



CHINA'S POST-COVID GEOPOLITICAL "EITHER/OR"

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As the coronavirus crisis continues to reshape geopolitical contours and dynamics, the rivalry between China and the United States has deteriorated markedly. Divisions over China's re-emergence as the first-in and first-out of the Covid-19 ward have thereby deepened. At issue is whether China's virus-fighting assistance and its post-Covid position in the world is accepted or resisted. The either/or proposition of whether "you are with us or against us," not long ago admonished by Washington, is increasingly coming from Beijing.

Three distinct phases have characterized the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The first was whether other countries suffered "with" or "against" China. As the world watched with shock and awe in January and February, and while the Chinese government boldly locked down swathes of its vast territory like a turnkey operation, some governments imposed early travel restrictions on China, led by Australia and the US. For Southeast Asia, a critical battleground in the China-US faceoff, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam tightened travel rules quickly, whereas Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand maintained road and air transport routes with China well into March. These four countries in mainland Southeast Asia have depended on China for tourism, trade, investment, and superpower support in the face of Western criticisms against human rights and authoritarian proclivities.

A similar pro- and anti-China wedge has been evident in the West. As China exerted and stabilized virus control from mid-March, the pandemic went on a rampage in Europe and the US. Global coronavirus tallies became a league table of sorts, not only for public health management but also the ability of each afflicted country to overcome an external enemy. China began at top spot but soon gave way to the US and European countries.

This second stage was about whether other pandemic-ravaged countries accepted China's assistance and advice through its so-called "coronavirus diplomacy," as Beijing began to export its medical equipment, expertise, experience, and largesse. To date, more than a hundred countries around the world have received China's anti-virus overtures with varying degrees of enthusiasm. European countries that are participants in China's Belt and Road Initiative, such as Italy, took in Chinese aid. Southeast Asian governments have broadly welcomed Chinese medical gear and advice but more so among the mainland countries, especially Cambodia and Laos.

But some countries have pushed back hard. Spain and the Netherlands, for example, declined what they deemed "defective" Chinese test kits and face masks. Sweden, with its own approach of building "herd immunity," closed the last of China's Confucius Institutes. On the other hand, President Trump labeled Covid-19 the "Chinese virus," questioned Beijing over virus misinformation, and suspended the US budget contribution to the World Health Organization, which is accused of conniving with Chinese authorities. Australia went a step further and called for an independent investigation into China's virus mismanagement and the WHO's role in it.

As partial re-openings take place in various countries from May, the third phase comes into play. The sharp economic contraction around the world will bite all economies hard but China's centralized rule and large domestic market may give the country some additional room to maneuver. If the weaknesses of the US and Europe in the 2008-09 Global Financial Crisis enabled China's launch to superpower status, the 2020-21 period could lead to solidification should

China's economy rebound quickly. Even though its growth this year will be much lower than forecast, China may come out of Covid-19 more intact than the other established major powers because it has suffered earlier and recovered faster.

China's new phase of ascendancy will line up the international community between those nations that recognize China's pre-eminence and others that resist it. In an ideal world, the coronavirus crisis would have galvanized international cooperation, led by China and the US, to fight against a common enemy. But instead, the virus has worsened pre-existing geopolitical tensions.

As the coronavirus blame game between the US and China intensifies, an open conflict between the two superpowers is more plausible than at any time in recent decades. China, for example, has expanded its claims in the South China Sea by setting up administrative regions in the face of Vietnam's opposition, while the US and others are preoccupied by the pandemic. Nine plaintiffs so far in the US, including the state of Missouri, have filed lawsuits against China for its role in not preventing the spread of the coronavirus, and the Trump administration is alarmingly fingering China as the culprit for America's woes, charges that can degenerate into a "casus belli" if conditions take turn for the worst.

Naturally, China is defensive regarding what it sees as a global scapegoating and a concerted drag on its geopolitical position. Moreover, China's economic slowdown also will put President Xi Jinping under pressure at home ahead of the Chinese Communist Party's centennial anniversary next year, while Trump faces election-year challenges. Both leaders will have incentives to boost nationalist inclinations and domestic popularity by finding outsiders to blame for internal problems.

Profound crises, such as imposed by the coronavirus, often lead to cathartic changes. Instead of more tension and potential conflict, Covid-19 may also force structural reforms and adjustments at home in both the US and China in a way that realigns their interests abroad. For example, Trump could lose the election this year, while Xi could be forced out or

pressured by CCP cadres to take a different tack, resulting in changes away from confrontation towards peaceful co-existence and a revamped international order that satisfies both, with a bigger space for China and enough of a role for the US. While such a scenario and others based on shifting domestic dynamics that lead to more international cooperation may seem farfetched, the alternatives of untenable tension and geopolitical showdown are infinitely more detrimental to all parties involved.

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