



**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

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## WHAT THE ASIA-PACIFIC WANTS FROM THE US-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

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The US-China relationship unfolds across many regions, but the Asia-Pacific is the main stage. In fact, the region's stability, or not, is deeply connected with the state of the relationship between these two major powers.

Over the past year, my colleagues at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) and I have engaged with experts and policymakers from across the region to understand their expectations of the United States and China. Their responses are diverse, at times contradictory, and resistant to generalisation. But, certain themes emerge clearly regarding the roles that they hope the United States and China will play in the Asia-Pacific.

### **The US role**

Perceptions of this vary. Some, like the current South Korean government, see the dominant role of the United States as a positive force in the region. Others, such as India, welcome US presence and influence for its ability to contain China, thereby allowing India to grow and help create a multipolar region where no single state is strong enough to constrain another.

Many, however, are more ambivalent. For instance, Indonesia resists US attempts to dominate the region, seeing it as a constraint on Jakarta's ability to freely choose and pursue its own economic policies. Meanwhile, Pacific Island states see US pursuit of primacy at the expense of China as a dangerous distraction from more urgent security concerns, such as climate change.

## **China's role**

As for China's role, several states across the region, such as Pakistan in South Asia, Cambodia in Southeast Asia, and Fiji in the Pacific, welcome China's economic influence but seek to balance it through their relationships with other players, to ensure that China does not dominate.

The Asia-Pacific views China's claims to peaceful rise and desire for a multipolar region with two types of skepticism. The first type, represented by US allies and partners, stems from the belief that China is not acting in good faith. China's assertiveness over the Taiwan issue and other territorial disputes is purported as evidence of this.

The second type of skepticism is represented by regional actors with weaker security ties to the United States. They accept that China might be engaging in good faith, but believe that it does not necessarily have an understanding or consideration of its partners' interests. For example, the Pacific Island states welcome Chinese infrastructure investments, but criticise them as often being ill-suited for local conditions, such as hospitals built without air-conditioning, or considerate of their environmental concerns.

## **Multipolarity over major power dominance**

Some regional actors seek a multipolar regional order, one that is free of the dominance of either China or the United States. However, their ideas of multipolarity are different. India, for example, prefers to become one of the poles itself, and also supports the emergence of more such states in the Asia-Pacific. Indonesia sees itself as a pole through the collective strength of ASEAN. South Korea, according to some opposition politicians tends to be strong advocates of a multipolar region that enhances the country's strategic autonomy.

Meanwhile, the Pacific Island states do not necessarily reject the idea of Chinese or US influence in their region, but prefer a managed, cooperative détente rather than a competitive relationship that encourages militarisation and distracts from core Pacific interests and concerns.

## **Recommendations to match words and deeds**

There is no common preference for how to best maintain regional stability, and actors often express one preference while their actions seem to suggest another. The United States claims it wants to maintain a dominant role in the region, yet its domestic politics sends mixed signals to regional states. China claims it does not want a dominant role, but its actions in Taiwan, in South China Sea, and with India suggest otherwise. Regional actors like ASEAN claim they want a multipolar system based on consensus, but do not seem prepared, nor capable to assume a role in shaping such a system.

It would behove all actors, from the major powers to smaller regional players, to articulate what kind of region they wish to live in and how to align their actions with that vision.

The United States, which frames its relationship with China as strategic competition, should show greater strategic restraint and make efforts to reassure China that mutual benefits are possible.

China, which rejects the framing of strategic competition, needs to improve its credibility as an honest player and the signaling of its strategic intent. It must take seriously the deep suspicions and apprehension that exist throughout the region regarding its intentions.

If multipolarity is what ASEAN seeks, it needs to better leverage the collective power of its members to persuade great power acceptance of multipolarity.

There is no single recommendation that can ensure regional stability in the Asia-Pacific, but dialogue and diplomacy that facilitates clear communication of intent and credible political commitments are certainly desirable and feasible.

*The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.*

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## ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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