

Regional Perspectives: Post-COVID-19

Time for A New Regional Order: The Failure of American and Chinese Leadership

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The way the world's two largest powers - the US and China - have responded to the COVID-19 crisis serves as a catalyst for Asian countries to look for an alternative approach to the rules-based regional order. Now is the moment to step away from the long-standing assumption that only the major powers can define that order.

US-China relations are certainly important in the management of international affairs in our region. But the pandemic crisis demonstrates that we cannot leave the future of the world in general, and Asia in particular, to these bilateral dynamics. Both countries have revealed a variety of vulnerabilities and constraints internally and externally. They have failed to pass the most crucial test - failed to demonstrate that they are responsible powers taking fair, just and timely measures to strengthen the global commons and welfare. The US has not been willing to lead, or even to join, the international effort to fight COVID-19. China has been busy trying to avoid being criticized for the initial mishandling of the outbreak of the disease in Wuhan. In the midst of this global crisis, China has never stopped its coercive and bullying behaviour, contrary to prevailing international rules, in deploying its military assets in the South China and East China Seas.

So far, the principle narrative on the future Asian order has revolved around the US-China relationship. A lot of attention has been paid to such concepts as 'power transition,' 'Thucydides' Trap' and 'Hegemonic war between the existing established power and the rising power.' This narrative stems from the entrenched tendency to understand the regional order as defined mainly by major powers.

Asia, however, is more than the US and China. Given how the US and China have been responding to the challenge of the pandemic, we need to look beyond them when we consider the future of the rules-based order in this region. In oversimplifying the situation - focusing only on the US-China interaction - we risk narrowing the range of policy choices available to us, ignoring in particular the capacities of other regional actors, including the novel instruments of leverage that they could bring to shaping the region.

The US-China relationship, therefore, is not the only variable defining the future of Asia. Numerous countries and institutions - under the label 'the rest of Asia' - have substantial political, economic, military and socio-cultural power. 'The rest of Asia' includes such countries as Japan, India, Indonesia, Australia, Korea and Vietnam - and, in particular, the institution of ASEAN.

The components of 'the rest of Asia' are not just pawns at the mercy of US-China power play - they have independent agency and are fully capable of navigating the 'Great Game' over the future of Asia. An important consideration is that, given their shortcomings in respect of

both hard and soft power, neither the US nor China can dominate Asia alone. Their respective regional agendas and aspirations need to attract the 'acceptance' or 'support' of other players. In fact, the US-China battle for support in 'the rest of Asia' has been a running characteristic of the international scene in Asia in recent decades.

To make a more constructive contribution to rules-making in this region 'the rest of Asia' needs to be more pro-active and creative in responding to China-US developments. It may be necessary to act bilaterally, multilaterally and regionally - looking, in particular, to forging new alignments among themselves as a means to weaken the propensity of the major powers to dominate the agenda.

'The rest of Asia' may need to adopt measures to constrain the behaviour of either major power when it is inconsistent with internationally endorsed rules and norms. They should encourage the two major powers to play constructive roles - and also be prepared to forge new alignments among themselves to advance security cooperation, political dialogue and economic arrangements such as the extension of CPTPP (TPP-11). Substantiating 'ASEAN Centrality' is critically important in the regard.

The prime goal for 'the rest of Asia' should be to sustain and further enhance the rules-based order. The rules-based order has provided the basic foundation for peace and prosperity for the past several decades. Strong binding rules protect small and medium-sized countries, because disputes can be resolved according to rules rather than on the basis of who has the power to impose an outcome.

The rules-based order should be based on the concept of multi-polarity – with 'the rest of Asia' joining the US and China in sustaining the order. Such a multipolar order will be more stable than an order at the mercy of the two major powers. It reaches beyond the bilateral mindset which has prevented Asians from thinking creatively.

There are indications already, it should be said, that 'the rest of Asia' countries are moving beyond a US-China order. There are signs of a developing common commitment to multipolarity - underlying a variety of Indo-Pacific visions, strategies and outlooks - on the part of Japan, India, Australia and ASEAN. An important consequence of the COVID-19 crisis is that it is a powerful reminder of the need to move forward in this multipolar process - and, in a sense, it provides an opportunity to do so.

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