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India and China in the Post-Covid World

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Disclaimer: This article was written prior to recent movements in India-China relations and larger world politics. It is cognizant of the dynamic and rapidly shifting developments, and the analysis is therefore subject to change and re-assessment in the future.

For India and China, in many respects the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated pre-existing trends. The world was already in flux, between orders, before 2019 when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. But it has also created a new reality, particularly within their polities and societies, and will have effects on their relationship.

This paper looks at the effects on India and China of the crisis induced by the pandemic and the reactions of states and their leaders to it. Let us first consider what we might expect of the post-pandemic world before seeing how that affects India and China.

Accelerated Trends

The pandemic has accelerated geopolitical trends apparent since the 2008 financial crisis. The world economy was already multipolar, fragmenting and localising before the pandemic struck. The rise of China, India and other countries had already shifted the center of global economic activity from the mid-Atlantic to Asia, raised the share of Asia in global GDP, and reversed the proportion of global GDP between the advanced and the emerging economies between 1980 and 2016. While the US share remained roughly the same, China's share of global GDP has grown to a little less than 20% and India's to about 8%, largely at the expense of Europe (Open Data, World Bank).

A fragmentation and localisation of the globalised economy of the nineties and noughts was already underway after the global economic crisis of 2008. An increasing proportion of world trade is carried out under regional preferential trading arrangements, protectionist sentiment and measures are rising, and the world economy is tending towards three large regional blocs, namely, the US-Canada-Mexico Agreement in north America, the European Union in Europe, and the RCEP in the Asia-Pacific, where China has expressed a willingness to joint the rival Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (*South China Morning Post* 2020). Last year southeast Asia traded more with China than with the US. For a few years, global supply chains have been shortening, with manufacturing mostly moving to locations within their own regions, and in some sectors to China and the US. Most manufacturing that has moved out of China has gone to Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand. Asia is being economically consolidated around China.

The pandemic and reactions to it seem likely to accelerate these trends. Chinese and Indian (*Times of India* 2020) leaders are now calling for self-reliance, and President Trump has already made clear his belief that international trade has not worked to US advantage and has acted on his protectionist instincts. It seems unlikely that this will lead to a wholesale decoupling of major economies like China and the US, or China and India. But when the prospect for the world economy for the next 3 to 5 years is at best slow growth after the crash of 2020 and a recession, the temptation will be strong for leaders to blame domestic economic difficulties on external factors and to follow beggar-thy-neighbour policies. India, for instance, has walked out of the RCEP negotiations at their final stage, and has raised tariffs for four years running, from a base that was already relatively high (*Economic Times* 2019).

In all probability, the world economy will take years to recover from what is a thorough crash, not just a recession or depression. The US economy is expected to shrink by a quarter in three months, as it did over four years after the Great Depression of 1929. It is harder to calculate the effects of the "epidemic of despair" that the pandemic and reactions like the lockdown have unleashed. Certainly, the pandemic has exacerbated inequality in India and other economies.

IMF Estimates For GDP Growth In 2020 (As of April 14th 2020)

Global Economy	-3.6%
US	-5.9%
Eurozone	-7.5%
China	1.2%
Japan	-5.2%
India	1.9%

As for the Indian subcontinent, the World Bank released a report on April 12th (which says that the Maldives will face the biggest impact from the pandemic, because tourism accounts for two-thirds of its GDP. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are also expected to fall into deep recession. India's growth in the fiscal year that just commenced is expected to range between 1.5 per cent and 2.8 per cent. (Open Knowledge, World Bank). As states react by trying to bring global value chains under their national control or to reduce their dependence on China, there will be opportunities at certain points of the value addition chain for countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, though so far the main beneficiaries of this process, which has been underway for some time, are Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and south-east Asian countries.

Economic change of such magnitude would naturally result in corresponding shifts in the relative balance of power among states.

Such a political dynamic was already visible in increasingly contentious US-China relations. US pushback to China's rise and emergence as a potential peer competitor in certain fields had already begun before the pandemic. The pandemic has made it unlikely that we shall see the implementation of even the limited January 2020 phase 1 US-China trade agreement, meant to minimise damage from the imposition of US and Chinese tariffs and other restrictions over the last two years. US-China contention today extends to trade, investment, technology, journalists, international organisations and almost every field, and is getting more acrimonious, with political flash points heating up in Taiwan, Hongkong and the South China Sea.

Heightened tension between China and the US is a natural attempt to maintain position by an established hegemon facing a power that is rising faster than any other in history and which seeks to "return" to centre stage. The pandemic has given US-China contention a sharper edge and made it more unlikely that they will be able to resolve their differences or come to a mutually satisfactory accommodation on managing them. After the pandemic, both presidents, Xi and Trump, need each other to blame while they seek to avoid responsibility at home for their missteps.

It is probably too early to say how this will turn out in terms of the relative balance of power between China and the US, except that the Asia-Pacific balance is already fragmented, with China as a dominant local power in east and south-east Asia, a global economic power, but hemmed in and balanced in her own maritime neighbourhood by the US with allies and partners.

The sharpness or edginess in Asian geopolitics today comes in part from the domestic politics that the pandemic triggered. Every government in every major power was caught flat-footed by the pandemic, despite warnings of its coming. The pandemic came when the major powers are under authoritarian leaders, each of whom lacks proven performance and therefore depends on a combination of ultra-nationalism and a personality cult or charisma for legitimacy. Their first reaction to the pandemic, whether in the US or China or elsewhere, was to appoint their number twos to handle the crisis, in an attempt to deflect the inevitable blame. When the extent and rapidity of the pandemic made that tactic ineffective, they shifted tack and began to blame foreigners, the WHO, other countries, and even domestic political opponents. The byproduct has been heightened rhetoric and mutual acrimony between major powers, and the politics of distraction.

There was one respect in which the new authoritarians were accurate in their rhetorical response. The pandemic revealed the ineffectiveness of the multilateral system as we have known it. Neither the WHO, nor the UNSC, nor the G-20 or other bodies can be said to have mounted an effective response to the pandemic. The G-20's tepid response — listing individual actions that states had already taken or announced and gutting the only substantive step of debt relief at birth — was in contrast to its effective response to the global financial crisis in April 2009. The world has come a long way down the path of political fragmentation. If proof were needed that the world is between orders, it is here.

While the US-led "liberal international order" is dead, it has not been replaced by another, bipolar or multipolar, or by a concert of powers. Indeed the US remains the sole superpower with global military reach and overwhelming political and soft power. China is a global economic power and a strong regional military power with limited, now declining, soft power. And the gap is large and growing between these two on the one hand and the rest on the other.

One would have hoped that the pandemic had created an opportunity to remake the international order and its institutions like the UN to reflect today's realities rather than those at the end of WWII. After all the two greatest powers in the world, the USA and China appear to be revisionist. Faced with a crisis of this magnitude, when tinkering is clearly insufficient, the crisis is an opportunity to forge an international order better able to deal with climate change, pandemics, human security, cyber threats, and other global issues. In an ideal world, perhaps. However, what we see now is only the destruction of an already waning order, a necessary condition before a new order emerges. To go beyond this would require changes in the sort of leadership that the major powers have today. Absent that, the immediate effect of the pandemic will be to postpone the emergence of a new international order. The new authoritarians' cloak of ultra-nationalism makes the give and take, bargaining and compromise required by diplomacy difficult enough without existing threats to their position from their inability to control the pandemic.

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Role of the State

In each of the major powers, whether democratic or totalitarian, the leadership has used the pandemic tactically to centralise power and to increase surveillance, monitoring and control of their populations and society, in the name of controlling Covid-19. Sensing a threat to their hold on power, the new authoritarians have circled the wagons and become more insular. They have also road-tested technological means of surveillance and control and improved technological propaganda tools, though the basic playbook remains that of previous authoritarians. We appear headed for more AI, robotics, automation, and technocratic forms of governance, changing our understanding and practice of rights and privacy, and the role of the state itself. Technology companies seem to consider the pandemic an opportunity to beta test their products on society.

The nation-state is now seen as indispensable. In every country there is a turning to the state and government for solutions. Big government is back by popular demand, in the form of a surveillance state with a significant economic role, rather than the welfare state. The liberal and socialist revolutions are postponed, yet again. Is this a victory for the Chinese model of state capitalism with a strong surveillance state? China's conditions are unique and cannot be replicated elsewhere. But it is certainly the end of the post war liberal conceit.

Big brother government will no doubt provoke reactions in the populace and society, particularly where the crisis is long and government incompetence manifest. While the initial response to the pandemic has been a strengthening of the state and its coercive machinery, it is, to my mind, still an open question whether this can be sustained when the legitimacy and resources of states are shrinking. Irrespective of how that struggle plays out and whether society or government has the ultimate advantage, one would expect changes in the social contract on which these states have operated so far. We can safely predict a period of considerable social turbulence and churning within each of the major powers, which will force a turning inward and a much higher preoccupation with domestic politics by governments.

New-ish Realities

Even as it accelerated existing trends, the pandemic has created certain new geopolitical realities, for at some stage quantity has a quality all its own, as Stalin reportedly said.

The world went into this pandemic with record numbers of refugees, high levels of humanitarian stress, and most fragile states unlikely to achieve the SDGs. The great powers were not in great shape either, internally or in their dealings with one another. Existing flash-points and crises, have been exacerbated, whether in Hongkong, Taiwan, the South China Sea, or the India-China border. In Korea the prospects of de-nuclearisation, or even of constructing a stable structure of deterrence, have receded further.

Every major power has been and will be internally and externally diminished by the pandemic — politically, economically, in reputation and in soft power. There might be short term tactical gains from being the first to restart the economy or from local success in dealing with the epidemic, but in the longer term this is likely to only confer minor advantages. Chinese commentary gleefully points out the West's failures in dealing with the crisis. It is too early to say which system was better at handling the domestic crisis. Each country, from the strongest to the weakest, advanced or developing, must reckon with diminished prospects for the next five to ten years. Without statistical jugglery, leaders' declared goals, mostly variations on making their country great again, now seem unattainable or postponed, whether it is Modi's $5 trillion economy by 2024, or Xi Jinping's China Dream, and so on.

The temptation for these leaders to find political distractions, particularly external enemies and threats, will be high. Since bread will be in short supply we are likely to see more circuses. We will see a sharpening of geopolitical fault lines and heightened tension as governments and leaders seek external distractions from their domestic failures in facing the pandemic. Some of this is already evident in China's assertive behaviour vis a vis the US, Taiwan, Hongkong and on the border with India. It is also visible in recent US actions towards China.

China-US relations are getting more contentious and there seems to be no appetite in Beijing or Washington for a grand bargain or a compromise or even a comprehensive effort to repair the relationship. Can we expect a shift if the White House has another occupant after November? The policies that president Trump espoused towards China, India, globalisation and retrenchment, have bipartisan and broad support in the USA. There will be no going back to the policies of the liberal east coast foreign policy establishment ("the Blob") in the foreseeable future. Heightened China-US contention, stronger India-US ties, on-shoring by US companies, decoupling from China, and a more isolationist USA appear here to stay for the short and medium term.

As for China, the key is whether elite unity, remarkably strong since the 1989 Tiananmen killings, will continue, as it seems to survive the Bo Xilai affair and the anti-corruption campaign. It is hard to believe that there will not be a reckoning or at least an attempt to fix responsibility for the handling of the outbreak in China. The signs of trouble are there: in Premier Li Keqiang asking for honest figures and reporting on the day victory was declared in the fight against the virus in Wuhan (*The Guardian* 2020) ; on the web where implicit criticism of the leadership such as Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary has a shadowy half-life (*Global Times* 2020) ; and, in public statements by Chinese intellectuals and party members. Public anger was strong, and cannot this time be sublimated by a burst of rapid economic growth as it was after Tiananmen.

Should elite unity fracture, leaders who centralised power will be blamed. But the need to maintain the rule and reputation of the "great, glorious and ever correct" CCP could see a silent coup, with papers being removed from desks, as was done after the Great Leap Forward to Mao, and a new collective leadership going its own way. Whether leadership unity holds or not, we will see an even more assertive China in the world, namely, more of the China that we have seen since Xi Jinping's "new era" began in 2012. A China that is already in an economic slowdown, with the party-state's performance legitimacy in question, will have little ability to compromise or moderate her external demands on both "core" and non-core interests. In fact the opposite was true in the past when domestic stress induced higher risk-taking abroad by China: in crossing the Yalu in 1951, in 1962, in 1979, between 2010-12 in the ECS, and in the SCS post-2008.

The Chinese call the post-Covid propaganda war against the West "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy. Yet, there is a brewing debate among Chinese media, foreign policy experts and former diplomats about the so-called Wolf Warrior diplomacy. This aggression and nationalism will be strategically damaging to China and her plans in the long run. But for now, it reflects the need to stoke nationalism amid questions of epidemic control failures and looming economic problems.

This is also a moment of worry for Taiwan, for the temptation in Beijing to seek compensatory victories must be strong, especially as the crisis and developments in Hongkong mark the end of any realistic prospect of a 'one country two systems' resolution of the Taiwan issue. Nor is it clear after the recent NPC session whether that is a goal that China still seeks.

Whether this marks the postponement of the China Dream or not, the path to its achievement has certainly changed. In the short term China's ambitious Belt and Road and other plans abroad may be slowed or stalled by supply chain and labour related issues. But the crisis also opens opportunities for China. Her strengths in the manufacture of medical products and pharmaceuticals, e-commerce, digital payment systems, and her Digital Silk Road are likely to be in demand. In the medium term, her consolidation of the Eurasian landmass can probably be accelerated, as Russia copes with a prolonged period of low oil prices, and Europe looks for finance and trade to pull her economy out of recession. As the US presence in southeast Asia weakens, China will no doubt step in.

There will be a host of second-order effects on geopolitics: The arc of instability from the Sahel to Pakistan will worsen; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, already present in a belt from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, could accelerate; financial defaults by developing countries will increase; increasing Russian dependence on China will bring China to Europe's borders; the European integration project slows further as its north-south split grows; the Schengen area breaks into smaller bubbles in the Baltic, Nordic and other groups that feel safe with each other; and so on.

The Post-Pandemic World

Globally, and in Asia, the inequality of power will probably be exacerbated. Before this crisis it was apparent that Asia's issues — North Korea's nuclear weapons, the SCS, ECS, WMD across the continent, maritime security, cybersecurity, the arms race, security dilemmas, etc. — could not be solved by either the US or China or even by the two of them together. Now that their contention has sharpened and become the most significant dynamic in the politics of the Asia-Pacific there is even less chance of these issues being settled peacefully. All of these require cooperative global solutions. If there is a new paradigm of international cooperation being born, it is not in response to Covid-19. Nor does this experience mean that a pure realist view, ignoring institutions and norms, is vindicated by this crisis. For country responses in actions and propaganda have been driven by domestic politics, chauvinism, emotion and other cultural factors rather than by rational calculations of self interest.

If there is an analogy, it could be late 19th century Europe without the common culture. Does this make war more likely or inevitable? No, probably not among the great powers, but it certainly raises the risks of miscalculation, of civil unrest of flash points erupting, and of other forms of conflict expanding.

Some Chinese economists foresee the pandemic creating a two-track world — an east Asia, (China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hongkong and Macao), that has successfully suppressed Covid -19, which can get its economy running again, albeit at a low level, and other parts of the world which cannot recover their economies due to recurring waves of infection, where social stresses become political stresses. However, this is an unlikely outcome. East Asia needs the rest of the world for its own economic survival, supply chains would then have to be rebuilt chain by chain from the bottom up. Issues, like mass unemployment, that the pandemic has thrown up within east Asian societies will not make the going smooth. Premier Li Keqiang spoke at the NPC in May of over 600 million Chinese who live on less than RMB 1,000 a month and of the need to get employment going again (*CNBC TV* 2020).

So far, this is a crisis with no winners, only losers. I believe that the crisis will accelerate the fragmentation of the world economy, the rise of the new authoritarian leaders, encourage increasing reliance on technology, and vastly increase inequality within and between states. There is also little prospect that the major powers will converge on a single model of international order in the near term.

In sum, I expect the post-pandemic world to be poorer, meaner and smaller — poorer because of the slow growth global environment, meaner as xenophobia, racism and chauvinism rise, and smaller as the global polity and economy fragment. If there is an analogy, it could be late 19th century Europe without the common culture. Does this make war more likely or inevitable? No, probably not among the great powers, but it certainly raises the risks of miscalculation, of civil unrest, of flash points erupting, and of other forms of conflict expanding.

India and China

What does this situation mean for India, and for India-China relations?

Three significant effects on India are immediately visible: India's trajectory towards a developed future is now at risk; China, our greatest challenge, is changing her behaviour and not for the better; and we will face a much more fraught external environment. A more complicated geopolitics will affect our ability to transform India and probably increase instability in India-China relations.

Like other countries, India faces a post-pandemic economic crisis, worsened by the fact that an economic slump preceded Covid-19. There is already severe damage to India's economy and its prospects. India's primary cost is the human one: the immiseration of migrant and landless labour, and the impoverishment of large parts of the informal sector, the large portion of our economy which employs the most individuals and enables much of our populace to survive. How this plays out will determine whether India can stay a stable and relatively peaceful society, or whether she resorts to mass mobilisation on the basis of (real or imagined) enemies at home and abroad to keep those in power in their positions. India could lose GDP growth, and a recent study by CII reveals that it will take a minimum of 6 months after the epidemic for the formal economy to restore normalcy and business continuity (*Business Today* 2020). It will take a massive effort to get the formal sector back up to speed, even though that is where the government has more instruments to determine economic outcomes.

A harsher external environment for India's transformation makes it harder for India to be transformed into a modern, prosperous and secure country for all its citizens. Our major partners, such as the US, will be domestically preoccupied recovering from the crisis for quite a while. China, whichever way she is affected, is likely to be a harder partner, more assertive and touchy, aggressive in pushing her interests and seeking overt primacy in her periphery. US-China contention will make the subcontinent an arena for their contention and we must expect a greater Chinese presence in our neighbourhood and an even stronger commitment to Pakistan.

As US-China contention grows, logically, India should seek to have better relations with each of them than they have with one other. The present Indian government's recent actions have conveyed mixed signals. It has strengthened military cooperation with the US and its allies, expanded the Quad, and has been willing to be identified with president Trump's personal political interests. At the same time it has been silent on China's responsibility for spreading Covid-19, silent on the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, silent on Hongkong developments, and silent on Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO. But in May it imposed a prior approval requirement on Chinese investment in India. It also seems happy to go along with President Trump's suggested expansion of the next G-7 summit into a Democracy-10 with India, Australia and South Korea, which the US is presenting as an opportunity to contain or confront China (*The Diplomat* 2020). In dealing with the unprecedented Chinese military actions at multiple points on the border since April 2020, the government of India has rejected US offers to mediate and has chosen to rely on quiet bilateral diplomacy.

The negative trajectory of India-China relations will be enhanced if the pandemic accentuates asymmetries in the balance of power between India and China. Public perceptions in India of China have turned even more negative. 67% of the Indian public believe that the PRC is to blame for the outbreak becoming a global pandemic, including 18.2% who believe that it is biological warfare by China, according to a quick opinion poll of 1156 Indians by the Takshashila Institution's Manoj Kewalramani in early May (*Takshashila Institution* 2020). More Chinese assertiveness could well push India into seeking enhanced balancing arrangements, not just with China's other neighbours like Japan, Vietnam, Australia, Indonesia and Singapore, but also closer military and security ties with the US itself.

All in all, it would appear that in addition to the domestic challenges that the pandemic poses each of our countries, the external situation too will be increasingly fraught.

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No:103| May 2020	China's Belt and Road Initiative: History In the Making	Priyanka Madia
No:102| May 2020	China, WHO and the Covid-19 Pandemic	Dr.Bhaskar Balakrishnan
No:101| May 2020	Covid-19 Pandemic and Contextualizing South Korea's Success	Sandip Misra
No:100| Apr 2020	Epidemics and their Urban Context: COVID-19 and Lessons from Wuhan	Madhurima Nundy
No:99| Apr 2020	Tracing the Informal: Analyzing Labour Legislation in China	Reeja Nair
No:98| Apr 2020	China's Post-Covid Path to Normalcy: Parallels for India	Santosh Pai
No:97| Apr 2020	China's Capabilities in Disruptive Technologies and Its Implications	Lt. G. S.L. Narasimhan
No:96| Apr 2020	What Does the Pandemic Covid-19 Tell Us About Economic Security As a Factor of Competitiveness? An Exercise on China	Bruno S. Sergi
No:95| Mar 2020	Asia's Geopolitical Challenges and Future Order: China Factor	Biren Nanda
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No:91| Mar 2020	Xi Jinping and Chinese Power	Richard McGregor
No:90| Mar 2020	Informal Meetings in Foreign Policy	Anu
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No:88| Feb 2020	Xi Jinping's 'New Era' – Continuities and Change	Anurag Vishwanath
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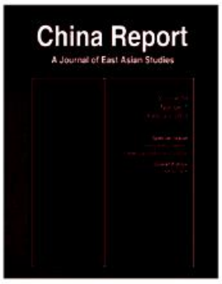

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