

Working Paper

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Dancing with elephants: How to engage with major powers in new context

Discussion Outline Paper

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1. The post-Cold War era has just ended. New era started to take shape

+ We are entering a totally new era with new strategic configuration and characteristics. We do not know how to name the new era since it is still evolving, but some of its key features have been identified:

- The most important characteristic of this new era is the increasing competition among major powers, centering most around the US-China-Russia.
- A lot of mechanisms, rules of the games have been revised to fit into new context
- The competition has just started and it will last for long; other players around the world has to be adaptive to the newly emerging context.
- The competition will be “zero-sum”, not “win-win” in the Asia Pacific region. There will be a single-power, not double-power domination.

+ Three areas of new competition among major powers: (i) Strategic competition; (ii) Economic and trade competition; and (iii) Technological competition. Five domains of competition: Land, Air, Sea, Cyber and Space with more frequent emphasis on Sea and Cyber. Nature of competition has changed quite a lot with less and less traditional factors.

+ The rise of populism in many countries, along with strongmen in the US, China, Russia, etc, make the current world situation even worse and most unpredictable since the end of the Cold War.

2. New strategic posture is emerging in the Asia Pacific region

+ Since President Xi Jinping came to power, domestically he put forwards “Chinese Dreams” with two centennial goals. Externally, he proposed a BRI, later becoming a grand strategy over the whole region.

+ Similarly, after President Donald Trump came to power, domestically, he proposed “America first”. His administration also worked out NSS, NDS and IPS, redefining their strategic goals and interests. Externally, the IPS is said to counter-balance China’s BRI in the Asia Pacific region.

+ After the US withdrew from the INF, a new strategic posture is now emerging in the region. The fear of deepened competition is deepened with the US intentions to deploy short and mid-range ballistic missiles in the region.

+ ASEAN member countries have been considered as sitting right at the center of this competition. (Maps to be shown for illustration)

3. How to better engage with major powers?

The region has been engaging with these external powers for decades. What they need now when new competition arising are some adjustments to be adaptive to new rivalry. Regionally, countries need to redefine and confirm their engaging principles, rules of the game, their goals as well as engaging mechanism, etc. Bilaterally, capacity building and a good engaging foreign and security policy are of utmost important in facing with new rivalry among major powers.

Principles: Open, Inclusive, rule-based and mutually beneficial

Objectives: Peace, Stability and long-term development/prosperity

Engaging Measures: Dialogues, Confidence building, Conflict prevention

Mechanisms: Both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms mobilized. ASEAN centrality is of utmost importance.

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