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A REPLY TO HUGH WHITE

Who will lead Asia

Unlike the big powers, Asean is acceptable to all the stakeholders

By TOMMY KOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

AUSTRALIAN academic Hugh White penned a thought-provoking essay in The Straits Times' By Invitation column last week: "Time for a small meeting of big powers" (ST, Sept 19, 2012).

His central thesis is that great changes are taking place in the Asia-Pacific region which will lead to a new order. He thinks this cannot be achieved through the various Asean-led institutions such as the East Asia Summit (EAS). He argues that what we need is a "concert of Asia" consisting of the United States, China, Japan and India.

Concert of Asia

TO WHITE, who is professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University and a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute, we face a choice. He wrote: "Would we rather be in the room when the great powers fail to agree on how best to manage their relations, or out of the room when they succeed in agreeing?"

Concert of powers

WHITE is not the first Australian to propose that Asean's centrality in regional institutions be replaced by a small group of powerful countries. A few years ago, there was another Australian proposal to replace Asean with a "concert of powers" consisting of eight countries: the US, China, Japan, Russia, India, Indonesia, Australia and South Korea. The proposal was opposed by Asean and failed to gather support.

I am against White's proposal for the following reasons.

An antiquated idea

FIRST, the idea that the destiny of our region is to be decided by a directorate of one superpower and three major powers is an antiquated one which belongs to another time and another century.

In the bad old days, before the United Nations was founded, the big countries would meet to decide on the fate of other states. National boundaries were arbitrarily redrawn, territories were exchanged and some small countries simply disappeared from the map of the world.

We now live in a world where countries, big and small, demand a seat at the table and a say on their collective future. It is a world in which power has to be exercised in consonance with laws, conventions and principles. We live in an imperfect world, but it is not a lawless world.

Gang of Four and Perm Five

SECOND, White argues that when the four big powers meet exclusively among themselves, they will succeed in solving the problems of the region. He adduces no evidence to support his argument. We can, however, draw an analogy between White's gang of four and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The Council consists of the five victorious powers of 1945 - the US, China, Russia, France and Britain, which have permanent seats and the power of veto, and 10 non-permanent

members.

Do the Perm Five have a good track record of being able to deal with threats to international peace and security? The record is a mixed one. Very often, the five permanent members of the Security Council are unable to agree - for example, on Syria. I suspect that White's gang of four will be no more successful than the five permanent members of the Security Council.

Inclusiveness is a strength

THIRD, White argued that the inclusiveness of forums such as the EAS is a "fatal weakness". He wrote: "The inclusiveness of the EAS or other large-scale forums means there are too many people at the table for serious great-power negotiations to take place."

I would point out that great- power negotiations usually take place bilaterally. I would also point out that in our region, there is a deficit of trust between and among the major powers. The US and China, China and Japan, and China and India do not trust each other. Left to themselves, they are very unlikely to be able to agree on a shared vision and a road map for the region. The inclusion of Asean and other small and middle powers changes the atmospherics of the group. As a trusted facilitator, Asean is often able to forge a consensus and reconcile the competing interests of the various parties. This is a role which the major powers cannot play, individually or collectively.

Asean+3

FOURTH, there is a heightened state of tension between Japan and South Korea and between China and Japan. Fortunately, they belong to a group called Asean+3. Asean takes no sides in the disputes between those three countries. Asean is, however, a stakeholder. It is, therefore, able to urge them to exercise restraint and to remind them of the substantial interests which they share in common and the inseparable link between North-east Asia and South-east Asia.

Tension and conflict in North- east Asia will adversely affect South-east Asia and the rest of the region. Asean is, therefore, able to play a helpful role in regional affairs by building confidence, reducing misunderstanding and mutual suspicion, and nurturing a culture of cooperation. Asean is a force for peace in the region.

Weakness as strength

FIFTH, the central role which Asean plays in regional affairs attracts both envy and puzzlement. According to the textbooks and the Realist theory of international relations, the strong should lead the weak and not the other way around. By this logic, the region should be led by the gang of four and not Asean. What these critics do not understand is the special characteristics of our region.

Let us use the analogy of choosing someone to drive the regional bus. Japan may agree to let the US drive the bus, but China will never agree. Nor will China agree to let India drive the bus, and vice versa. The only driver which the US, China, Japan and India will agree upon is Asean.

George Yeo, Singapore's former foreign minister, was right when he said that Asean's weakness is paradoxically its strength. Asean is acceptable to all the stakeholders. Asean has a good track record of prudence, pragmatism and good judgment in driving the regional bus. However, for Asean to continue to be accepted by all the stakeholders, it must remain united and neutral. This is the most important challenge facing Asean's leaders when they meet at the EAS in Phnom Penh in November.

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By Invitation features leading writers and thinkers from Singapore and the region.