcome, will be debated intensely throughout the region as a serious proposition from a credible thinker. With *The China Choice* having recently been released in a mandarin edition, it will be fascinating to see how White's analysis is received by the intelligentsia in Beijing and the newly minted CCP leadership. No less fascinating will be the response to the White thesis in Delhi, Tokyo and Jakarta.

To conclude, *The China Choice* is an extremely important book that tackles a question whose importance cannot be exaggerated. No serious thinker on global and Asian regional security matters can afford to be ignorant of its central thesis. *The China Choice* is a formidable work that is destined to resonate for decades to come.

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