

US-China rivalry post-pandemic : how will the world look like?

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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

US-China Rivalry Post-Pandemic: How Will the World Look Like?

By Victor R Savage

SYNOPSIS

COVID-19 has created a game changer in the US-China hegemonic rivalry. Both hegemons are affected economically and politically by the pandemic; the question is who will rise stronger out of this global catastrophe.

COMMENTARY

THE RAPID rise of China is a cause of global political discomfort given its cultural differences with the west, its authoritarian system, and its control of what the Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism” – a surveillance-based economic order.

The trepidations over China reflect what the US professor of journalism Howard French refers to as the Chinese concept of “*tian xia*” or “everything under the heavens”. Honed over 4,000 years, *tian xia*, underscored China’s central pivot in the cosmos, ensured its leadership was paramount amongst other states, and provided a smug racial endorsement of its cultural egotism.

Celestial Empire’s Rise: The *Tian Xia* Worldview

Throwing out Deng Xiaoping’s caution to go slow on revealing China’s economic prowess, President Xi Jinping wanted to define himself as the national leader and the initiator of the ‘China turn’.

To be fair, Trump is not the only one blaming China for taking economic advantage of the United States but also past US presidential administrations. Leaders in small countries might cringe at Trump's twitter messages, but applaud his political boldness in taking on China and other regional hegemon.

The most potent force of power has ironically been in an almost invisible virus, COVID-19. While several countries — Russia, China, US, and Israel — have been secretly experimenting with biological warfare in laboratories, COVID-19 has blown their cover.

No country anticipated the rapid damage the viral infection could cause — globally eight million infections, over 449,000 deaths to date within five months.

COVID-19: The Game Changer in Globalisation

COVID-19 taught us the real meaning of globalisation and how interrelated our world has become. No event, not even the 20th century World Wars, has had such a profound and devastating impact on global movements, the shut-down of economic and social activities, and the stopping of air travel. Global capitalism has been muzzled.

COVID-19 undergirds what the Financial Times said — that democratic liberal politics is dead globally. When Italy was going through its darkest hour with the pandemic and called out to its European Union members for help, not one single member came to its aid.

Ironically, China gave it liberal support in supplies and medical personnel. COVID-19 showed the ultimate sacrifice governments are willing to make. Short of medical supplies, Italian doctors practised "triage" on COVID-19 patients by withholding medical aid for patients over 60 years.

Once again COVID-19 brought the US and China to a renewal of fiery accusations, with collateral damage on the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Given the US domestic situation, with 40 million unemployed, the slate of bankruptcies, rancid race relations, riots in over 350 cities, and the inept administrative measures in controlling the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, Steve Bannon might be grossly off the mark by making 'China' Trump's main election issue. Americans see Trump's China issue as a storm in a tea-cup.

Post COVID-19 World: What Will It Look Like?

Geopolitically, the post COVID-19 world will become more fragmented. With a US\$25 trillion in debt, America is in no position to be a global humanitarian benefactor and global policeman. One wonders if the heir apparent hegemon, China will fill the US shoes.

China after all, has tried to show a softer side of its diplomatic statecraft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing liberally donated millions of masks and other medical supplies as well as medical support personnel (nurses, doctors) to over 100 countries.

In response to Trump's criticisms that China gives only \$40 million as against America's \$893 million (15 percent of WHO's budget) contribution to the WHO annually, the Xi administration responded with a \$2 billion donation.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 opens Pandora's Box on future options for conflict. The danger of such biological viruses falling in suicidal terrorists' hands could spell unsurmountable and irreversible damage on states.

West Living a Lie About Health Systems

While North Korea had been blackmailing Western powers with its nuclear power potential, COVID-19 has shown the world the hermit kingdom was frightened by the invisible virus; Kim has probably new ideas for leveraging power.

COVID-19 demonstrates western countries were living a lie that their national health systems were impeccable. While Trump is blaming China and the WHO for the US' pandemic woes, his criticisms should be directed at himself for misreading the serious situation and the unprepared of the US health services.

Despite the mantras that COVID-19 will usher in radical economic and social change, pessimists say life will continue in the same way in a post COVID-19 world.

The unfolding of climate change, will unfortunately have a more devastating global impact. Like COVID-19 few countries and leaders are prepared for this life-threatening global catastrophe. The tragedy is climate change spinning rapidly out of control, an answer to the Thucydides trap might be up in the air.

Which Hegemon will Rise?

While French economist Thomas Picketty notes wars and major global calamities bring inequality to ground zero, the coronavirus pandemic has generated mixed signals. The question is which hegemon has the national resilience to come back in a stronger state? Former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has marvelled at the American ability to bounce back from a crisis.

Is the current US economic crisis, its racial war, its political split between two warring political parties, an indication of the finality of its global hegemonic status as some political pundits predict?

On the other hand, is China, a yet to be tested hegemon, a state with pent-up national desires and burning ambitions, rearing to claim the mantle as global hegemon?

Ironically, both Xi and Trump are catalysts for each other's foreign policy initiatives. Hence, in representing the angst of small countries, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made an impassioned appeal to both hegemons.

In his 4 June 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article, he urged the two powers to understand the reality of the geopolitical situation on the ground, relinquish thoughts of operating on a zero-sum game, and leave room for trust in competition and cooperation in various areas, for the sake of global harmony.

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