



Rethinking The Alignment Of World Order Post Covid-19

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Abstract

The Novel Corona Virus, 2019 (Covid-19) may prove a watershed moment in the history of international relations. As the Covid-19 rages, the USA and China are embroiled in deep political and strategic conflict. The paper argues that the long-standing tussle over control of global order will intensify and result in its major metamorphosis. It is further argued that changed geopolitical order will see a significant rise of China and the relative decline of the USA which will have far-reaching implications for the multilateral institutions and regimes, one of the special areas of focus of this paper. Though the relative balance of power will potentially shift in favor of China feeding the narrative of counter-hegemonic balancing, yet it would be misleading to conclude the demise of US-led global order in the foreseeable future. I further argue that the potential and capability of China to dislodge the US from the superpower status and assume the leadership of global order is beset with tremendous roadblocks. The paper concludes with some policy insights for the US foreign policy as to how the rise of China can be tamed and accommodated in the existing order without involving the use of coercion or risking a great-power war.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Global Order, Multilateral Institutions, Covid-19, Hegemony, Balance of Power

Introduction

Historically, every great crisis has brought with it forces that played a very crucial role in bringing about transformations in the existing state of affairs. The current pandemic is one such reality which potentially will compel nations to rethink the way they operate in the international system. International order was already undergoing metamorphosis due to the play of various factors like rise of protectionist trends, disdain for globalization, erosion of faith in multilateralism, coupled with nationalist and populist movements across the globe. The covid-19 apart from widening the scope of these changes has also affected other domains of international relations.

The geopolitical map of the world is again sought to being redrawn with the aggressive rise of China and restrained counter efforts of the United States of America with its hesitant allies to restrict the Chinese clout leading experts to the fear of cold war 2.0 between the two. At

stake would be global order, with America and the West vying for its preservation and China flexing its muscles to unsettle it. Acting according to the principles of realism, China sees the present moment as an opportunity to shape the geopolitics to its liking pushing back against nations it has territorial disputes with.

This article proceeds in three sections. In the first section, we begin with those arguments which stress that the U.S. power is durable and China's rise will not pose any real threat to its hegemony. This section of scholars believes that the U.S. is 'wealthier, innovative and more militarily powerful compared to China than it was in 1991'(Beckley, 2011, p.43). The second section provides a contrarian view that China is rising, catching up to the U.S. at a time when the U.S. is in decline. If China continues its economic ascent and closes the existing gap in the economic size as the case seems, it will translate economic prosperity into military capability and challenge the hegemony of the U.S. primarily in the Asia Pacific and elsewhere later. In this context, Fareed Zakaria states, "the challenge for America is political decline, for as others grow in importance, the central role of America has to shrink" (Zakaria, 2008). In the final concluding section, an attempt will be made to depict that the ascendancy of China need not necessarily have to result in a confrontation with the U.S. Rather, rising China can be tamed and accommodated in the American-led global order with due appreciation of Chinese interests.

To use Michael Beckley's description, 'declinists' refer to that group of scholars, pundits, and government analysts who foresee that the global order is slated to undergo metamorphosis with Chinese ascendence and collateral decadence of the U.S. The declinists argue that since the 2008 financial crisis, the U.S. has been steadily declining in terms of economy and consequently in military spending while China has steadily grown at a higher rate which affords large resources at its disposal to modernize its military infrastructure. The U.S. economic decline coupled with its retreat from various international institutions and regimes raises doubts about its ability and willingness to underpin the global order so enthusiastically maintained by her post-world war second. Kishore Mehubani argues that the west is diminishing and that a 'cycle of western domination of the world is coming to a natural end'. Explaining his argument he states:

" In short, the west has hitherto provided the locomotive driving global economic growth, and the Rest hitched their wagons to the train. China's explosive growth in recent decades was fuelled by exports to America. Now, the Rest is providing the locomotive, and western societies can deliver economic growth to their populations by hitching their wagons to the Rest" (Mehubani, 2018).

The decline of the west (primarily economic) is accompanied by the rise of China(both economic and military). The main indicator gauging the rise of China and the decline of the west is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Though many scholars contest the efficacy of GDP

as the measurement for determining the relative power of the west and China. They argue that GDP hides more than it divulges. In this context, Brooks and Wohlforth 2016 states:

“Economic capacity is a necessary condition of military power, but it is insufficient; technological prowess is also vital, especially given the nature of modern weaponry. Technological capacity also magnifies economic capability, and military capability can also have spinoffs in both the economic and technological arenas. Furthermore, military capability can have indirect but important implications for furthering the leading state’s economic interests. To highlight any one element at the expense of others is to miss these key interactions” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, p. 16).

However, Arvind Subramanian while giving due credit to GDP in assessing the overall position of the country states: ‘GDP matters because it determines the overall resources that a country can muster to project power against potential rivals or otherwise have its way’ (Subramanian, 2011, p. 67-68).

Admitting the inefficacy and insufficiency of GDP as the measure of a country’s power, Oliver Stunkel (2016), however, notes that ‘GDP though not an ideal or complete measurement of country’s power yet is the single best proxy when discussing the shifts of power’. Going by this standard measure (GDP), he opines that at least, China will continue to grow over the coming decades albeit moderately, and is expected to translate its expanded economic power into military might. However, that is not to result in any major conflict between it and the U.S. as according to him, China is less likely to pursue any direct ideological conflict with the U.S. over international order. Rather, it will be more interested in seeking favorable terms of trade with the rest of the world to elevate its citizens out of poverty. The different argument but to the same effect has been forwarded by Brooks and Wohlforth and seconded by Michael Beckley among others. They emphasize that China’s economic rise will not result in any major threat to the U.S.-led world order. Their primary reasoning is that U.S. is already far ahead of China in every respect particularly the global military dominance of the U.S. Even if, the U.S.’s economic performance does not match that of China’s, it has already invested hugely in military science and hardware which will continue to pay dividends to it in the decades to come. Moreover, the gap is very big for China to fill given the uncertainty of rising trajectory of its economy. Reinforcing the above case, Michael Beckley states:

“The widespread misconception that China is catching up to the United States stems from several analytical flaws, the most common of which is the tendency to conclude US-China power balance from data that compare China to its former self. For example, many studies note that the growth rate of China per capita income, value-added in high technology industries, and military spending exceed those of the United States and then conclude that China is catching up. This focus on the growth rate, however, obscures China’s decline

relative to the United States in all of these categories. China's growth rates are high because its starting point was low. China is rising but it is not catching up" (Beckley, 2011, p. 43-44).

The arguments presented above against China emerging as the new pole of power to challenge the U.S.-led global order carry weight and cannot be easily dismissed. However, the opponents of the declinist strand of thinking suffer from certain predispositions which result in overlooking certain aspects injurious to U.S. hegemony. It is widely recognized that expanding economy affords resources to a state to develop, expand and modernize the other elements of national power while slowing economic growth constricts the ability of the state to cater to the existing distribution of security network or even force it to roll back certain important security functions. While making a comparison between the U.S. and China, one can ill-afford not to put the things in the above context. China over the decades has been growing at an unprecedented rate, albeit with certain hiccups. It has lifted millions out of poverty, improved tremendously on human development indicators, urbanization has expanded and development of world-class infrastructure. Above all, the massive investment in innovation, modern technology, and military science saw China emerging as the manufacturing hub of the globe and great military power. China's continually growing ability to deny access- technically known as 'anti-access/area denial' (A2/AD) capabilities- into the South China Sea is the reflection of burgeoning military might of it. In fact, 'area denial' count as the touchstone for the U.S. policymakers to measure the rise of the naval power of China (Pan, 2014, p. 457). The salience of economic health and size in the emergence of any state as the potential contender for regional or global hegemony comes to the fore while comparing China and Russia. Russia, though is great military power in terms of the state of the art military technology and a major exporter of military hardware, is widely believed as no potential challenger to the U.S. dominance mainly because of its faltering economy which is unable to support its ambitions. China, on the other hand, though not militarily as advanced as Russia- as the former still rely on the latter for some of the latest military equipment- yet is widely seen as the one who can contest the U.S. hegemony primarily in Asia-Pacific. In this context, Chengxin Pan observes:

"...its (U.S.'s) geopolitical mindset of seeing its mirror image in the behavior of other powers sustains a perpetual state of fear, with China now increasingly as its main source. With its vast landmass and fast-growing economy, China is seen as a natural candidate to dominate Asia and uproot the U.S. primacy in the region" (Pan, 2014,p. 456-7).

Therefore, it is plausible to argue that as China's economic heft soars, that will translate into high defense budgets, hence more expansion in military capabilities. Some argue the opposite. Nuno Monteneiro, for example, argues that there is no direct relationship between the increased wealth of the nation and the consequent increase in military capacities. Rather, it is subject to the choice of policymakers whether they are inclined to invest accumulated wealth into the production of military capacities (Monteneiro, 2014, p. 16). The example

often cited in support of the above argument is the comparison made between three economies of France, the U.K. and, Germany. Though France and the U.K. are smaller economies than Germany, yet they are militarily more powerful than Germany. It is hard to dispute the comparison as made above. Nonetheless, it would be an exercise in futility to extrapolate the above argument to China. The decision of the state to invest additional wealth in the generation of military capacities is shaped, among other things, by the security environment, especially in its neighborhood. China sees its Asia-pacific neighborhood surrounded and encroached by the U.S. in collaboration with several littoral states with whom China has disputes. China interprets the U.S. presence in the region as threatening to its core interests of the sovereignty and territorial integrity. The presence of a credible threat to its core interests in the region severely limits the wiggle room for Chinese policymakers not to shore up its military capacities. The more the U.S. keeps its presence in the Asia-Pacific, the more threat perception develops in China therefore, the more China seeks military build-up in the region. This explains the militarization of the South China Sea despite the promise of Xi Jinping to the contrary. It happened because “U.S. Navy stepped up its naval patrols and China responded by proceeding with militarization” (Mahbubani,2020). Hence, the increased wealth will arguably, result in the expansion of military power. China has already demonstrated its intent and capability to not allow foreign hegemonic presence in the Asia-Pacific which is reflected in the growing efforts by China to militarize the artificial islands in the region. The frequent American attempts to patrol the areas of South China Sea claimed by China and in turn Chinese countermeasures to try to thwart these patrols signify the resolve of China to confront any action by any power seen as in violation of its core interests. For China to safeguard its threatened interests, the development of military capacities would be inevitable. This explains the ‘highest defense spending in 2014 in recent years despite an economic slowdown’ (Rajagopalan,2015). Therefore, to expect China not to increase its military budget and capacities in the face of credible threats tantamount to welcoming the enemy while it is making incursions into their territory: a highly unlikely scenario.

Now, the key question is, can China maintain its economic growth to be able to bypass the U.S economy and occupy the position of economic superpower? Arvind Subramanian in his insightful research work, ‘the inevitable superpower’ makes some realistic projections about the future trajectory of the Chinese economy. He admits that China’s economic growth will slow down owing to certain major challenges lying ahead but still will be a decent rate of around seven percent on average over the next two decades compared to 2.5 percent per year of U.S economic growth. This shows the relative decline of the U.S. economy which incidentally is the core argument of Subramanian’s work:

“The upshot of my analysis is that by 2030, relative U.S. decline will have yielded not a multipolar world but a near-unipolar one dominated by China. China will account for close to 20 percent of global GDP(measured half in dollars and a half in terms of real purchasing

power), compared with just under 15 percent for the United States....By 2030, China will be dominant whether one thinks GDP is more important than trade or the other way round; it will be ahead on both counts” (Subramanian,2016, p.68-69).

If Subramanian’s analysis is anything to go by, this, then, begs the question: How is China expected to conduct itself in international affairs? Power Transition Theory offers two possible scenarios: Should economically dominant China decide to conduct itself within the existing international architecture, major war will be averted. In contrast, should China embark on the collision course of challenging the U.S-led international order, then an outbreak of great war is highly likely (Lemke and Lemke, 2010). As already brought out above that heightened threat perception will see the rise of aggressive China to enhance its security.

China in Covid-19 Era

To this end, China will not miss any opportunity, whenever it presents itself, to further its interests. Covid-19 is one such opportunity, rather a crisis turned into an opportunity where China has stepped up its aggressive actions in its disputed neighborhood to coerce them into accepting China’s demands. Covid-19 seems to have cleared the haze surrounding Chinese behavior in the face of the U.S. economic decline and the concomitant rise of China. With the relative decline of the U.S., China sees the present moment as an opportunity to shape the Asia-Pacific to its advantage. Rory Medcalf, head of National Security College at Australian National University, states:

“A lot of structural problems in the international order are becoming much more glaringly apparent’. For him, the defining issue is not just how the US responds to the challenge of China’s rise but whether ‘middle players’ including India, Australia, Japan, and Europe are prepared to take risks to defend the International order and work together in doing so. China’s aggressive posture has become more visible in the midst of pandemic”(Crawford, 2020).

Reinforcing the above view, M.K. Narayan, Ex-National Security Advisor to Indian Government, describes the Chinese behavior in the following words:

“In March-April this year, while the rest of the world was wrestling with the covid-19 pandemic, Chinese further stepped up its aggressive actions, renaming almost 80 geographical features in the region as an index of Chinese sovereignty” (Narayan, 2020).

Taking advantage of the Covid-19, China made swift border incursions in the Ladakh area of India which led to the deterioration of bilateral relations between the two neighbors. The confrontation at the border turned violent leading to the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese military personnel. Indian External Affairs Minister, S.

Jaishankar has described the border standoff as very serious which needed deep conversation between the two countries. China has also ramped up its military activities in the south china sea triggering countermeasures from the USA. The aggressive activities of china seem to indicate that it has cast off the age-old principle of its foreign policy architected by Deng Xiaoping—‘ Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.’ (GlobalSecurity.org). This is mainly because according to William Choong, Senior fellow at the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore:

“ In the Chinese mind, the US has lost its mantle of leadership in the Asia-Pacific, if not the world. So china does see an opportunity to press the advantage on some of the hotspots in many parts of the world” (Crawford, 2020).

With the United States and its allies reeling, distracted, and divided by the pandemic, china’s ambitions to become the dominant player in Asia has grown, as has its desire to reshape international institutions and rules to suit its power and preferences. M.K. Narayan believes that even the regional allies of the USA in the Asia Pacific are not willing to confront china openly. He states that Australia which is an important member of Quad (a group of four countries of the US, Japan, Australia, and India) , widely seen as an anti-china coalition, has recently expressed her unwillingness to confront China as it has strong economic relations with the latter. Similarly, Britain is also hesitant to come out openly against china. He, therefore, concludes that

“It is thus more than evident that few nations across the world are willing to risk china’s ire because of strong economic ties that have been forged over the years. Economic ties are proving way stronger than military and strategic. Even in Asia, while a majority of ASEAN countries have grave concerns about china’s predatory tactics, with the ASEAN having become one of china’s biggest trading partners, it adopts a default position. Viz., “not to take sides” (Narayan,2020).

However, Chinese assertiveness has more to do with the lack of American will to lead and less to do with its capacity to do. The military dominance enjoyed by the U.S. could be used as a strategic asset on a bargaining table to exercise a check on the behavior of other states. But the U.S. at the moment seems averse to reinvent itself in much need post-WWII role if it is to prevent the collapse of global order (Makhdoomi, 2020). Encouraged by the silence or at best lukewarm opposition to its activities and behavior, China has expanded its economic, political, and military footprints in the region and elsewhere. This has caused anxiety in the west which wants some kind of checks and constraints upon Chinese expansionist agendas. Though Russia under the extended rule of Vladamir Putin has grown more ambitious to the dislike of the US and the west, yet America fears China’s rise more than Russia’s as the former has the required financial clout to sustain its military ambitions. This explains the recent and

ongoing attempts by the US to contain the rise of China to prevent it from posing any real threat to its status of global dominance. Running through the USA's foreign policy tradition is a strategic article of faith that the US ought to dominate the western hemisphere while not permitting another great power to dominate Europe and North-East Asia (Mearsheimer, 2001).

American observers perceive that the rise of China in Asia will follow essentially a geopolitical trajectory similar to Monroe Doctrine of USA. John Mearsheimer, for example, predicts that China will want to follow its own Monroe Doctrine in order to seek the position of regional hegemon (Mearshiemer, 2014, p. 341). Explaining this he argues:

“ My argument, in a nutshell, is that if China continues to grow economically, it will attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the western hemisphere. The United States will, however, go to enormous lengths to prevent China from achieving regional Hegemony....the result will be security competition with considerable potential for war” (Mearshiemer,2014, pp. 332-33).

Mearsheimer's premonition may well actually turn into a reality as rising states want to translate their newly acquired power into greater authority in the global system to reshape the rules and institutions as per their interests. China, right now, is engaged in the same exercise, therefore, these moments are fraught with danger. Because when a state acquires a commanding position in the international system and the power of the existing leading state weakens, a strategic rivalry ensues and conflict- perhaps leading to war- becomes likely.

Now, the larger question which stares us in the face: do all rising powers become revisionists and embark on the rough path of challenging the existing world order? History offers us mixed shreds of evidence. In the late 19th century and early 20th century when Germany was rising as a leading power in the west, its dissatisfaction continued to grow with the existing order dominated mainly by Britain. The result was the security competition where Britain along with major powers like France and Russia collectively tried to contain German ambitions culminating in the war. Some analysts envisage the same situation unfolding between the USA and China.

The other example where power transition happened rather smoothly is the case of 20th century Great Britain. Great Britain did not resort to any containment strategy or alliance formation against the rising United States of America. Rather, a relatively smooth power transition took place. Japan's impressive economic and military power did not push her to unsettle the global order rather she got integrated into the international system. So amid these conflicting evidences how are then we to explain the rise of China? Whether a rising power challenges the existing international order or not depends mainly on two factors 1). The nature of the rising state's regime and the collective imagination of its historical past, 2).

The character of international order. In the above two cases, Japan and the USA did not challenge the existing global order because both nations' domestic political system was in harmony with the international system. Both are wedded to the liberal democratic principles with the capitalist mode of production which were the underlying principles of international order. Both have a benign view of its past with no fundamental sense of victimhood. Contrary to the above two cases, China like Germany possesses a domestic political set up at odds with the international system. The underlying principles and values of the Chinese regime are in fundamental conflict with those of international order and China like Germany harbor a deep sense of victimhood and injustice at the hands of colonial powers. Rising power, therefore, affords her an opportunity to right the historical wrongs done to it. Hence, the rise of China will not be a smooth one, and conflicts are bound to arise as we see it presently.

Multilateralism in the Covid-19 era

Multilateralism has received a serious setback in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, Covid-19 has made the cracks of multilateralism more glaring. There seems to be a consensus that multilateralism is on the decline or losing relevance. Lamenting the poor state of multilateralism, S. Jaishankar, said, 'Just when multilateralism was most in demand, it did not rise to the occasion..' (TOI, 2020). He continued, that countries behaved in selfish ways in pandemic raising a debate on the future directions of global affairs regarding the kind of world order or disorder we are going to enter.

Multilateralism, in the form of international regimes, laws, and institutions is thought to be functionally viable if there exists a global hegemon who is able and willing to uphold these structures and processes. Hegemon's willingness is contingent on the capacity of these collective structures and arrangements to serve its interests. The freedom of navigation in the 19th century and early 20th century was guaranteed by Britain due to its unrivaled naval superiority. Similarly, it widely accepted that the economic regimes established after the second world war owed their existence to the presence of the USA as a hegemonic power (Baylis and Summit, 2005). Today's crisis of multilateralism is widely attributed, among other things, to the retreat of the United States as a global hegemon. The USA no longer seems to back and finance the international institutions with the same spirit and enthusiasm it once did. This is due to the changing geopolitical environment and renewed interpretation of its national interests and priorities. This non-committal attitude towards multilateral institutions has intensified during the reign of President Trump. From the withdrawal from Paris Agreement, unilaterally reneging from Iran Nuclear Agreement, ditching the Trans Atlantic Partnership Pact (TPP), to the recent withdrawal from World Health Organization (WHO) are some of the instances of US's retreatism amounting to the abdication of leadership by the USA. The international laws, regimes, and institutions are a check on the arbitrary behavior of states. The weakening of these institutions has led to a rise in the arbitrary actions of the states which S. Jaishankar is alluding to. Though hegemonic power is

crucial to the efficient functioning of regimes and institutions, yet its decline, according to liberal institutionalists would not bring about the demise of the regimes it upheld. The disengagement and isolation of declining hegemon may threaten the progress of multilateralism, not shake its core (Zerubabel et.al, 2020). The multipolar world at least in an economic sense would induce new powers to step in the vacuum created by the retreat of the declining hegemon. This can be experienced in the context of US withdrawal from WHO which was replaced by China which pumped additional monies in the WHO treasury to compensate the deficit created by the US's stoppage of funds to the said organization. Being an economic giant, Chinese leadership utilizes the crisis to project its soft power which enables them to mitigate the repercussions of their use of brute force elsewhere. For instance, after the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, China emerged as a responsible economic player in the region (Breslin, 2008, pp.138-39). Beijing's 'charm offensive' in South-East Asia and elsewhere seemed to win it many friends so much so that it was widely believed that a Sino-centric East Asian order was on the horizon (Beeson,2008). Keeping up its policy of 'charm offensive' in the covid 19 period, Beijing provided EU and Africa with 500,000 testing kits, thousands of respirators, 200,000 advanced masks, and 17 tonnes of medical supplies playing the good Samaritan and undermining the US by becoming the first global responder. Even the Serbian president has admitted that the only country in a position to help in this crisis is the People's Republic of China. 'To the rest, thanks for nothing' (Makhdoomi, 2020).

Conclusion

Though it would be premature to forecast the form and substance of emerging global order, what is , however, certain, is that the existing order would be subjected to more pressure, strain, and challenges by changing dynamics and calculations and therefore, certain not to remain static. To quote Medcalf, 'whatever is happening we are on the edge of some kind of gathering storm. It is just that we do not yet know what the storm will look like or how it will break' (Crawford, 2020).

What, however, seems clear is the rise of a more confident and aggressive China. True, it cannot be the sole superpower and is not poised to singularly fill the breach left by the U.S. at least so, in the foreseeable future. Yet, the pandemic has laid bare the vulnerabilities of the U.S. hegemony and capability of China to seriously challenge the American dominance in multiple ways and areas.

Notwithstanding the above, the U.S. with its European allies has the leverage to tame the rise of China and facilitate its integration with the existing system. The western order, based as it is, on the rules and norms of non-discrimination and possesses open and rule-based institutions may create an incentive for China to integrate into it; as these features create conditions for rising states to advance their expanding economic and political goals. Moreover, the accommodative nature of western-backed liberal order allows rising power

to ascend the system and become the key stakeholder of it. China has, to a great deal, embraced the existing rules and institutions to its advantage. It has made the active use of these institutions to project itself to the great power status. Realizing that the road to progress, development, and great power status runs through these institutions, China, after a long recess, joined the World Trade Organization and used to further its economic interests. As its economic clout grows, its say in multilateral institutions increases making it an important stakeholder in the sustenance of these institutions. China is already integrated into the existing system to a great extent. The integration can further be promoted and sustained only if the U.S., the leading proponent of the current order sets about strengthening the existing order. The USA has to shun the attitude of retreatism and unilateralism. She has to reinvent her role of benign global hegemon in order to infuse trust and confidence in these institutions. For this to happen, it is incumbent on the U.S. to invest in these institutions and encourage other states to be part of them on the basis of equality and non-discrimination. The U.S. should desist from distancing herself from multilateral institutions and regimes and not resorting to unilateral actions; which shake the confidence of nations about the efficacy of these institutions and regimes, creating a vacuum to be filled by other rising powers(in present scenario China) leading to conflict between the rising power and declining hegemon. The U.S. must come to terms with the hard reality of rising China: it cannot thwart China's rise, but it can ensure the peaceful rise of China within the existing system by making it robust and comprehensive.

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