

Defend the 'rules-based order' in Asia at any cost?

By **Hugh White**

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Link: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/defend-rules-based-order-asia-cost/>

It is good to see Ben Schreer and Nick Bisley set out so clearly the questions that lie unanswered at the heart of Australia's foreign policy today. They ask whether we're really serious about [defending Asia's status quo](#)—the 'rules-based order'—by opposing China's bid for regional hegemony in East Asia, and if so what are we willing to do about it? These questions have been evaded for too long, at the cost of making our foreign policy position almost incoherent.

But Ben and Nick don't provide clear answers to these questions themselves. They urge Australia to step up and support America in defending the rules-based order, but they don't say what we should be willing to do. And yet this is the key choice that we face. We can all agree that sustaining the status quo would be the best outcome for us. But how far should we be prepared to go, and at what cost?

These are awkward questions that we've avoided for too long. That can't last because it's now so clear that resisting China's ambitions is going to be much harder than almost everyone expected. We have at last realised just how powerful and determined China is. Nick and Ben themselves plainly acknowledge this when they say, quite rightly, that China's challenge is the most formidable we've faced in Asia since the days of Japanese imperialism.

But that makes it a bit unrealistic of Ben and Nick to soothingly suggest that all we need is 'a new mix of competition and cooperation, with the balance tipping towards the former'. We needed a lot more than that to deal with Imperial Japan. They're reverting here to the same old mistake of assuming that we can resist China's ambitions without really trying. This would only be so if China wasn't really serious about overturning the status quo, and would be happy to back off if it meets the mildest resistance.

But all the evidence points the other way. Trying to compel them to change their mind won't mean 'a new mix of cooperation and competition' with China. It means confronting China as an enemy—just as we confronted Imperial Japan.

Which brings us to the remark they attribute to Julie Bishop, that Australia 'had to be prepared to fight to defend the order in Asia'. That does get to the hard nub of the issue: are we prepared to go to war with China—presumably in support of the US—to preserve the status quo rules-based order in East Asia?

Despite their hopeful talk of mixing competition and cooperation, it seems clear that Nick and Ben believe, like Mrs Bishop, that the answer is 'yes'. And they're not alone. As I

argued in in my recent *Quarterly Essay*, this seems to be the key underlying message of the 2016 Defence White Paper, and is a view widely shared in Canberra.

But this answer too is seriously incomplete because it doesn't say what kind of war we should be willing to fight, and at what cost. It isn't enough for Nick and Ben and Mrs Bishop to say that we should be willing to fight to preserve the current order. They need to tell us how big a fight they're willing to undertake. How far up the rising curve of scale, risk and cost do they think we should be prepared to go?

Do they envisage a minor skirmish? Or a major and protracted—but still conventional—regional conflict? Or an unlimited nuclear war? If the answer is that they're only willing to fight a limited war, they need to explain how they can be sure that a limited war would be enough to make China back off. They need to explain the risk that a war once begun might not stay limited, even if both sides want it to. And they need to explain how sure they are that our side would win because that's not to be taken for granted. China today is, after all, relatively far more powerful than Japan was in 1941.

Let me be clear: I think there could be circumstances in which Australia should be willing to go to war with China—even a very big war indeed. But I don't think that defending the status quo rules-based order is important enough to justify that kind of war.

That isn't because I don't like the status quo, or because I'm not worried about what a new order would be like. I'm very worried about that. It's because I'm even more worried about the war we could find ourselves fighting to defend it. I think that would most probably be a very serious war indeed, and there's no reason to be confident that it wouldn't become a nuclear war. That kind of war destroys the status quo anyway, even if our side wins.

It would be worth fighting such a war to avoid a truly evil and oppressive new order in Asia, but we must think very carefully and clearly about whether that's what we will face if China gets its way. Some disagree. They think it's safest, as well as easiest, simply to assume the worst, and to criticise those who suggest a more measured approach as appeasers.

But we have to understand where that leads us. Against an adversary like China, the alternative to appeasement is a high risk of war on a major scale. I don't need any convincing at all that a Chinese-led order in Asia would be worse, and perhaps much worse, for us than the old order we know and love. But I need a lot of persuading that it would be bad enough to justify risking the kind of war that seems likely to be required to stop it.

I don't think I'm alone here. Despite the tough-guy talk one hears from so many, I see no evidence that Australians would be willing to fight a major war—let alone a nuclear war—just to preserve the rules-based order in Asia. I doubt very much if Nick or Ben or Mrs Bishop would either. (If I'm wrong, perhaps they'll say so.) Moreover I see no

evidence that our US allies would be willing to fight that kind of war to defend their part of the status quo.

That's why Australia needs to rethink its aim. We need to stop focusing on preserving the status quo and start thinking about what kind of new order in Asia can realistically be achieved and sustained to meet the new circumstances we face today—especially the new distribution of power—and how we can make the best of it. It's timely to remember that by 1918, that's what everyone wished they'd done in 1914. And Churchillian reveries get in the way of that.

Hugh White is professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University. He is a member of the China Matters Advisory Council.