Strengthening Multilateralism as the Best Way Forward

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Though China’s current regime is no democracy, China long has been more or less a rule-abiding, cooperative and responsible player in international affairs. Unfortunately, it is no longer the case. In recent years, China is becoming more and more provocative internationally, as exemplified by its renewed encroachment in the South China Sea. Foreign enterprises in China also complain about increasingly unfair treatment and even harassment.

China’s assertiveness scares many of its Asian neighbors. Like it or not, many Asian countries count on the U.S. to balance China. U.S. commitment to the region is an important force that delays a dangerous arm race between China and its worrying neighbors.

To be sure, U.S. foreign policy record is packed with precedents of unilateral actions that allegedly violate international law. But at times, the U.S. is an indispensable force that creates and upholds a multilateral, rule-based international system. For decades, the U.S. China policy that crosses the partisan divide has been to encourage China to participate in such an international system. This policy has successfully brought prosperity to both countries as well as stability in Asia.

Confronting China’s new provocation, Washington has two options: to work with other Asian countries to encourage and pressure China to get back onto the track of rules-based multilateralism, or to force China to yield through raw rhetoric and harsh sanction.

If the next administration chooses the latter by resorting to all-out trade war with China, as presidential candidate Donald Trump suggested, Beijing will see this as an act of bullying. No leader in China can afford appearing weak by yielding to such perceived arm-twisting. This will also enable Beijing to conveniently blame the U.S. for its unfolding economic crisis. This approach would push China to dig its heel further into its confrontational disposition. As such, U.S.-China relations would soon turn into a clash of two bullies. The highly sophisticated, advanced, and open U.S. economy would fare badly in any protectionist trade war. Worse, Trump’s suggestion of scaling back U.S. commitment to its allies would isolate the U.S. in the Asia Pacific. The U.S. is set to lose in this clash of bullies.

As such, there is only one effective approach to China policy for the next administration that warrant prosperity and stability in the Asia-Pacific region: that is, working closely with other Asian nations to strengthen and expand the multilateral institutions in the region, and motivating China to resolve conflicts and build consensus with other players in such multilateral setting.