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Primed for Competition: US-China Relations in post-COVID World Order

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The novel coronavirus pandemic has pushed the world to question the inherent assumptions about globalisation and rethink what the future global order might look like. An insight into existing theoretical accounts can serve as the first step to address these debates. Broadly speaking, theoretical accounts of transfer of power speak about how the dominant power creates a global division of power while placing itself at the helm, following which power starts diffusing, ultimately creating disequilibrium. Unable to uphold the order it has created, the dominant power, then seeks the support of its rivals to maintain it. Fundamentally they address the question whether a status quo power and a rising power can coexist. As post-cold war politics has panned out, US has occupied the position of dominant power and China as the rising power. At the cost of oversimplification one can say, that liberals provide a fairly optimistic account of the future of a rising China being accommodated within the US led order, focussing on the pacifying power of three interrelated and mutually reinforcing causal

mechanisms: economic interdependence, international institutions and democratization¹. Within the realists' school of thought, some predict that China's rise will lead to serious instability (offensive realism) while others see a powerful China having relatively peaceful relations with neighbours, including USA (defensive realism).² This neat division does not capture the diversity within the realist school, which itself differs over fundamental questions of distribution of power, but seems to acknowledge that the structure of the international system is such that it forces great powers to compete among themselves for maximising power. According to variants of power transition theory, conflict is most likely when a rising power, dissatisfied with the status quo, approaches parity with the dominant state in a region and is willing to use force to reshape the existing international rules and institutions.³ As the post-cold war order has developed, despite US emerging as the dominant power and China as the rising power, the question remains whether there will be a power transition.

Although this is not a comprehensive account of International Relations theory on structural change, it does provide a background into possible ways the future US-China relations might pan out.

China: “Peaceful” rise?

Deng Xiaoping’s arrival heralded a new era for China; he maintained the rhetoric of ‘Socialism’ but with ‘Chinese characteristics’ which effectively opened up China to the world economy and its slow but steady integration into it. This led to exponential economic growth and corresponding international recognition; however the infamous Tiananmen Square incident came as a huge blow to China’s international prestige. The way China survived the crisis of legitimacy was by ‘biding its time’ and ‘keeping a low profile.’ Meanwhile economic development continued unabated while the political system and one party rule remained intact. For those in the West, it was China’s rapid economic growth together with its ideological orientation which made it a revolutionary power that threatened US’ power status.⁴ However aware of the need for a peaceful international environment to sustain its rapid growth and dissuade fears of Chinese ‘takeover,’ Chinese premier Wen Jiabao put forward the “peaceful rise” thesis. In his speech to a Harvard University audience in December 2003, he emphasised that China’s development depends upon and in return contributes to world peace, and that China would resort to peaceful means for development by

relying more on its own resources and market.⁵ From the Chinese side, every attempt was made to send the message that China has no intention to upset the status quo; this was evident in China’s diplomatic endeavours whether it was cooperating with ASEAN, across South America and Africa, or building its presence in Asia through strengthening ties with Pakistan and Sri-Lanka, a marked shift from its aggressive policy of 1970’s and 1980’s. Xi Jinping, who succeeded Hu Jintao in 2013, outlined a vision for China where he envisioned China to become a “global leader of composite national strength and international influence.”⁶ This vision, as formulated by Xi in his Governance of China, calls for a promotion of cooperative patterns of interstate relations, aimed at ‘win-win’ solutions and mutual benefits, rather than zero-sum power politics.⁷ Apart from indicating the inherent flaws of the current system, the emphasis was on respect for differences in terms of political and socio-economic system and values. The Chinese have been very vocal about separating themselves from Western liberal interventionism marked by the Washington Consensus and regime change justified by reference to human rights.⁸ At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi laid out a bold timetable for China where he asserted that the “China Dream”, i.e. ‘rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation’, would be achieved by 2025 and his “Made in China” programme would be at par with the world’s most advanced technological powers, and by 2049 China would become a “world power with pioneering global

influence.”⁹ It is clear that Xi has departed from Deng’s dictum and is striving hard to achieve this dream. Under his leadership new policies have been instituted, combined with new infrastructure, with the Belt and Road Initiative, standing out in his attempt to build a “community of common destiny.” For Xi, this attempt is to “foster(ing) a new type of international relations” which cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric given the renewed Chinese assertiveness and global aspirations.¹⁰ The Chinese narrative has since focussed on reforming and developing the US-led global governance system and it can be argued that as Xi moves closer to achieve his dream, this model will be put forward more authoritatively as an alternative to the present model.

US-China relations: Is competition inevitable?

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, several indicators have pointed towards deterioration in relations as both the United States and China were locked in a mutual blame game over the origin of the virus, expulsion of each other’s prominent media organisation and competition to exert influence on global governance institutions such as UN, WHO that are faltering in the face of this mammoth challenge. This competition played out in India’s immediate neighbourhood as both countries rushed to provide coronavirus aid to Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. However, now it seems that the worst is over for China, with the lockdown at the epicentre in Wuhan being lifted

after 74 days and the manufacturing sector slowly opening up again; the same cannot be said for USA as New York has emerged as the global epicentre and as of April 28, the US alone accounted for one-third of all infections in the world.¹¹ The Trump administration has been subjected to serious criticism from around the world for mishandling the situation and grossly underestimating the lethality of the virus. In the face of its flawed domestic response it is not surprising that the international leadership America previously produced at times of global uncertainty, is missing. Meanwhile, China is going out of its way to spin the narrative from being the creator of this virus to being a ‘global saviour’ by embarking on a highly publicised campaign supplying medicines around the world.

Even prior to the outbreak, Washington’s and Beijing’s relations were at an all-time low ever since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1972, fuelled by the trade war, US unease with the expansive Chinese military deployments, and China’s concerns over American attempts to ‘contain’ it with its Indo-Pacific strategy. (which the Trump administration has made a top priority). Even earlier, going back to the 2008-2009 financial crisis, China responded fast by providing a stimulus package, which was in sharp contrast to the West’s laggard response; this also made Washington uncomfortable. While competition does not necessarily translate to conflict, especially if conscious efforts are taken to ensure

differences don't become disputes, if we are to learn anything from history of the cold war, it is that ideological differences are more resilient to change. The rhetoric being employed by both sides relies on US stirring up sentiments against what they call authoritarianism or totalitarianism of existing Party led regime, and Chinese exposing the pitfalls of the international order and US "cold war mentality". In 1994, China's economy was significantly smaller than even that of Italy's and has grown 24 times since then and now stands second only to United States. China has successfully reduced extreme poverty to below one percent, which reinforces Chinese credentials to provide an alternative order.¹² Moreover, Donald Trump seems to be equating his "America first" sentiment with anti-China emotions, and following policies which reduced space for engagement that were kept open by his predecessors.

It is clear that the Chinese have long harboured ambitions to reform, if not replace, the existing international system while making the most of it economically; all indicators suggest that China and US are primed for further future competition. The question, therefore is, that with the norms of engagement and global order all set to change, will this pandemic prove to be the catalyst which changes the international system as we know it? History cannot always be an adequate guide since past behaviour does not guarantee future actions. The illiberal nature of the Chinese regime and statist version of

capitalism already challenged the US on the ideological front and the mishandling of the virus is definitive proof of the structural flaws of the present system. But even if China wishes to fill the present leadership vacuum and capitalise on the situation to take forward its global ambitions, it has to revive the Chinese economy which has been hit hard by the pandemic, and more significantly, address the question of culpability, as definitive proof suggests the virus emerged from its own territory-Wuhan.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Friedberg, A. (2005) The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?. *International Security*. 30(2). pp. 7-45

² Dunne, T., Kurki, M., Smith, S., (2007) *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

³ Blanton, S.L., (2015) *World Politics Trend and Transformation*. Canada: Cengage Learning.

⁴ Xia, Ming. "China Threat" or a "Peaceful Rise of China"?. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/college/coll-china-politics-007.html>

⁵ Full Text of Wen Jiabao's speech "Turning your eyes to China" at Harvard University, December 10,2003.

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⁶ Kantha, A. (2017, November 4) The rise and rise of Xi Jinping, *The Hindu*, Retrieved from: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-rise-and-rise-of-xi-jinping/article19977457.ece>

⁷ Xi, Jinping (2014) *The governance of China*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

⁸ Etzioni, A. (2011). Point of order: is China more Westphalian than others?. *Foreign Policy*. (9: 6). pp. 1-10

⁹ Rudd, K., (2017, October 22). Xi Jinping offers a long-term view of China's ambition, *Financial Times* Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/24eeae8a-b5a1-11e7-8007-554f9eaa90ba>

¹⁰ Mardell, J. (2017, October 25) The 'Community of Common Destiny' in Xi Jinping's New Era, *The Diplomat*, Retrieved from: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-community-of-common-destiny-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/>

¹¹ Shumaker, L. (2020, April 28) U.S. coronavirus death toll exceeds Americans killed in Vietnam war as cases top 1 million, Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-cases/u-s-coronavirus-cases-approach-one-million-one-third-of-global-infections-reuters-tally-idUSKCN22A1EJ?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews>

¹² Klein, E. (2020, March 31) The Coronavirus has pushed US-China relations to their worst point since Mao. *Vox.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/31/21200192/coronavirus-china-donald-trump-the-ezra-klein-show>

