



SLIDING TOWARD A LESS ORDERLY WORLD

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In a matter of weeks Covid-19 erased “normality” across most of our planet, effortlessly riding the tentacles of globalization to every corner of the world, paying no greater heed to geopolitical divides than to religious, racial, or political boundaries. The pandemic gradually reduced the distracting cacophony of the international system to a whisper, leaving all states unusually exposed.

In thinking about the longer-term ramifications of the pandemic, perhaps the most widely used gambit was to posit two fundamental alternatives. Firstly, that the pandemic would prove to be a true watershed in which everything was rendered more fluid and there was genuine scope to make fundamentally different choices about the future of the human enterprise. The alternative view was that the pandemic would see the strengthening or accentuation of established trends and developments, that is, that we would face the same future that we could (more dimly) discern in 2019, but that this future would arrive more quickly and, to that extent, be rather more inevitable. In broad terms, it would appear that the first alternative was more widely endorsed in the earlier stages of the pandemic with the weight of opinion swinging to the latter from around mid-2020. This transition is broadly supported when comparing the commentary CSCAP commissioned in the April-May 2020

timeframe (reprinted in the Regional Outlook) with the articles that follow which were prepared in the October-November 2020 period. Whichever assessment the reader prefers, there is little doubt that the world will feel and work differently when Covid-19 is behind us.

In one decisively important sense, however—namely, its impact on the character of the US-China relationship—the notion that the pandemic has been a transformational watershed seems indisputable. Covid-19 struck a world in which significant changes in the relative strategic weight of the world’s major states was well advanced, both motivating and allowing behavior that challenged the prevailing international order, inevitably, the very order that had supported and encouraged these changes. By the time Covid-19 took hold the condition of the international system could fairly be described as turbulent and increasingly brittle.

Among the more confident predictions of new or strengthened propensities post-Covid was the winding back of globalization—that is, to restrain or qualify the post-Cold War willingness to allow market forces free rein to determine the supply chain for all products. As major power relations deteriorated in the new century, some began to question the wisdom of this philosophy, at least for the products deemed highly sensitive from a national security or health perspective. Many consider that while efficiency may have been king in the past, the Covid experience will see it displaced for an indeterminate period by resilience. Economists, of course, have warned that market dynamics and the profit motive constituted formidable forces that can only be diverted at considerable cost to the state and/or the consumer.

There are also important wider considerations. International trade, joint ventures, reciprocal direct investment are self-evidently a crucial medium for the development of common interests between states, including a shared resistance to issues that generate tension and confrontation and put those common interests at risk. This belief—that economic interdependence strengthens the peace between states—has long been part of the enduring drive to strive for genuinely freer international trade. It is an

aspect of our world that we jettison to our peril. Economic interdependence may not guarantee peace, as the events of August 1914 attest, but it can still prove invaluable.

An illuminating indicator of the intensity of the political clash between the US and China that the pandemic brought to a head is what happened to the issue of the rules-based order. The rules-based order—the system that had developed from the foundations laid by the US in the immediate aftermath of World War II—had been flagged as an issue for most of the new century. Most states were prepared to concede, albeit discretely, that the prevailing order had been instrumental in enabling the strong improvement in their international standing and future opportunities but a few also signaled reservations through a reference to the fact that they had not participated in the design of the order.

Under the stresses associated with the pandemic, this somewhat hesitant and ambiguous disquiet distilled into the contention that alternatives to the liberal democracy model of governance were available that were demonstrably more effective and offered a superior basis for a revamped set of norms and guidelines to underpin international order. While openness and clarity about a contentious issue is an important step forward it does not promise a durable solution. That is almost certainly the case here. Among the foundational principles drawn from the history of the first half of the 20th century and that informed the US approach to order is that the concentration of power was a threat to the primacy of the individual and to international peace because errors of judgement could be more directly translated into massive and irreversible actions. The democracy/market economy model—with its deliberate disaggregation of power and institutionalized power-sharing—was not intended or expected to deliver the most efficient and effective governance. Rather, the objective was to provide the strongest governance consistent with the State being subordinate to its citizens.

At the practical level, these somewhat esoteric notions translate into sharp differences in the role of the state in business affairs and concerns that these differences

preclude a level playing field or fair competition for national and foreign markets.

These circumstances demand determined and creative diplomacy. The objective has to be to develop mindsets among the key players that ‘decoupling’ is a costly and dangerous path, not something to be approached in a mood of distrust and betrayal. The tools of persuasion will necessarily include highlighting the fact that an indeterminate period of co-existence and power-sharing seems inescapable. Much will also have to be made of the significant errors of judgement on all sides in terms of setting objectives and policy directions and the means of accomplishing them that contributed so much to the recent ‘emotional divorce’. Our notional diplomat will have to be well-informed and able to skillfully occupy the space between being frank and being brutal. Speaking truth to power can be daunting but doing so in a manner that makes power pay attention is the supreme skill. Finally, our diplomat will be able to stress that the voluntary and sincere goodwill of all the smaller and medium states of the region is available to both in equal measure.

We should not be naïve. The prevailing tensions are not the result of mere misunderstandings. They have deep and substantive roots and may defy remedy. While none should be discouraged from tackling this diplomatic challenge, a consistent message on the themes outlined above from the leadership of ASEAN could prove to be decisively important. ASEAN, after all, is in the front row of this unfolding drama and has perhaps the most to lose.

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