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Global Health Security

Post COVID-19 World: Will It Reshape Global Leadership?

By Benjamin Tze Ern Ho

SYNOPSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated political fissures within the international community, worsening the ongoing US-China competition. While the post COVID-19 world remains unclear, the contest for international leadership will go on.

COMMENTARY

THE OUTBREAK of a mysterious virus affecting thousands of Chinese citizens in Wuhan late last year had drawn little global concern, let alone taking action to prepare for what later turned out to be a pandemic. The general consensus among many countries – especially in the West – was that this was a virus that would be largely contained within East Asia.

In large Western cities such as London, Paris and New York, life continued as usual, and the voices of concern were mostly isolated within the medical community. After all the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) had minimal impact on the West, and it was assumed that this virus would be likewise.

Whither American Leadership

Few months on, the picture has changed drastically. As of 30 March 2020, more than 720,000 people worldwide have been affected by the disease, with some 34,000 deaths. Besides China, eight of the top ten countries affected are Western economies (Iran being the other) making up more than three-fifths of all cases worldwide.

Already the number of reported deaths altogether in Italy and Spain is more than five times that of China. While how long more this pandemic will last remains to be seen, a number of key themes and questions have been raised which are likely to persist long after the pandemic is over.

The first is whether the United States can continue to maintain its global leadership. Already the past few years have witnessed significant policy moves by the US administration that have raised the likelihood of American withdrawal from global politics.

These include the Trump administration's pull-out from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), growing protectionist measures in economic affairs, and significantly downgraded participation in international multilateral institutions such as the the East Asia Summit last year.

To be certain, the Trump administration has insisted that Asia continues to be integral to its political vision and that it remains highly invested in the region, both economically and in security affairs. For instance, its goods trade with Southeast Asia has grown from US\$233 billion in 2016 to US\$271 billion in 2018.

Economic relations with countries such as India, Japan and South Korea continue to be healthy, mirroring the state of political relations with these Asian players. In the security realm, the Indo-Pacific strategy has allowed the US to articulate its preference and priorities in defense cooperation in the region.

The high level Trump-Kim summits held in Singapore and Hanoi in 2018 and 2019 have also generated substantial interest in Southeast Asia as a key region in international affairs and its role in American foreign policy.

Can China Step Up to the Plate?

At the same time, it is unclear whether America – following COVID-19 – is able to preserve its international primacy even if it wants to. Indeed the pandemic has shown up significant weaknesses in the American political system as evinced by its lack of healthcare resources and coordination between the federal and state governments.

While this by no means disqualifies Washington from being a global leader, it does raise concerns that the US has been unable to fully put its house in order and that it ought to rectify matters at home before embarking on its political pursuits overseas. Indeed, scholars such as the American political scientist John Mearsheimer have argued that the US ought to practise greater restraint in its international politics which would consequently translate to a less interventionist foreign policy.

Others such as Hugh White have proposed sharing power with China thus effectively diluting US global influence. Notwithstanding some merits in these arguments, the broader implication involves whether American leadership will continue to be sustained.

Assuming this is no longer so in the long run, be it due to domestic factors or the international system, the question is whether China would step up to provide the

international leadership that the US leaves behind. While Chinese leaders rarely speak of China “wanting to lead”, the unspoken objective behind its rise is that ultimately it wants to be the number one superpower, as pointed out by Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew many years ago.

From the Belt and Road Initiative to the recent “face mask diplomacy”, Beijing seeks to brand itself as an exceptional power. A central narrative in China’s combat against the COVID-19 pandemic is that the Chinese model of fighting disease is superior to that of the West.

The CCP’s ability to control its population allows it to enforce measures that are seen to be incompatible with Western notions of human rights and individual freedoms. To this end, the Chinese government is likely to further emphasise its authoritarian approach to political governance as a mark of its ability and call into question the universality of Western ideas of political governance.

Time to Look Beyond Superpowers?

In a recent interview with CNN, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the likelihood that the COVID-19 would take some time, even possibly several years to run its course. As such it was imperative for both the US and China to work together to combat the pandemic, noted PM Lee. While this is certainly a preferred outcome for many countries, including Singapore, the possibility that COVID-19 would have resulted in deep structural changes within the international system cannot be ruled out.

To this end, the success stories (however preliminary) in combating the COVID-19 in places like Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea are instructional as they highlight the need for dynamic governance in times of crisis. More crucially they highlight the more fundamental issue that answers to global problems are not the monopoly of superpowers.

Small, and middle-power states possess considerable agency in determining what happens provided there is enough political will, social capital and trust between the government and citizens. Indeed it would be a mistake to discount the observations and lessons made by smaller states, simply because of their size. As observed by the English writer JRR Tolkien in his book the Lord of the Rings, “even the smallest can change the course of the future”.

Is it beyond the reach of the world’s small and medium powers to play a role in reshaping the global order in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

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