

AusCSCAP: 51st Meeting, 12 June 2019

University House, Canberra

Hegemony, Power, Prestige

What do major powers want, and how do they seek to achieve it?

Summary Record

A group of strategists and scholars met at ANU under AusCSCAP auspices (see separate agenda and list of Australian/overseas participants) to discuss the thesis that *prestige* – or how a country is perceived internationally - is the quality at the heart of a workable international system. Hard power (military and economic), and soft power, are of course essential prerequisites, but prestige is still coveted simply because it translates hard power effortlessly into influence, allowing powerful states to achieve their aims without brandishing their hard power assets.

Proponents of this thesis argued that history had shown that once a nation had developed to the point where its power was something like 80 percent of the major hegemon's power, then contestation resulted. They saw little evidence that states and their leaders had progressed to a point where such challenges would not arise, and certainly in the case of the two major powers of Asia - the United States and China - this historic pattern was again unfolding.

Others disagreed, claiming that many factors were changing the historical pattern. While all participants recognised the widespread benefits that had flowed from the US-guided, liberal rules-based order that had prevailed since 1945, and while they noted that China's rapid rise was causing consternation, some felt it was a nonsense to claim that China's rise could be characterized as a quest for international prestige. In under two generations China had developed from a poor and backward nation to a global, or at least regional, hegemon. A large proportion of its people (over 300 million) had been lifted out of poverty and joined the middle-class. China had done this through a combination of its own efforts and drawing upon, and learning from, others. Such action it could be argued, was not motivated by the pursuit of externally-conferred prestige; it was the result of the concerted determination and pride of its people to better themselves. If this was a cause for concern or discomfort - because a non-western development model was succeeding - then that could not be helped; but exportability and prestige accumulation were not the motives.

Yet others stressed that prestige must be conferred - unlike military power, you cannot create it for yourself. Prestige is conferred on one by others - it is earned, not forced. It cannot be made to order simply by accumulating and exercising hard power assets - whether military or economic. Prestige is an ephemeral phenomenon - if power is perceived to be used unwisely or injudiciously, then national prestige can suffer enormously. The observation was made that China had a long history of uncontested regional power and pre-eminence but was still feeling its way in the novel contemporary environment where several regional actors wielded significant power.

The centrality of the United States and China to any debate on great power rivalry in the region encouraged comments from others. One participant argued that China was demonstrably pushing an alternative development model to that of the prevailing western-based liberal economic order. The terrestrial and maritime silk-roads, assembled under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), were largely a modern-day version of China's past approach of extracting fealty and tribute from communities on its periphery. The BRI was certainly meant to extend Chinese power and prestige beyond its historic limits. Others felt that given the depth of the US alliance system in the region, the extent of its hard power, the appeal of its soft power, and the magnitude of its accumulated national and regional capital stock, the US would not be replaced as the preferred hegemon for a very long time. Nobody questioned the assertion that under the current Trump Administration real doubts had emerged as to the US's commitment to the region, and several suggested that traditional allies were doing the US a major disservice by not drawing attention to the negative impact of its current posture and policy settings. One US scholar conceded that while the American people could currently not accept the fact that their country was no longer the global hegemon, it did appear that elements of 'middle America' had embraced Trump's apparent rejection of American 'exceptionalism', and were no longer prepared to accept the burden and cost of global leadership. In such a situation, it was little wonder that a challenge had arisen to US status and prestige.

Debate followed as to what this turbulent outlook might mean for the middle and smaller powers in the region. It was proposed that several regional countries with a culture and society more akin to China than the west, viewed the China model in quite favourable terms, while others were less enamoured. Some (but not all) thought there were emerging divisions in ASEAN which testified to this cleavage. Indonesia, it was suggested, was ambivalent toward China - with a major distinction being drawn between the average Indonesian's favourable regard for Chinese acumen, work-ethic and industry, and their attitude to the nation of China itself. Japan was cleverly hedging between its alliance relationship with a wavering supporter, and its chequered history with China. Japan was thought to be enhancing its 'good international citizenship' credentials by carefully calming and managing the excesses of the Trump

Administration, and this was seen as a most effective way for a major middle power to build regional and global prestige.

India was also seen as a major 'prestige' player. Under the Modi Administration, India, soon to be the world's largest country by population, was walking a careful line, always aware of the rise of China and its potential to dominate the region, and cognizant of any displays of outward aggression. At the same time India is trying to build its own prestige through other means, primarily through realizing the power of its people.

The 'power as prestige' argument was seen to be particularly evident in the case of Russia. No other country in the past 30 years had suffered such a catastrophic loss of prestige. Putin has strong domestic support because he is seen to be skilled in clawing back at least some 'reputation for power' through the assertion of hard power on Russia's periphery – Crimea, Syria and the Ukraine – but judiciously enough to preclude an overt western backlash. It was also pointed out that, while Russia could still be considered a global power in respect of its nuclear arsenal (unlike China), its faltering economy and its lack of appealing soft power, made significant gains in prestige improbable in the near term gain.

While the thesis that prestige is effectively the currency of the international system rests largely on historical precedent, a number of participants felt that the trade war and other factors were changing the dynamics of international relations and world order. Circumstances in the second decade of the 21st century were quite different to any former historical situation. The explosion in technology (IT, social media, fake news, impact of robotics, mega-data, alternative energy, climate change, smart dust, etc.) and the future impact of these developments on society, could be expected to render redundant traditional approaches to prestige accumulation. Trade itself was becoming a 'weaponised' commodity, and the contest for supremacy was now being fought out, not on a battle-field, but with goods and services, investment and exchange. As for the current trade war between the US and China – if one hegemon loses, then its prestige will be enormously reduced. The hearts and minds of the future are not going to be won by 'the hand that beats the drum of war but by the hand that cradles the iPhone'.

Most at the seminar agreed that prestige matters, and could be seen as an essential component of a helpful intellectual framework for anticipating how states will behave and predicting long-term aspirations and outcomes. Nonetheless the discussion prompted two further observations. First, to what extent could prestige be examined as a driver operating independently of power calculations? The work of Ned Lebow, for instance, has portrayed the search for prestige partly in this manner. Secondly, to what extent is it necessary to possess a serious degree of historical/cultural knowledge in

order to assess how one society or another might define ‘prestige’ – or simply ‘national objectives’?

The seminar discussion conceded that the United States would find it ‘psychologically’ difficult to share primacy with another power. Some of the commentary on Russia also included consideration of that country’s historic anxieties and ambitions. The question then followed, does it make sense to analyse current US-China relation solely in terms of ‘established power v rising power’ dynamics, setting aside civilizational factors?

The implications of the discussion of prestige for Australia were somewhat problematic. Prestige, some thought, is less important to a state like Australia, where a ‘pragmatic’ foreign policy mindset, aimed more at influence than prestige, is a practical necessity.

It was suggested that DFAT’s Foreign Policy White Paper of 2018 had set a trajectory whereby we should invest more in the instruments of diplomacy and build a deeper and more durable understanding of the neighbouring cultures and societies with which we interact. Washington at the moment was wandering from formulae to formulae, deluding itself as to the efficacy of its foreign policy, and in doing so squandering the high moral ground of its accumulated prestige. It could be argued that it is up to smaller and middle powers such as Australia to use quiet diplomacy and influence to point this out and help ensure that the United States remains as a powerful actor committed to the stability and fairness of the region.