

Regional Perspectives: Post-COVID-19

Divide, Cook and Consume

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In a rising tide of 'non-medical' comments on the COVID-19 phenomenon (including the pieces published on this website) two types of observation seem to be surfacing. The first refers to the epidemic as a catalyst, deepening the already bitter US-China rivalry; the second observation refers to the way the world is backtracking in this viral atmosphere, moving away from multilateralism, connectivity, economic integration and other similar things associated with the brighter side of globalization. In other words, this second line of thinking sees deglobalization as the unfortunate megatrend of our times.

What is said less often (if at all) is that the US vs China dynamic, on the one hand, and deglobalization, on the other, are in a very basic sense two sides of the same coin. The nature of the strategic divide between the two superpowers, the declining one and the emerging one, is such as to leave no room for optimism about overcoming that divide - and getting back quickly to the joint construction of a seamless world. What is at stake is something considered non-negotiable - global hegemony, with all its incredible perks.

The understanding of these hard realities injects a dose of fatalism and resignation into current expert analysis - reflected in remarks about two power-hungry, egoistic giants playing a blame game and mercilessly shaking the rest of the world. This picture damages the reputations of both superpowers - and even implies that choosing between them is meaningless. Such a seemingly balanced attitude to current US-China confrontation, however, is hardly justified.

The truth is that globalization - as conceived by Washington strategists in the early post-Cold War era - was basically a megaproject to eternalize America's unipolar status. Enterprises like Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) were launched to drive the world in that direction, but they backfired. Another power has risen as their major beneficiary - and some have concluded that if this process is allowed to continue, the New American Century might never eventuate.

Now that this alarmist mentality has crystalized inside the Trump administration, we see America's total neglect of the WTO and hear about its new preference for bilateral trade deals. Instead of preaching inclusiveness in the framework of economic cooperation in the Asia Pacific, the US switches to the 'free-and-open' Indo-Pacific doctrine, aimed at containing China.

Current trade war moves have been accompanied by public insults - taking hostage the Huawei Princess, Meng Wanzhou, and xenophobic media hype - all aimed at cutting China down to size. Thus, the model of globalization that once fitted the ruling hegemon's interests has now been sacrificed - in order to split the world into pieces and to cook and consume those pieces at a 'Divide and Rule Feast'. As usual, collateral damage is not seen as a problem.

Whatever may be said about the style and substance of China's international behaviour at present, is it guilty of doing anything as destabilizing and destructive as this? My answer is an emphatic no - and I do not mind if this answer is viewed as an expression of respect for the extraordinary achievements of China, and a gesture of solidarity with China during its trial.

To those Asians who tend to be critical and suspicious of China - and there are not a few of them, as we know - I would say that unless they and their Chinese counterparts find a way to understand each other now, they may as well stop cherishing the dream of the Asian Century.

Since some Asian balancing games are traditionally based on the profit motive - that is, the desire to gain from dealing simultaneously with partners who are at odds with each other - I would suggest that the choices faced today are not about to have or not to have. They are about to be or not to be.

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