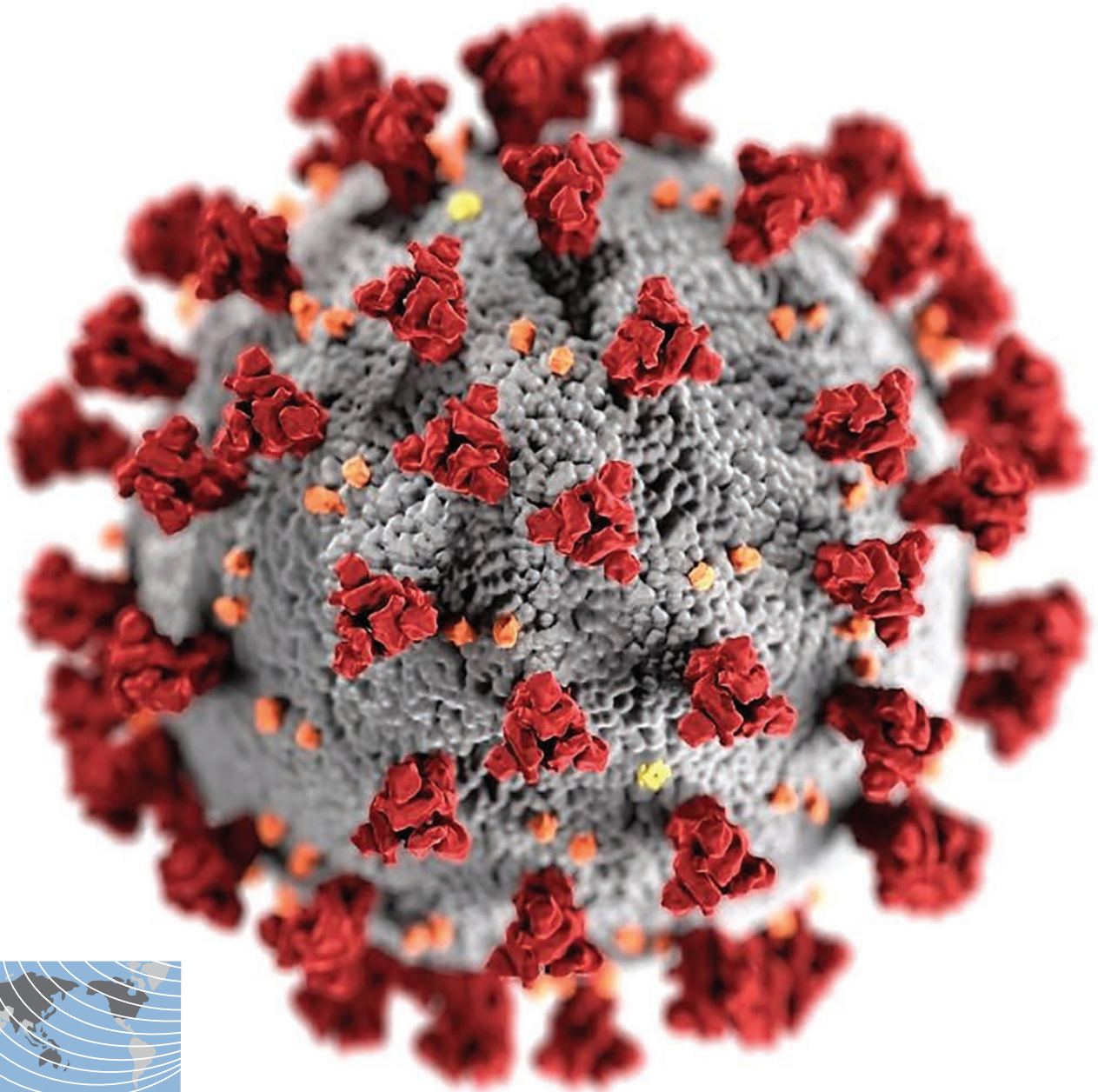


CSCAP

REGIONAL SECURITY OUTLOOK



CSCAP
COUNCIL FOR
SECURITY COOPERATION
IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

2021

COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Established in 1993, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is the premier Track Two organisation in the Asia Pacific region and counterpart to the Track One processes dealing with security issues, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus Forum. It provides an informal mechanism for scholars, officials and others in their private capacities to discuss political and security issues and challenges facing the region. It provides policy recommendations to various intergovernmental bodies, convenes regional and international meetings and establishes linkages with institutions and organisations in other parts of the world to exchange information, insights and experiences in the area of regional political-security cooperation.

Front cover image

Source: Illustration of a SARS-CoV-2 virion.
Credit: Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins / CDC.

Back cover image

Source: Jan Huisken

CSCAP thanks the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, The Australian National University, for their support for this publication

Designed and printed by CanPrint Communications,
Canberra, Australia.

ISBN: 978-0-642-60708-9

Copyright © 2020 by CSCAP
www.cscap.org

EDITOR

Ron Huisken

Adjunct Associate Professor,
Strategic and Defence Studies Centre,
Australian National University

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Kathryn Brett

Strategic and Defence Studies Centre,
Australian National University

EDITORIAL PANEL

Anthony Milner

CSCAP Australia

Ric Smith

CSCAP Australia

Philips Vermonte

CSCAP Indonesia

Jusuf Wanandi

CSCAP Indonesia

LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITORS

On behalf of CSCAP, we are pleased to present the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook (CRSO) 2021. Inaugurated in 2007, the CRSO volume is now in its fifteenth year.

The CRSO brings expert analysis to bear on critical security issues facing the region and points to policy-relevant alternatives for Track One (official) and Track Two (non-official) to advance multilateral regional security cooperation.

The views in the CRSO 2021 do not represent those of any Member committee or other institution and are the responsibility of the individual authors and the Editor. Charts and images in the CRSO 2021 do not necessarily reflect the views of the chapter authors.

Ron Huisken and Kathryn Brett.

CONTENTS

Regional Security Outlook

- 4 **Introduction: Sliding Toward a Less Orderly World** – *Ron Huisken*
- 9 **United States: Persistent Security Concerns in an Election Year** –
Jeffrey W. Hornung
- 13 **Sino-US Strategic Competition: Impact on the Security Situation in the Asia-Pacific Region** – *Teng Jianqun*
- 17 **Japan: Strengthening Order and Stability in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific** –
Ryo Sahashi
- 20 **India: Competition over the Character of Order in the Indo-Pacific Intensifies** – *Vijay Gokhale*
- 23 **Optimistic and Pessimistic Scenarios: A Russian Perception of an Insecure and Uncertain Post-Pandemic Future** – *Alexei D. Voskressenski*
- 26 **Europe’s Approach Towards Asia: diversification in times of COVID-19** –
Alice Ekman
- 29 **ROK: Korean Peninsula Security Outlook 2021** – *Beomchul Shin*
- 32 **Australia: The Art of Strategic Balance** – *Andrew O’Neil*
- 36 **Indonesia’s Regional Security Outlook 2021: Indonesia as a Responsible Maritime Power** – *Gilang Kembara*
- 39 **Thailand During the Pandemic: Building resilience in an increasingly polarised world** – *Kasira Cheeppensook*
- 42 **Malaysia’s Regional Security Outlook: Continuity amid Disruption** –
Thomas Daniel
- 46 **Singapore’s Concerns: Comprehensive Security Rebooted** –
Simon Tay and Jessica Wau
- 49 **Vietnam: The Indo-Pacific Regional Architecture: the Quad, Inclusivity and ASEAN Centrality** – *Le Trung Kien*
- 52 **New Zealand: A Re-elected Government with Less Appetite for Geopolitics** –
Robert Ayson
- 55 **Myanmar: At a Crossroads: Myanmar’s Evolving Security Challenges** –
Aung Zin Phyو Thein
- 59 **Sino-American Competition in Cambodia: A 2020 Retrospective** –
Pou Sothirak
- 63 **Special Supplement**
AUSCSCAP/ASIALINK The Virus and Regional Order – Initial Assessments

Sliding Toward a Less Orderly World

Ron Huisken



April 14, 2020. Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19. Credit: ASEAN Vietnam Chairmanship 2020.

The COVID-19 novel coronavirus is a gritty and primitive specimen, so primitive that scientists dispute whether it qualifies as a form of life. But it is wickedly contagious and possessed of fiendishly advanced stealth capabilities. In a matter of weeks it had erased ‘normality’ across most of our planet, effortlessly riding the tentacles of globalisation to every corner of the world, paying no greater heed to geopolitical divides than to religious, racial or political boundaries. The first infections appear to have occurred in central China in late November 2019 and just 10 weeks later the number of states yet to report any infections was smaller than the number who had. By mid-2020, when barely a handful of the 197 members of the United Nations could claim to be COVID free, the virus had become the undisputed gold standard for a global pandemic. In the absence of a vaccine, the logical countermeasure was to stifle the virus by keeping people apart and enduring whatever economic consequences flowed from doing so.

Separation and lockdown became the global norm. The pandemic gradually reduced the distracting cacophony of the international system to a whisper, leaving all states unusually exposed. This inadvertent additional transparency appears to have intensified the inflammatory effect the advent of the virus had on a number of international relationships. The scale of the economic penalty paid to weather the pandemic has been immense – essentially immeasurable – as are the social, political and other changes tangled up with this huge scar on humanity’s timeline.

In thinking about the longer-term ramifications of the pandemic, perhaps the most widely used gambit was to posit two fundamental alternatives. Firstly, that the pandemic would prove to be a true watershed in which everything was rendered more fluid and there was genuine scope to make fundamentally different choices about the future of the human enterprise. The alternative view was that the pandemic would see the strengthening or accentuation of

established trends and developments, that is, that we would face the same future that we could (more dimly) discern in 2019, but that this future would arrive more quickly and, to that extent, be rather more inevitable. In broad terms, it would appear that the first alternative was more widely endorsed in the earlier stages of the pandemic with the weight of opinion swinging to the latter from around mid-2020. This transition is broadly supported when comparing the commentary CSCAP commissioned in the April-May 2020 timeframe (reprinted below from p5) with the articles that follow which were prepared in the October-November 2020 period. Clearly, however, these are differences of degree, even of semantics. Whichever assessment the reader prefers, the world will feel and work differently when COVID-19 is behind us.

In one decisively important sense, however namely, its impact on the character of the US-China relationship – the notion that the pandemic has been a transformational watershed seems indisputable. COVID-19 struck a world in which significant changes in the relative strategic weight of the world’s major states was well advanced, both motivating and allowing behaviour that challenged the prevailing international order, inevitably, the very order that had supported and encouraged these changes. By the time COVID-19 took hold the condition of the international system could fairly be described as turbulent and increasingly brittle, an outcome clearly anticipated in the assessments offered in successive editions of this publication over the years 2014-20 (See Box).

CSCAP Regional Security Assessments 2014-20

“One does not have the sense that East Asia today is characterised by expectations of peaceful change that are either alarmingly weaker or encouragingly stronger than was the case in the early 1990s. In short, we are not winning.” **[Outlook 2014]**

“Despite being clearly anticipated and exhaustively studied for some twenty-five years, the management of the Asia Pacific’s strategic transformation is currently headed toward outcomes at the worst case end of the spectrum” **[Outlook 2015]**

“The US appears to have become more resigned to the likelihood that achieving a stable coexistence with a powerful China will involve a prolonged period of geo-political contestation.” **[Outlook 2016]**

“...the drift of the US-China relationship toward difficulty and coolness inescapably heightens the risk of inadvertent incidents...This will occur against the backdrop

of a broader sensation that the constellation of circumstances that produced decades of comparative order and stability ... is now badly eroded... The Asia Pacific now has no more important business than to address what will or should be the shape of (the) new order and determine how to get there peacefully.” **[Outlook 2017]**

“That we are witnessing the end of an era ... seems beyond dispute... A major change in the distribution of hard power is well underway but for the indefinite future this ‘new order’ seems destined to have a collective leadership (as) no single state will have the margin of hard power and the aura of legitimacy to ... seize or accept ... the mantle of sole leadership.” **[Outlook 2018]**

2018 saw “the end of ambiguity and denial about whether the United States and China saw themselves as in an essentially adversarial contest for global pre-eminence.”

“What recent events have thrown into sharper relief is whether the extant rules-based order ... is capable of sustaining a level playing field between states that hold starkly different views on the question of governance.” **[Outlook 2019]**

“The abrupt reconfiguration of US policy objectives [in 2017-18] effectively drew a line under the posture of engagement of China that had endured since 1972.”

“More than a year of negotiations have been inconclusive...neither confirming nor precluding whether the stark differences ... on the principles and practice of governance can be bridged to sustain constructive economic entanglement.”

“...for longstanding reasons, both [the US and China] share deep responsibility for the prevailing state of affairs between them.” **[Outlook 2020]**

Perhaps the most important consequence of COVID-19 has been that China and the United States have been prepared to see their increasingly difficult bilateral relationship fracture precipitously and to be effectively stripped of every residual positive attribute. Far from rekindling suppressed instincts of collegiality, the crisis saw the two premier states defiantly flaunting the distinctive features of their governmental systems as they engaged in a bitter and emotional exchange on the causes, management and probable consequences of the pandemic. The consequences of this emotional divorce – if it is simply allowed to run its course – are incalculable. A critical element of

this estrangement was a seemingly mutual impatience to be rid of the deep economic entanglements that had developed over the decades of engagement.

Among the more confident predictions of new or strengthened propensities post-COVID was the winding back of globalisation – that is, to restrain or qualify the post-Cold War willingness to allow market forces free rein to determine the supply chain for all products. As major power relations deteriorated in the new century, some began to question the wisdom of this philosophy, at least for the products deemed highly sensitive from a national security or health perspective. Many consider that while

“In one decisively important sense, however – namely, its impact on the character of the US-China relationship – the notion that the pandemic has been a transformational watershed seems indisputable.”

efficiency may have been king in the past, the COVID experience will see it displaced for an indeterminate period by resilience. Economists, of course, have warned that market dynamics and the profit motive constituted formidable forces that can only be diverted at considerable cost to the state and/or the consumer.

There are also important wider considerations. International trade, joint ventures, reciprocal direct investment are self-evidently a crucial medium for the development of common interests between states, including a shared resistance to issues that generate tension and confrontation and put those common interests at risk. This belief – that economic interdependence strengthens the peace between states – has long been part of the enduring drive to strive for genuinely freer international trade. It is an aspect of our world that we jettison to our peril. Economic interdependence may not guarantee peace, as the events of August 1914 attest, but it can still prove invaluable.

An illuminating indicator of the intensity of the political clash between the US and China that the pandemic brought to a head is what happened to the issue of the rules-based order. The rules-based order – the system that had developed from the foundations laid by the US in the immediate aftermath of WW2 – had been flagged as an issue for most of the new century. Most states were prepared to concede, albeit discretely, that the prevailing order had been instrumental in enabling the strong improvement in their international standing and future opportunities but a few also signalled reservations through a reference to the fact that they had not participated in the design of the order. Some key events, most notably the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 without a clear mandate from the UN

Security Council damaged the aura of authority and acceptance associated with the order. The issue surged to a new plateau over the manner in which Crimea was re-incorporated into the Russian Federation in 2014 and China’s dramatic construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea in 2014-15, developments seen as putting central components of the order – namely the UN Charter and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea – under stress.

Under the stresses associated with the pandemic, this somewhat hesitant and ambiguous disquiet distilled into the contention that alternatives to the liberal democracy model of governance were available that were demonstrably more effective and offered a superior basis for a revamped set of norms and guidelines to underpin international order. A core axis of resentment about the prevailing order has been exposed as the perceived contention that liberal democracy and the market economy was and remained an evolutionary pinnacle in humanity’s aspiration to devise the optimal system of governance. A cluster of states – the strongest of which is China – are increasingly disposed to contend that over the very long periods of time that they have been coherent communities they have evolved distinctive social contracts and means of giving effect to such contracts. These arrangements – and associated notions of such core themes as democracy, human rights and the rule of law – may in some respects differ quite sharply from the liberal democracy model but these states now insist that it is unacceptable to in any way question their legitimacy or to portray them as having anything other than equivalent status. In an address to the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University on 27 April 2020, China’s Foreign Minister elected to put it in the following terms; “China and the

US are facing increasingly prominent contradictions in social systems, values and state interests.”

While openness and clarity about a contentious issue is an important step forward it does not promise a durable solution. That is almost certainly the case here. Among the foundational principles drawn from the history of the first half of the 20th century and that informed the US approach to order is that the concentration of power was a threat to the primacy of the individual and to international peace because errors of judgement could be more directly translated into massive and irreversible actions. The solution was deemed to lie in deliberate disaggregation and institutionalised power-sharing. The democracy/market economy model was not intended or expected to deliver the most efficient and effective governance. Rather, the objective was to provide the strongest governance consistent with the State being subordinate to its citizens. In contrast, the thinking that animates China’s leadership – from the writings of Confucius to Marx, Lenin and Mao – all points to the State taking comprehensive responsibility for the nation’s destiny, insisting on correspondingly exclusive ownership of the instruments of power and re-casting the concepts of rights, obligations and rewards in collective rather than individual terms.

At the practical level, these somewhat esoteric notions translate into sharp differences in the role of the state in business affairs and concerns that these differences preclude a level playing field or fair competition for national and foreign markets. The body of rules seeking to provide a level playing field for international commerce and related matters such as the protection of intellectual property and market access – or a system to ensure fair competition between private enterprises from all



November 15, 2020. Signing Ceremony of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Credit: ASEAN Secretariat / Kusuma Pandu Wijaya.

nations – are without doubt the most widely and continuously accessed component of the rules-based order. These were roughly the issues that defeated the increasingly urgent US-China negotiations in 2018-19. This development does not so much challenge the importance of a rules-based order but it does leave hanging whether it is possible to envisage an order that is devoid of a normative foundation.

Although a handful of governments handled the COVID crisis with distinction, all things considered, the international community had little cause to feel reassured about its performance. No one with clout and credibility tried to pull states together. Given the intensifying contestation between states, it was hardly surprising that the world's multilateral machinery, starting with key global bodies like the UN Security Council and the G20 but extending to ASEAN processes like the ARF

and EAS, was paralysed. Once again, as a community of states, we have been forced to conclude that we have much to re-learn as well as learn, yet another experience to examine for the lessons it offers on how to minimise the risk of a recurrence and how to suppress it most efficiently should it recur, and to find more effective ways to encourage states not to allow the passage of time to cause these lessons to be lost.

And what of CSCAP? We owe our existence to the aspiration to build in the Indo-Pacific region a multilateral process centred on ASEAN that was adequately credible, flexible, imaginative and courageous to play an indispensable role in preserving stability and peace amid what was confidently expected to be a testing agenda of strategic transformation. Whatever one thinks of how effectively we have used the past 25 years we now confront the perfect storm – a challenge to

regional stability and peace that is at the very top of the scale of imaginable possibilities and – due to the consensus rule in the ASEAN Regional Forum – comparatively little in the way of tried and tested procedures to explore and encourage a mutual backing away. The order that prevailed for more than 60 years after WW2 is eroding. Whether it will be superseded by a single, looser order or multiple orders each with distinctive values and norms is still unclear. Further uncertainty stems from the architect of the current order self-consciously washing its hands of leadership and example-setting in recent times and displaying an arrogant disregard for that most coveted quality – the aura of legitimacy and authority. It remains to be seen whether, as a nation, it wishes to, and is able, to begin to claw that back but it remains immensely powerful and influential and therefore must endure being judged by the highest standards.

In the short term, at least, this leaves only diplomacy. The objective has to be to develop mindsets among the key players that ‘decoupling’ is a costly and dangerous path, not something to be approached in a mood of distrust and betrayal and to be accomplished ‘as quickly and as absolutely as possible’. The tools of persuasion will necessarily include highlighting perhaps the most important judgement arrived at in earlier CSCAP assessments, namely that an indeterminate period of co-existence and power-sharing seems inescapable. Much will also have to be made of the significant errors of judgement on all sides in terms of setting objectives and policy directions and the means of accomplishing them that contributed so much to the recent ‘emotional

divorce’. Our notional diplomat will have to be well-informed and able to skilfully occupy the space between being frank and being brutal. Speaking truth to power can be daunting but doing so in a manner that makes power pay attention is the supreme skill. Finally, our diplomat will be able to stress that the voluntary and sincere goodwill of all the smaller and medium states of the region is available to both in equal measure.

We should not be naïve. The prevailing tensions are not the result of mere misunderstandings. They have deep and substantive roots and may defy remedy. Simply to persuade the parties to frame the objective as the creation of sufficient

space between them to diffuse the more acute sources of confrontation – rather than seek a wrenching parting of the ways – would be an extraordinary accomplishment. While none should be discouraged from tackling this diplomatic challenge, a consistent message on the themes outlined above from the leadership of ASEAN could prove to be decisively important. ASEAN, after all, is in the front row of this unfolding drama and has perhaps the most to lose.

Ron Huiskens

Adjunct Associate Professor, Strategic & Defence Studies Centre, ANU and Editor of the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook.

United States: Persistent Security Concerns in an Election Year

Jeffrey W. Hornung

Donald Trump entered office four years ago with a promise to pursue an America First strategy. Different from his predecessors who focused largely on expanding multilateral free trade agreements, embracing relations with alliances, and pursuing stable relations with China, the Trump administration focused on crafting bilateral trade agreements, pursuing strategic competition with China

and strengthening alliance ties while concurrently criticising them. The United States will begin 2021 with a new administration led by Joe Biden.

Aside from the possibility of black swan events, the security challenges facing the incoming Biden administration are likely to remain largely the same as those in 2020. As such, it is likely the US will continue to prioritise similar issues in its outreach to the Indo-Pacific region. The specifics, however, will depend on the answers the Biden administration arrives at to several questions examined below.

US Approach to the Indo-Pacific Region

The increasing geopolitical, military, and economic heft of the Indo-Pacific

region means the US will likely continue to prioritise the region in 2021. This means certain elements of the Trump administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy or the Obama administration's 'rebalance' are likely to remain in place. This includes a focus on free trade, transparent development assistance and infrastructure support, freedom of navigation, and freedom from coercion. Because regional countries find themselves under increasing duress on many of these fronts, the Biden administration will likely continue to work with regional allies and partners to prevent further deterioration of these elements. Within the region, there are four areas that will likely remain unchanged as US priorities in 2021.



From left, Doug Emhoff, husband of Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, Harris, President-elect Joe Biden and his wife Jill Biden on stage together, Saturday, Nov. 7, 2020, in Wilmington, Del. Credit: AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, Pool.

The first is China. Chinese activity in 2020 in the military domain continued to follow a pattern seen over the past decade. Increased military spending, defence modernisation, and air and naval provocations have undermined US military advantages and freedom of manoeuvre. Additionally, China's maritime and air activities in and above the East and South China Seas continue to challenge the sovereignty of other countries, intimidate Taiwan, and undermine regional stability. Collectively, these actions impair US interests. A similar story is occurring in the economic domain. China's state capitalism is at odds with free and open economic competition. In addition to industrial subsidies and unfair trade relationships, the US has increasingly called out Chinese technology transfers, use of tariffs and currency manipulation, intellectual property theft, and leveraging of development assistance to expand its influence. Consequently, economic

ties have shifted and become increasingly confrontational. These trends are unlikely to change in 2021, ensuring US attention will continue to focus on China.

A second issue is North Korea. Despite three years of sustained diplomatic efforts by Washington and Seoul, there is scant evidence that Pyongyang has changed toward more peaceful behaviour or that the threat it poses has been reduced. Not only has Pyongyang tested and developed more weapons over the past four years, a military parade in October 2020 appears to show it has developed a new ICBM. How the Biden administration chooses to approach North Korea could dominate its foreign policy agenda. Should it continue to pursue diplomacy without any tangible evidence of change? Should it declare an end to the Korean War and accept North Korea as a nuclear state? Or should

Washington return to a harder position, even if Pyongyang continues its penchant for provocations? If these were not hard enough questions, COVID-19 may lead to greater instability on the Korean Peninsula, leading to a crisis early on for the next administration. Whereas 2020 was relatively quiet, history shows North Korea rarely stays quiet for long. The Biden administration may face an early challenge from North Korea.

The third likely priority issue for the US in 2021 is relations with allies and partners. Because of the continuing security concerns stemming from China and North Korea, US allies and partners will likely continue to be a strategic asset for the US. While US alliance relationships in 2020 remain more-or-less strong, several undercurrents of friction could manifest in 2021 to challenge Washington. With Japan and South Korea, the major focus of attention

July 27, 2020. Philippine Sea. F/A -18E Super Hornets attached to Carrier Air Wing 5 fly as the Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan* steams ahead. Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jason Tarleton.



will be continuing negotiations over the extent they are willing and able to fund contributions to continue hosting US forces in their countries. While it appears unlikely a Biden administration would apply the same level of pressure on these allies as a second term Trump administration would have, there is discussion in Washington on the need for allies to do more to support the US. This makes it likely these allies will seek to delay these talks and potentially reach a better deal with the next administration. US relations with the Philippines and Thailand generally improved in 2020, with Manila retracting its threat to cancel a bilateral Visiting Forces Agreement and security ties with Bangkok continuing a return to pre-coup normalcy. As the past has shown, however, small perceived slights or an overbearing US can easily derail improvements. Only with Australia, where alliance ties were relatively smooth in 2020, does 2021 appear to be shaping up to be free from potential problems. That said, one potential issue Washington may face in 2021 that may cause friction in any of its alliances is the issue of whether any ally is willing to host US ground-based intermediate range missiles.

A final US priority in 2021 is COVID-19. While the focus will be on containing further domestic spread concurrently while mitigating the impact on the US economy, there are regional matters related to COVID that will likely have Washington's attention. First, in addition to continuing to monitor the possible spread of COVID-19 among US forces in the region, the US might also need to be alert to any COVID-induced degradation of military readiness of not only regional-based US forces, but also those of allies and partners to prevent adversaries sensing opportunities to be exploited. Second, as the region is a major trading hub,

the US may need to continue to contend with mitigating the effects of border closures and diminished transportation links in regional and global supply chains. Third, US engagement may continue to focus on countering the efforts of countries that seek to exploit COVID-19 for gain, including spreading disinformation and provoking states weakened by the pandemic. Finally, the US may continue to work with regional allies and partners to coordinate efforts on stopping COVID-19 and working toward recovery.

Unanswered Questions

In response to these challenges, the Biden administration will likely confront several questions as it develops policy responses. Below are some of the more likely questions that may arise.

What is the best approach with China? In the US, China is seen as both benefiting from the current world order while simultaneously challenging it through activities that discredit its principles and norms. It is unclear, however, what the best US approach should be. Will the Biden administration continue to pursue strategic competition and accuse China of exploiting the rules-based order and attempting to restructure it to its advantage and seek to reinforce US strength and promote US influence? If so, to what extent will the US try to encourage stronger support from its allies? Alternatively, should the trade war intensify and regional allies and partners grow increasingly uncomfortable with the competition, will the next administration shift its approach and focus less on the explicit geopolitical competitive aspects and instead seek ways to reinvigorate US alliances and partnerships as part of a broader multilateral effort which includes international/regional institutions?

“Despite the Bush and Obama administrations’ efforts to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia and continuing demand signals from individual Southeast Asian nations for more US engagement, there is also an explicit desire to avoid being forced to choose a side in the US-China strategic competition...”

And with either approach, to what extent should Washington pursue more visible ties with Taiwan, particularly after the US House of Representatives unanimously passed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act in March 2020, signalling strong bipartisan support for preventing Taiwan's diplomatic allies from severing their ties with Taipei under duress from Beijing?

What will be the US level of attention to regional development assistance and infrastructure support? In October 2018, Congress passed and the Trump administration signed the BUILD Act to improve the use of investment for development. The new entity that was created was given a budget of \$60 billion to help encourage private investment projects as alternatives to projects supported under China's Belt and Road

Initiative. As competition between the US and China continues into 2021 and the economic effects of COVID-19 continue to spread throughout the US economy, how much flexibility will the Biden administration have to devote large sums of economic assistance overseas? Furthermore, should Chinese activities call for more immediate US responses in the military, diplomatic and economic domains, where will development assistance and infrastructure support fall in the long list of US policy priorities?

How strongly should the US prioritise human rights? Although the Trump administration had occasionally spoken to issues of human rights, such as criticising China's human rights record in Xinjiang and Hong Kong and even sanctioning Chinese officials responsible for repression, its efforts were arguably limited to China. Other countries' abuses were largely ignored. Will the Biden administration continue to highlight human rights abuses as it pertains only to China? Or will human rights re-emerge as one of the main pillars of US foreign policy? And will the US go even further and pursue a broader value and democracy promotion agenda in its outreach to the region?

To what degree will the US seek to strengthen relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both as an organisation and its individual member countries? Despite the Bush and Obama administrations' efforts to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia and continuing demand signals from individual Southeast Asian nations for more US engagement, there is also an explicit desire to avoid being forced to choose a side in the US-China strategic competition that emerged. While the Trump administration has continued to grow relations with Vietnam, improved US relations with Thailand following years of

fractured ties, and avoided a potential US-Philippines alliance-ending decision if Manila had cancelled the Visiting Forces Agreement, multilateral diplomatic engagement in the region's institutions has not been a priority despite US allies like Japan and Australia strengthening ties with ASEAN. Where ASEAN or individual Southeast Asian states will fit in US policy in 2021 will be something the Biden administration may have to answer, particularly as part of a broader regional strategy. Should these states continue to seek balance in US-China ties, the next administration may be challenged to effectively reconcile engaging them while deflecting Chinese influence.

How and to what degree should the US engage India in implementing its regional strategy? The Trump administration sought to deepen US-India ties, continuing a general pattern set in motion by its predecessors. This includes maintaining the designation of India as a Major Defence Partner to help support India's capacity-building, a designation initiated by the Obama administration. There is no reason to believe the Biden administration would dramatically shift that trajectory. Yet, some questions may need to be answered. How will the US respond should New Delhi oppose US efforts to explicitly strengthen military and political cooperation with India as part of the geopolitical competition with China, such as fully formalising the Quad? Similarly, will the US continue to highlight India's plans to purchase missiles from Russia and oil from Iran, much to India's chagrin, and risk improvements in bilateral ties? Finally, should the US push India on civil liberties and link improvement to the clearance of weapons sales, even though this may jeopardise stronger ties?

Conclusion

The security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region could ensure that the region continues to remain important to the incoming Biden administration, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, as dynamic as the region is, the security trends have proven relatively static, suggesting the issues of China, North Korea, and US alliances may sit high on the list of policy priorities of the next administration. While the Biden administration's specific policies may depend on answers to the aforementioned questions, the US regional approach may exhibit more continuity than change.

Jeffrey W. Hornung

Political scientist at the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation.

Sino-US Strategic Competition: Impact on the Security Situation in the Asia-Pacific Region

Teng Jianqun

The National Security Strategy Report (NSSR) issued on December 18, 2017 by the Trump Administration was a milestone in relations between China and the United States. This event also had deep impact on the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region. In this report, the United States for the first time since the two countries established their diplomatic relationship in 1979, characterised China as a strategic competitor and international revisionist. This was an abrupt and profound change in the relationship between the two countries, a change which has also caused great concern among other countries in this region.

The United States declares China to a ‘strategic competitor’

The United States has officially and emphatically positioned China as a “strategic competitor. If you read the Trump administration’s NSSR you find the whole report says just one thing: China is an international revisionist and a competitor of the United States. The logic is as follows: while the current challenges or threats to the United States might traverse terrorism, North Korea or Iran in the long run, it will be China’s aspiration to displace the US as the global hegemon. So the United States should prepare to face such a challenge from China.

The US currently has at least three negative perceptions of China. First, American worries about the China of the future have been intensified in recent years by China’s fast development at home and active diplomacy abroad. Today, even ordinary individuals in the United States tend to think about the future of China in pessimistic terms. Public opinion polls show the increase of negative perceptions from American citizens toward China. The leaders from both countries have addressed the importance of people to people exchanges, which are good ways to develop better mutual understanding. Yet, these exchanges have suffered setbacks in recent years because of



June 18, 2020. PLA Navy guided-missile frigate *Hengyang* attached to a destroyer flotilla under the PLA Southern Theater Command fires its close-in weapons system during a maritime live-fire training exercise in waters of the South China Sea. Credit: eng.chinmil.com.cn/ Li Wei.

“United States worries about the China of the future have already completely twisted US attitudes and policies towards China.”

the passive and negative US attitude in this regard.

Second, some US politicians seek to manipulate these worries to their advantage. This became especially clear when the divisions in American society met the 2020 election campaign. Politicians like President Trump sought to manipulate the worries of the public to mobilise support. Language can be used in clever ways to exploit these worries and to worsen the relationship between the two countries. President Trump initiated trade friction or war since August 2017, but it was not simply about the trade deficit. He also used “Chinese Virus” to describe the COVID-19 pandemic, a label targeted at all the Chinese in the world. Politicians in the United States also intervened in the domestic affairs of China, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet. They have tried hard to portray China as a strategic competitor or threat to the United States so as to mobilise public support and secure re-election.

Thirdly and finally, worries about China also come from the so-called deep state in the United States. There are interest groups attracted to having a clear-cut enemy and to exposing potential future leaders to their thinking. There is a tradition in the United States, now more than 240 years old, to have an enemy, from Germany, Japan, the former Soviet

Union to Osama Bin Laden of Al Qaeda. Meanwhile, they also worry about the future of their country given the continuing fast development of China. Today, to portray China as a strategic competitor or rival has become their number one job.

These three factors have paved the way toward strategic competition between China and the United States, which has had a negative impact on the Sino-US relationship. As a result of these choices by the United States, China has already responded strongly to the challenges from the United States. The Sino-US relationship has entered into a new rebalancing stage since the old balance of power between the two sides has been or is being changed. During this process, we should expect there to be ups and downs or even confrontation.

China’s response to actions taken by the United States

The rebalancing process actually started in 2001. The Bush Administration for the first time noted that the United States should aspire to rebalance the relationship among world major powers. According to the NSSR issued in September 2002, the United States accepted the importance of the fight against terrorism but also resolved to put rebalancing major powers relationships at the top of the agenda of US foreign policy. China has been active in cooperation with the United States, including the fighting against terrorism, in those years.

When Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced that the US Administration would pivot (later rebalance) toward the Asia-Pacific region in July 2009, the security environment in this region was suddenly changed. The Japanese government purchased Diaoyu Island, which led to the deterioration of relations between China and Japan. The Government of the

Republic of the Philippines under the leadership of President Benigno Aquino III also unilaterally initiated the South China Sea Arbitration in January 2013.

Facing this sudden change in the security environment, China has responded in two ways. On the one hand, China took a tougher stance on sensitive issues like Diaoyu Island and the dispute in the South China Sea. China sent Coast Guard vessels to patrol the surrounding waters close to Diaoyu Island. China also denied the outcomes of the arbitration process set up by the Government of the Philippines that were announced in 2016. On the other hand, however, China also proposed several diplomatic initiatives to help maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

The year 2020 has been a presidential election year for the United States. US President Trump has continued his provocative activities in the West Pacific, including the sending of reconnaissance and surveillance aircrafts and fighting warships close to China’s territory or waters. These military activities are one part of the so-called US strategic competition with China. Equally, however, these military activities could be seen as preparations for a possible future war in areas close to the Chinese mainland.

China’s response to the Trump Administration, as State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi once said, is that China will not follow the US steps but nor will China allow the US to do whatever it wants to do. The Chinese government’s response to US provocations has been as follows: (1) Politically, the Chinese government continues to protest the US challenges. The spoke-persons from the Chinese government continue to state the official position on these issues; (2) Diplomatically, the Chinese government has taken



February 11, 2020. China's Bayi Aerobatic Team performs during the Singapore Airshow at Changi Exhibition Centre in Singapore.
Credit: SilentArtPhotography/Flickr.

reciprocal actions to United States steps, including the closure of the US Consulate General in Chengdu after the US had closed the Chinese Consulate General in Houston.

(3) Economically, the Chinese government for the first time imposed sanctions against US companies related to arm sales to Taiwan.

(4) Militarily, the Chinese PLA has maintained an active program of military drills and exercises, including large-scale firing drills in Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea. The PLA has also initiated blockade exercises around Taiwan Island.

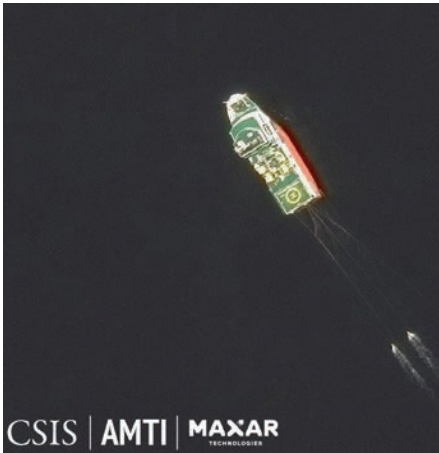
The so-called strategic competition initiated by the United States undoubtedly had a negative impact on the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. In such areas as the South China Sea the two countries have already entered into a security dilemma. Neither side

is inclined to compromise in this geopolitical competition. As for the United States, the South China Sea has been an important area which connects two major oceans. As for China, sovereignty over islands, reefs, and surrounding waters in the South China Sea has been a historical right and has also been endorsed by the documents agreed at the end of World War II. Such a security dilemma also makes the ASEAN countries nervous.

The impact of Sino-US strategic competition in Asia-Pacific region

United States worries that the China of the future has already completely twisted US attitudes and policies towards China. Such negative policies have already greatly impacted relations between China and the United States as well as the security situation in Asia-Pacific region.

Trade frictions sparked the first clash in this strategic competition, marked by President Trump's executive order in August 2017. Initially, I do not think China realised that this particular episode of trade friction would be managed so differently from previous ones. Since the normalisation of relations in 1979, trade frictions have occurred on a number of occasions. However, after rounds of negotiations and intervention from top leaders from the two countries, the two sides would have a final settlement of these issues. This time, however, under the Trump Administration, trade became a major theatre of the strategic competition between the two countries. Now, three years later, we have still not found the proper solution to these matters.



May 4, 2020. Haiyang Dizhi 8 during survey operations off the coast of Malaysia. Credit: CSIS.

The military confrontation between China and the United States in the West Pacific region has intensified over the course of 2020. This might be a result of the presidential election. President Trump wanted China to be a hot topic to take attention away from his management of the pandemic and the weakening economy. The Chinese side has been quite patient in the face of these provocative activities to minimise opportunities for the so-called China threat to play into the US electoral contest.

Some US politicians would like to initiate an ideology-oriented foreign policy towards China. From June 24th to July 23rd, four cabinet members of the Trump Administration delivered at least four speeches with such an orientation. Secretary of State Pompeo even said that it was time for the countries of the free world to be united in the fight against communist China. This is actually a cold war mentality. The main purpose to initiate such a policy towards China is to mobilise the support of the so-called free world countries to challenge China for the sake of the US.

The friction between China and the United States since 2017 has had a negative impact on the situation of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. In the South China Sea,

in Taiwan, as well as on the trade front, the tension between China and the United States has made regional countries rather uneasy. The countries in this region used to have good bilateral relations with the two major powers: they relied heavily on the United States in respect to regional security while on trade they used to rely heavily on China. However, China has now doubled its efforts in security cooperation with regional countries while continuing with its cooperation on trade. Today ASEAN has already become the largest trade partner of China. The PLA has already carried out air, land, and sea military drills with ASEAN countries in recent years.

The response of the regional countries to the strategic competition between China and the United States has been very cautious. They are fully aware of the dangers of being sandwiched by the two major powers. The best choice for regional countries would be a balanced relationship with China and the United States. They do not like to see the escalation of the tension between the two sides. The logic for their balanced choice is as follows: if two elephants fight against each other, the sugarcane field will be destroyed.

The impact on Asia-Pacific security of the US power transition

The US presidential elections can be expected to have some positive implications for the security situation in the Asia-Pacific. Firstly, the tension between China and the United States in various areas will be eased in the coming years. As we discussed, the new administration under President Biden will relax the policy of extreme pressure on China that President Trump sustained for four years. Such an easing of tension will have a positive impact on the situation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Secondly, the Biden Administration will adopt a multilateral approach in its foreign policy, including a return to the Paris Accord on climate change. The new Administration will address cooperation between China and the United States rather than confrontation, including the restoration of the Sino-US strategic and economic dialogue.

Thirdly, Biden will adopt an ideology-oriented foreign policy, which will address human rights and freedom. According to the old story, Asia-Pacific countries have to choose a side between China and the United States. In terms of bilateral relations, this might be a disputed area, which will give some negative impact on the relations between the two countries.

Fourthly, we can expect competition in the building of regional economic networks. The Biden Administration will take an active attitude towards regional economic networks and the United States will return to TPP and take the leading role in these mechanisms without China's participation. This might be the new pattern of strategic competition between the two countries. In this regard, relations between China and the United States will be full of ups and downs.

In conclusion, the power transition in the United States can be expected to have a significant positive impact on relations between China and the United States, which will also have positive effects for the regional security situation. China will take an active attitude towards the new government and will try its best to cooperate in every aspect of the relationship between the two countries.

Dr. Teng Jianqun

Senior research fellow at China Institute of International Studies in Beijing.

Japan: Strengthening Order and Stability in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Ryo Sahashi



August 16, 2020. Philippine Sea. Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Murasame-class destroyer JS *Ikazuchi*, left, fleet replenishment oiler USNS *John Ericsson*, and the Navy's forward-deployed aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan* steam ahead while conducting a replenishment-at-sea. Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jason Tarleton.

There has been no other year like 2020, no other year in which the emergence of a black swan event has forced us to reconsider so much of our suite of domestic and foreign policies. The black swan, of course, was the emergence of COVID-19 and its spread into a pandemic. The weight of lives lost has been compelling, and the fear generated by the widening pandemic spread created a dangerous situation in which the free movement of labour was hampered, xenophobia increased, and discrimination over access to the health system was rampant. Furthermore, it is clear that some political leaders and governments, including some in Asia, are strengthening their coercive political options on the grounds of

infectious disease control and seeking the suppression of freedom. The transactional relationship between freedom and security is a classic political science theme. The tension between freedom and suppressing the pandemic is indisputable, but there are moves in some states to exploit fears of the unimaginable to constrain freedom more than is necessary.

The implications for international politics are also profound: beginning in the spring of 2020, the US-China confrontation over the response to the coronavirus outbreak accelerated toward a confrontation that, unlike the “trade war” of the past two years, will be difficult to avoid or even to subdue. In retrospect,

by the end of 2019, the US and Chinese governments had broadly agreed on the first phase of trade talks, and in January 2020, when that was achieved, there was an upbeat atmosphere and no public criticism from Washington of China's management of the initial outbreak of COVID-19. However, following the spread of the disease in the United States and Europe, the Trump administration abruptly took a harder line, criticising China's political system for its lack of transparency and blaming it for the spread of the disease. This stance was essentially without precedent over the 40 years since the two countries established diplomatic relations.



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga (right) and Australian counterpart Scott Morrison exchanging documents in Tokyo on Nov 17, 2020. Credit: EPA-EFE.

A tough stance toward China on the pandemic highlighted a range of security challenges related to China. Human rights issues in Hong Kong and Xinjiang have also received renewed attention, and new American legislation and policies have been enacted for each case, including sanctions on senior figures deemed to be responsible for developments in these locations. The China policy speeches delivered by four senior Trump administration officials in July 2020 appear to reflect an unyielding determination that the US stance toward China, at least during the tenure of the Trump administration, was not going to change. Unlike the trade war, it is much harder to see an easy or short way out of this situation.

The countries of Asia seem frightened by a world that takes US-China confrontation as a given. This is not surprising, given that the stability of US-China relations has underpinned political relations in the region for half of a century, reduced uncertainty in the security environment, and has been the basis for economic and social integration. The network of supply chains rooted in the region are not only critical to the economies of regional states but also stands as a symbol of globalisation and regional integration.

Now, however, the US-China rivalry is not only worsening political relations in the form of an increased sense of competition, it is also creating strong political pressure in both countries to tighten export controls, and to put scientific and technological cooperation and the transnational movement of people and knowledge under tighter control. In addition, both states are looking to restructure their supply chains to lessen their vulnerability to disruption.

While the US-China confrontation is a top concern for Asia-Pacific countries, long-standing and deep-rooted concerns such as on the Korean peninsula, stability in the Taiwan Strait, and stability in the border regions also cause headaches. In 2020, the channels of dialogue between the US and North Korea that have been in place for the past two years have ceased to function, and a roadmap toward the goal of denuclearisation remains elusive. As the US policy toward Taiwan has progressed through the dispatch of high-level officials and expanding arms sales, the actors surrounding the Taiwan Strait have increased their military activities and the international politics concerning this emotive issue have become increasingly tense. In addition,

skirmishes on the Sino-Indian border appeared to be occurring more frequently, including a recent one that resulted in the first military fatalities in decades. The pandemic has also not stopped Chinese maritime activities in the South and East China Sea.

It is not being suggested that 2020 is a year in which everything abruptly turned through 180-degrees. It has been the case, however, that factors such as the new coronavirus outbreak, the US-China conflict, and reviving nationalism are driving trends that are moving faster than expected, and certainly faster than governments can cope. The values, norms, and processes for regional cooperation underpinning the Asia-Pacific order have been left unattended and put at risk of being by-passed.

After nearly eight years as Japan's prime minister, Abe Shinzo stepped down, and his chief cabinet secretary, Suga Yoshihide, became Japan's 99th prime minister. The world that awaited Suga is one where the international order has weakened to a previously unimaginable degree, making it extremely difficult for him to steer a sensible path through the turbulent waters of great power politics. Globalism is weakening, and the US-China confrontation is violently shaking the world. The spread of the coronavirus disease is putting strong downward pressure on global economic growth, and the increase in the debt of each country is likely to become a major issue in the future. The new administration is embarking on a mission to prevent the spread of coronavirus infection while at the same time rebuilding its own economy and restoring the habits of cooperation, which have all but disappeared in the international community.

Japan's diplomacy aims to achieve and maintain stability through order building and multi-layered cooperation, and the new administration can

be expected to bring a pragmatic approach to the strengthening of these traditional objectives. This meant that Japan would prioritise three pillars: to maintain the Japan-US alliance as the most crucial asset to secure its vital interests; to take the lead in shaping the world's rules and norms while increasing the number of non-aligned partners; and to continue engaging with China to stabilise its immediate regional environment.

The idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific can be expected to remain in place for the time being. There continues to be strong agreement within the government to seek stronger and deeper relations with Australia, India, and ASEAN countries. In addition, the government will seek to bolster the extant international order by strengthening relations with the United Kingdom, France, and Germany to attract these and other countries to the Indo-Pacific region. It will also continue to seek partnerships with the so-called Five Eyes countries (US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). In any case, the priority must be to strengthen ties with the United States and other like-minded countries to gain a firmer foothold in the region rather than look to diplomatic negotiations with countries that are riskier and less likely to bear fruit.

It seems unlikely that Japan will see QUAD cooperation between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, as the only way to enhance the emerging regional security architecture to meet the demands of the future. Japan understands the importance of the US-Japan alliance, of bilateral security cooperation with Australia and India, and of mini-lateralism. However, it also fully appreciates that there are not enough pieces to complete the whole picture. There must also be cooperation with ASEAN, maintaining relations with China, and seeking potential cooperation with

South Korea. ASEAN members are indispensable partners for Japan to promote a rules-based order, based on regional integration, and this explains why Japan's new prime minister made his first international trip to Vietnam and Indonesia.

Economic security and human rights issues will continue to be the main focus of the US-China conflict. While we need to pay attention to the situation in Taiwan as an international crisis flashpoint, as well as to the military strategies of the United States and China, economic security is likely to be the area where Japan can play an important role, and where it is expected to play such a role. Japan shares security concerns related to sensitive technologies with the US and European countries, and policies are now being developed to translate these into secret patent arrangements, enhanced security clearance system, and other measures to protect technologies. With respect to data localisation, the trend in government practice has been to force service providers to keep their data and server system within their territories. Japan should instead promote the already expressed principles of Data Free Flow with Trust, which would be a good example of rules-making.

Civil liberties have been further undermined around the world in the wake of the spread of the COVID-19. There is a growing recognition that this issue is not limited to the US-China confrontation and there is some pressure to make this issue a cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy. While the Japanese government is working to develop a clearer picture of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", the debate over the meaning of freedom is likely to become more active and substantial.

At the same time, the promotion of Japan-China relations will not lose its importance in an era of US-China

“The values, norms, and processes for regional cooperation underpinning the Asia-Pacific order have been left unattended and put at risk of being bypassed.”

confrontation. If Japan's diplomacy aims to build a peaceful and free world order, there is no doubt that the United States is the primary partner. However, it is also true that building a substantive relationship with China will add crucial weight to regional stability. Moreover, if China's foreign behaviour and market economy development can be encouraged to move in directions consistent with international norms and rules, there is great potential for peace and prosperity.

As it strives to cope, albeit with trepidation, with greater security responsibility, Japan is hopeful that the US will return to a diplomacy path that emphasises order-building. The problem is that the US has been inclined to unilaterally set redlines regarding China and to then urge other countries to take a joint step. Japan will prefer to develop a multi-layered diplomatic strategy, looking across the Indo-Pacific, while also being aware of its role as an honest broker.

Ryo Sahashi

Associate Professor, Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, the University of Tokyo.

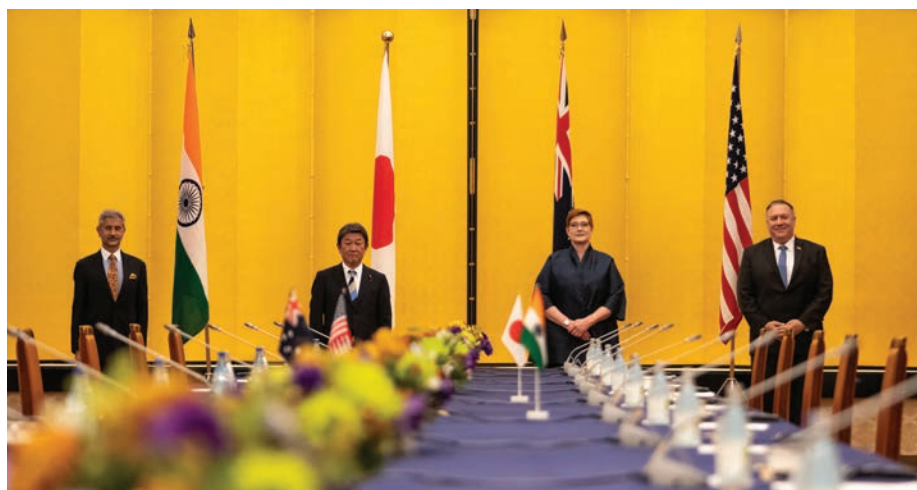
India: Competition over the Character of Order in the Indo-Pacific Intensifies

Vijay Gokhale

The Indo-Pacific that will emerge on the other side of COVID-19 may be a different region from the one that was there at the beginning of 2020. The major trends that defined the first two decades of this century – the relative diminution of American supremacy, the rise of China, the end of classical Free Trade and the substitution of manufacturing by innovation as a key determinant of power – are expected to accelerate. Competition between the United States of America and China, the two dominant Indo-Pacific powers, is becoming more rivalrous and, daresay, adversarial in nature.

Is it likely that strategic competition between America and China can be managed or will it intensify going forward? It might be too early to aver definitively, but the likelihood is

“China sees the Americans as an existential threat to the Communist Party’s grip on power. America looks at China as an authoritarian regime that seeks to diminish American influence in the Indo-Pacific...”



Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo participates in a Quad Meeting with Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, in Tokyo, Japan on October 6, 2020. Credit: State Department Photo by Ron Przynsucha.

that it will intensify. China sees the Americans as an existential threat to the Communist Party’s grip on power. America looks at China as an authoritarian regime that seeks to diminish American influence in the Indo-Pacific because it considers the United States to be an interloper. The region’s success in becoming the world’s centre of economic gravity owes a lot to China’s economic development, but it is also because of the peace and stability that the American presence has provided to the region. It stands to reason, then, that both contribute to the well-being of the rest. No country in the Indo-Pacific desires to return to the days of Cold War, but neither should they be given false choices. A recent CSIS survey showed that respondents from the Indo-Pacific, especially from South East Asia, wanted international cooperation with America but neutrality for themselves. This is understandable, but it can work only when there is a balance of interests in the region. Such balance will happen only through increased collaboration and on an equal footing. After all, this principle was the genesis of ASEAN itself.

India has had a well-defined and consistent security outlook for the

Indian Ocean region. As a principal littoral state, India sees the Indian Ocean as a free and open global common. India supports a rules-based order and respects multilateral arrangements and mechanisms that manage the oceans. India has been a consistent security provider, in terms of anti-piracy operations, SAR, HADR and as first responder in times of disaster.

Just in 2020, the Indian Navy dispatched four vessels to Mozambique carrying medical and humanitarian assistance after Typhoon Idai struck the African nation in March, as well as food for Malawi and Zimbabwe; the Indian Navy carried material and medicines to the Maldives, Mauritius, Comoros and Madagascar in May to help their governments to cope with the COVID-19 crisis; the Indian Coast Guard and Indian Air Force sent a team of specialists and 30 tonnes of technical assistance to Mauritius to deal with an environmental crisis due to an oil spill in August; and two patrol craft gifted by Sri Lanka to the Seychelles were ferried by the Indian Navy. India provides net security to ensure that the vital sea-lanes of communication remain unimpeded between the Gulf of Aden and the



March 15, 2020. PM Modi and EAM S. Jaishankar attend a video conference of SAARC leaders on combating COVID-19. Credit: MEAIndia/Flickr.

Straits of Malacca. India's navy and coast-guard patrol the high seas to deter pirates, and as India's economy has expanded, it has willingly taken on greater responsibilities in all these ways in close cooperation with other countries.

The situation has become more complicated in the Indian Ocean region in the past decade, as a result of security concerns from both State and non-state actors. Newer challenges like the environmental crisis facing our oceans and our island neighbours due to climate change, and the threats posed by human, narcotics and arms trafficking, require a fresh approach. There is no gainsaying that the growth of trade in the last thirty years is transforming the northern Indian Ocean into the busiest sea-lanes in the world. They are likely to become even busier going forward as the world's economic centre of gravity moves into the Indo-Pacific. Countries that had little or no presence in this part of the world are now venturing into the Indian Ocean both politically, and increasingly, militarily. This is natural to some extent, but it is also true that the balance of power in the Indian Ocean is undergoing a significant change as states from outside the region begin to establish a permanent presence.

India has felt it necessary to build out its own vision for the future of the region. Prime Minister Modi laid it out when he addressed the Shangri La

Dialogue in June 2018. India's Indo-Pacific vision is a forward-looking, inclusive and people-centric one. India recognises ASEAN centrality as its guiding principle, respectful of the role that the ten South-East Asian nations have played in building peace and prosperity in the two oceans. India is willing to engage in consultation and seeks to exclude no country of the region from a future Indo-Pacific architecture. A reading of the Prime Minister's address makes it clear that India envisages the Indo-Pacific region as a region of shared prosperity and not as a theatre for conflict. Therefore, dismissing the Indo-Pacific strategy as an attempt to build an Asian NATO, without adducing evidence to back up this claim, is not warranted in the light of the open and transparent manner in which India has laid out its vision. The concept of the Indo-Pacific deserves to be discussed.

In the past ten years, the biggest change for the region has been the sharp escalation in China's naval activities in the northern Indian Ocean, including through its hydrographical surveys in the EEZ/ Continental Shelf of littoral states, the growing deployment of submarines and underwater unmanned drones, and the establishment of its first overseas military facility in Djibouti which, according to some experts, is the beginning of a larger Chinese naval presence throughout the Indian Ocean. Hence, a close examination of China's intentions and behaviour

is warranted. China claims that her naval activities are normal and reasonable and assures the rest of the world that it will never seek hegemony. When the Chinese say that they will not exercise hegemony, they presumably mean not the American kind. They are not seeking to assume the role of a paramount state that uses its power and influence to impose rules and order on an otherwise anarchic world. Pax Britannica is not for them either. They have shown no appetite to directly control large tracts outside the homeland or to carry the flag as, David Livingstone did, for, 'Christianity, Commerce and Civilization'. Exercising the sort of hegemony that the Soviet Union did is entirely ruled out. The lessons of Soviet failure due to overreach in the export of Communism globally are compulsory reading for all members of the Chinese Communist Party. What China seeks is the pursuit of national self-interest through persistent and consistent actions to become the dominant state in the Indo-Pacific. The shape of possible Chinese hegemony may be uniquely Chinese in character – a kind of Chinese hegemony with socialist characteristics.

COVID-19 has made this more, rather than, less likely for three reasons: First, the fundamental shift in the world's centre of gravity from the Atlantic-Mediterranean region to the Indo-Pacific region has occurred faster than the West had planned for. China is the central actor in this drama, but ASEAN, India and others have also hastened the process. Second, expectations from a decade previously that the balance of power between China and the United States would likely remain decisively in America's favour at least for the first half of this century, are being proven wrong. China has not only demonstrated the determination to challenge American power in the Indo-Pacific, it is building the capacity to neutralise America's



The Galwan Valley in the Himalayan Mountains, site of a deadly clash between Indian and Chinese border troops in 2020.

naval superiority in the Western Pacific and it is unlikely that China can, any longer, be confined within the first and second island chains. Third, it is building a parallel universe in trade, technology and finance that will selectively reduce its vulnerabilities to American hegemony. China's international behaviour in the Year of COVID have given legitimate cause for concern to the peripheral and proximate states of the Indo-Pacific region. China speaks of the Community of the Shared Future for Mankind, and win-win cooperation; she plays balance-of-power politics and acts in ways that take advantage of others in adversity.

China's aim is to establish its supremacy in areas of productive technology, trade networks, and financing options in ways that shut out competition. The Belt and Road Initiative is creating a Sino-centric system of specifications, standards, norms and regulations that will favour China's technology and services to the exclusion of others. Those who worry that the primary concerns over the BRI are the potentially high levels of indebtedness that vulnerable Indo-Pacific economies may face, are missing the larger point; they don't aim to impoverish their potential clients, but to ensure that their clients' national systems are fully oriented towards the consumption of Chinese technology and services and are in sync with China's strategic interests and policies. Digital dependencies are integral to this objective. Huawei / 5G

and the fibre-optic networks are some of the ways that China is re-wiring the region to its long-term benefit. In the Chinese version of hegemony, so long as its industry and services enjoy supremacy in the Indo-Pacific and thus ensure the prosperity and well-being of the Chinese people, China is content to provide the public goods and financing for the region's benefit as a sugar-coated pill. The other facet of China's potential hegemony is the idea that it is the region's responsibility to accept and respect what China calls its 'core' concerns and interests. These are flexible and change according to the situation, but are always non-negotiable. What is 'core' will always be defined by China. The definition has expanded beyond issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity, to cover economic, social and cultural issues, and even the persona of the Chinese leader. Those who do not fall in line are apt to be taught a 'lesson'.

India believes that the interests of the region are better served through a balance of forces rather than the preponderance of any single force – whether it is the Americans or the Chinese. This is one of the pillars of India's Indo-Pacific vision. Giving any country in this region a veto in the matter will be only at the peril of the security of the whole region. It should also be a matter of concern for others when China chooses to confuse the Indo-Pacific vision with plurilateral mechanisms like the Quad. The Quad is a platform for a group of countries who

share common interests in the region they are located in. The Indo-Pacific is as much home to India, Australia and Japan, as it is to China. As for America, many in the region look upon it as a resident power, whose benign presence has been helpful to the region's stability and growth. China herself has benefited from the American presence, not least in securing the capital and technology that has helped in its national rejuvenation. Hence, labelling any mechanism, such as the Quad for instance, as a security hazard and threat to peace and development, seems to be contradictory and self-serving. Contradictory, because China is the initiator of similar plurilateral mechanisms, including some in India's neighbourhood. Self-serving because China does not wish to permit any other platform that offers alternatives to the region. The claim by China that the Quad is a historical regression and a danger to peace and security rings hollow, especially when it seeks to press centuries-old territorial claims on sea and land through the use of force. If China is committed, as it claims, to uphold the principle of peace and stability and is ready to practice its diplomatic philosophy of affinity, sincerity and inclusiveness, they should desist from tilting at windmills and demonstrate this diplomatic philosophy in deeds and not merely in words. It would be good if they begin by winding down the aggression they have displayed against their neighbours by unilaterally altering the status quo, and join the open discussion on the future of the Indo-Pacific in which the peace and security of all is assured. India is willing to discuss Asian security with all parties in accordance with the principles of democratic and transparent engagement, and on the basis of respect for globally agreed norms of behaviour.

Vijay Gokhale

Previously India's Foreign Secretary until January 2020 and a former Ambassador to China.

Optimistic and Pessimistic Scenarios: A Russian Perception of an Insecure and Uncertain Post-Pandemic Future

Alexei D. Voskressenski

The global pandemic outbreak has had severe health consequences as well as imposed unprecedented restrictions on ordinary life across much of the world. In the case of Russia, although it saw considerable successes in resisting and fighting the pandemic early on, the challenges have mounted steadily as the crisis persisted. The Russian President has left the decision to lift restrictions to governors and their assessment of conditions in their particular province. Though the situation globally may be considered as an unprecedented crisis, in Russia there has been no panic among authorities or population, necessary restrictions continue to be followed, and living with the virus has been internalised on a daily basis in the country's framework for an eventual stage by stage exit from emergency. Such a position has allowed the Russian people to perceive the decision made by the authorities as rational. Contrary to the critical views of many, Russia found herself better prepared than argued previously by the pessimists. Dealing with the full consequences of the pandemic will necessitate considerable rethinking and more informed public discussions in the future. Similarly, the prospect of another lockdown could stress social cohesion since gloomy economic prospects raise insecurity. At the present time, however, the authorities have the situation well under control.

The pandemic showed that, at least for Russia, the reliability of one's own political and economic system is very important. Doubts on that front generate unsettling feelings of insecurity. In Russia, as in many other states, the COVID-19



Russian Airborne Troops (VDV) operated Mi-8 utility helicopters to carry D-30 122 mm towed howitzers during the Kavkaz 2020 Military Exercise held in September. Credit: Russian MoD.

experience has made many more sceptical about the merits of hyper-globalisation and attracted to policy adjustments that would result in greater autonomy and reliance on internal processes. In fact, however, the pandemic offers mixed messages on the value of being less dependent on the outside world so we can expect the matter of autonomy versus more connectivity and openness to be the subject of ongoing debate.

The pandemic has raised questions not only about hyper-globalisation but also about how to curb excessive consumerism. The Russian economy is now based on the market principles of pure mercantilism where the market system drives economic growth but with the inescapable corollary of growing inequality. In such a situation, the goal has been to reconcile or harmonise economic principles with equality. And even if the economic space is shrinking, not losing freedom and not curtailing human rights should be a priority. The goal now may be to find a new equilibrium between the real economic conditions and freedom,

in which economics is recognised as inseparable from politics in the quest to avoid further destabilising a fragile social consensus in the country.

The pandemic has also shown that the regions closer to Russia are more important for the future. The main consequence of this realisation is that regionalism and trans-regionalism sit alongside a sustainable national economy as vitally important objectives. Both problems are related to the economic imperative to build, save, and develop the value, production, and supply chains based on regional/trans-regional cooperation to ensure economic growth. To achieve this purpose, it is important to ensure the development of a market which is broader than the national territory. In the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Russia is the major economic driver, overshadowing the productivity and purchasing power of all the other state-members in driving strong, sustainable economic growth. In order to build a multilateral Eurasia with strong regional ties, Russia needs to find a way out of the political deadlock with Europe

and simultaneously carefully weigh how to use regionalism to foster its economic relations within the existing Russia-China partnership.

The COVID-19 pandemic may not completely transform the international system but it will influence states' behaviour and may encourage them reconsider their foreign policy settings. Firstly, it is now understood by all that war has lost much of its utility as a tool in geopolitical games. That does not mean that there will be no wars at all. However, a major power war these days may induce economic consequences which could be worse than the pandemic. Thus, to ensure an exit from the pandemic while avoiding economic depression may become as acute a challenge as fighting a pandemic alongside a geopolitical competition. The proclaimed decoupling of American and Chinese economies is dependent on the ability of the US to persuade its allies and the rest of the world to rechanneling financial flows and reorient values, production, and supply chains. Since many national economies including that of the European countries are already deeply connected to the Chinese economy and since China may ensure technological cooperation with Europe as well as with Russia, it could achieve stable indigenous growth provided it also developed a skilful foreign policy based on the combination of multilateralism, trans-regionalism, and regionalism. China's goal should be to avoid as many conflicts as possible to ensure international cooperation with the West, while at the same time, strengthening its cooperation with Russia. This policy might also play an important role in further strengthening Russian-Chinese relations. However, it is far from certain that anything resembling this scenario will unfold in reality.

For China, both her regional and international involvements are important. This is the reason the PRC predominantly seeks minimisation of disagreements. China has already deployed all state instruments to further pursue a regionalist as well as global agenda in the form of the "Belt and Road" (BRI) initiative based on the "double circulation" strategy – the orchestrated transition of its domestic economy to one driven primarily by internal consumption coupled with the limited economic expansion into a friendly and welcoming segment of the world. China's future efforts are dependent on the ability to create a real "win-win" regional and trans-regional alignment based on a constructive and fair framework of the BRI project as an open and multilateral initiative.

The US may not withdraw to be completely irrelevant to the Asian agenda in the post COVID-19 order. The reason for this conclusion is simple: all significant political shifts in US domestic and foreign policies have great regional and global repercussions. So, for East Asia and Asia in general, both the US and China are important for the foreseeable future. This may provide Russia with the new opportunities to strike a skilful geopolitical and geoeconomic balance that would be welcomed by all states of the Pacific Asian region. Further, there may be scope for Russia to initiate a new multilateralism in the Greater Eurasian economic space, making its relationship with the EU more pragmatic and at the same time coupling the EEU with the BRI initiative to speed up an economic growth.

Although possible sharp regional geopolitical competition may preclude this century becoming an Asian Century in terms of economics, it will certainly be an Asian Century in terms of geopolitics. We could

see a North-East Asian regionalism in the post-pandemic era driven by a strengthened Russian-Chinese partnership; the US will look indifferently on the Korean peninsula (unless there are significant further developments in the North Korean ICBM program); and East Asian regionalism will be driven by a balance of economic and security considerations with the former likely to be predominant. Thus, the centre of geopolitical competition in the Asia-Pacific as a whole may move to be the newly constructed Indo-Pacific with the involvement of the US and its security allies as a geoeconomic and geopolitical balancer to perceived Chinese geopolitical and geoeconomic expansion in the region. This may press India to figure out what may be more beneficial – to be at the epicentre of a geopolitical competition that may incline China toward the further strategic encirclement of India, as some fear, or to foster a trans-regionalist agenda including utilising the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to forge a constructive India-Russia-China triangular relationship aimed at further economic connectivity in the Asia-Pacific.

The outbreak of the pandemic changed everyone's outlook adding more unpredictability and insecurity. In spite of the fact that China, with its huge population, is destined to be the largest economy in the world, the rate at which it catches up with the US is likely to slow over the coming decade. The annual average growth rate of the Chinese economy over the next decade is likely to be around 5%, compared to 2-3% for the US. Thus, we can expect the world's two biggest economies to remain roughly equivalent in size over the next decade. If economic decoupling remains a policy imperative we may see the emergence of economic bipolarity: there are as yet no guarantees that China could

devise better rules for the world economy. The further decoupling of the two economic superstates may create such animosity between them that we will see a new “Cold War”. It is impossible to predict how relations between the US and China will unfold. Even the course of the pandemic includes unknowns that could have a major bearing on this decisive relationship: which consequences of the pandemic will prove to be enduring and transformative in importance; what will be the speed and scope of the second wave; and how will the matter of a vaccine play out; will we see, as a belated reaction to the pandemic, an outbreak of global cooperation on vital issues? Nor can other “black swans” be ruled out.

For the PRC, ensuring economic growth is a much more vital issue than for many countries because of its huge population and the fact that such a large proportion remains relatively poor. Some analysts have estimated that China may need a year or even a year and a half to make up the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic. A great deal can happen in a year, as 2020 has demonstrated so graphically. J. Biden, as a new President, may further increase American economic competitiveness and initiate a new round of negotiations with his Chinese counterparts. Similarly, new arrangements between the US and China in the case of D. Trump’s re-election can hardly be excluded. The US and China are not doomed to war or conflict, though competition between them is inevitable. Fortunately, competition is less dangerous than conflict which tends to lead to unpredictable outcomes thus raising overall insecurity.

The Chinese model of development is not the Soviet model. In Eastern Asia – the central region for Chinese interests – there are main

constructive opponents of China – India, Vietnam, Japan, Australia. In general, they are politically more tolerant of China than the US. All these countries need Chinese capital and technologies. For them it is more important to see China, notwithstanding its immense size, to somehow be incorporated and accommodated within the region. But the isolationism of the US and its withdrawal from the region is a concern for these states as they would be alone vis-à-vis China. Therefore, there may be a further rebalancing of relations between the US and China in this region as well as a search for new mechanisms to ensure a constructive balance of competition and cooperation.

This region includes China’s major national interest, namely to achieve a reunion of the country. This means that we are at the beginning of a new era in which decisive events will take place in Greater East Asia. Current trade frictions between the US and China are only a cover for this main “battle” between them. The core of this battle is not necessarily an aggravation of the regional situation – although this cannot be precluded - but developing a new model of incorporating China in a global system.

This broad outlook opens further “windows of opportunity” for Russia both in the West and in the East to raise peoples’ hopes for a more secure and sustainable future. This optimistic scenario presupposes the appearance of a new generation of well-trained, skilful and honest Russian politicians and experts, the reconsideration of short-sighted and mercantile models of development and of scientific and industrial policy, the implementation of a new degree of openness and competitiveness, and, finally, a persuasive theoretical and practical characterisation of Russia’s place in the world system.

“Although possible sharp regional geopolitical competition may preclude this century becoming an Asian Century in terms of economics, it will certainly be an Asian Century in terms of geopolitics”

We could add to this formidable list a genuine, pragmatic pivot to the East to boost the economy to harmonise Russian development, not something intended as further irritation of the West. Alternatively, being complacent about the further deterioration of the international and regional environment, strengthening opposition to the US and the EU, the economic marginalisation of the EEU, deepening dependence on China, the deterioration of the economic environment in the country is a prescription for pessimism and despair with further negative consequences for Russia’s development and more gloomy and insecure future for the region.

Alexei D. Voskressenski

Professor in the School of International Relations and director of the Center for Comprehensive Chinese Studies and Regional Projects at MGIMO University.

Europe's Approach Towards Asia: diversification in times of COVID-19

Alice Ekman

COVID-19 is not a game changer when it comes to Europe's approach towards Asia, but it is certainly accelerating existing trends that had emerged in previous years in a context of deepening US-China rivalry.

First of all, COVID-19 has reinforced EU's concerns about China's international communication campaigns, and more broadly the on-going battle of narratives which glorifies China's management of the pandemic crisis and its governance system, and does not hesitate to underline the presumed weaknesses of the EU and its member states. Already in previous years, China's official communications have been keen to underline the perceived 'decline' of Europe in various ways (pointing regularly at Brexit or the Yellow Vest protests in France, for instance) and this trend became more apparent during the pandemic. In particular, the large communication campaign surrounding China's mask diplomacy and assistance in Europe at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis has backfired in most EU member states. EU leaders have voiced dissatisfaction with China's communication campaign and exposed the intentions behind China's "politics of generosity", with Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, explicitly underlining the "geopolitical component" and "struggle for influence" behind China's aid. Additionally, China's official narrative during the pandemic has prompted an adjustment in the EU's own narrative

in response. Various EU leaders highlighted the EU's donations and initial support to China, countering Beijing's self-positioning as Europe's saviour.

The EU's communication counter-offensive takes place in a context of a change in perceptions of China in Brussels in recent years, acknowledging the hardening of China's domestic and foreign policies under Xi Jinping. In 2019-2020, human rights concerns became more visible on the EU's agenda regarding China, with joint statements on the situation in Xinjiang, the National Security Law in Hong Kong, and the arbitrary detention of Swedish and Canadian citizens in China. The majority of EU member states also raised these issues within the framework of the United Nations, along with the United States, Australia and other partners.

A second trend is the restructuring of global supply chains and the diversification of Europe's economic partnerships in Asia. For many EU member states' governments and economic actors, the pandemic has raised full awareness of their dependency on Chinese manufacturers in several strategic sectors (including pharmaceuticals, medical and protective equipment) and, as a result, are accelerating their efforts to diversify their supply chain towards other Asian countries. This diversification is currently reinforcing trade ties between EU markets and Southeast Asia in particular. As the EU's free trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam entered into force in 2019, Brussels hopes to sign similar agreements with other ASEAN countries in the coming years.

The restructuring of global supply chains is a complex and lengthy process that can be expected to unfold step-by-step in the coming years, a process being encouraged by two

pre-existing factors, in addition to COVID-19: the rising labour cost in China and the deepening US-China trade tensions. The potential conclusion of bilateral EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, which was expected to be concluded by the end of 2020 but is still under negotiation, is unlikely to change this trend.

A third, related trend, that has accelerated under the effects of both the COVID-19 crisis and the prolonged US-China rivalry is Brussels' inclination to deepen its partnerships with states in the broader Asia region. China is an important partner for the EU, but the EU recognised the merits of further diversifying its connections with a number of partners, including Japan – with which it has signed an agreement on connectivity in September 2019 – but also India, Australia, the ROK, ASEAN, among others. It is likely that bilateral connectivity agreements will be signed between the EU and some of these countries in 2021 and 2022. The EU's connectivity strategy is currently being developed on its own – independently of the Belt and Road Initiative – and with a geographic perimeter extending beyond Asia, to consideration of, for instance, concrete cooperation with Asian partners on the development of infrastructure projects in sub-Saharan Africa.

Fourthly, COVID-19 has reinforced the pre-existing conviction in Brussels that there was an urgent need to reinforce the "strategic autonomy" of Europe in line with its interests; interests that do not always align with those of the US or China. Although transatlantic cooperation may be easier under a Biden than a Trump administration, and the diversification of the EU's Asia policy may be facilitated to

“China is an important partner for the EU, but the EU recognised the merits of further diversifying its connections with a number of partners, including Japan ... but also India, Australia, the ROK, ASEAN, among others.”



June 10, 2020. Polish paratroopers from the 6th Airborne Brigade drift to the ground in Drawsko Pomorskie Training Area during Exercise Allied Spirit. Credit: NATO.

some extent by Biden's willingness to reassure the US allies in the region, the political change in the US will not lessen the EU's determination to review and sharpen its "strategic autonomy". Nor does it put into question the depth of its security alliance and economic partnership with the US, but rather aims at clarifying and reinforcing the EU's sovereignty in the sectors it deems of strategic importance.

This aspiration concerns first and foremost the digital and telecommunications sectors, where a number of long-term security and geostrategic issues have arisen at a time of deep and enlarging US-China technological tensions. The deployment of 5G networks became a matter of intense discussions in Europe, leading to the endorsement by the EU Commission in January 2020 of a joint toolbox of measures agreed by EU member states to mitigate the security risks related to this development. This toolbox is designed to commit member states to moving forward in a joint manner on 5G. But 5G is only the tip of the iceberg; others technologies can be expected to raise security and/or geostrategic concerns in Europe over the coming years, especially if US-China technological tensions remain high. For this reason, the EU now aims at reinforcing "digital sovereignty" (a concept promoted by Commissioner Thierry Breton), particularly in the areas of computing power, control over data and the security of connectivity networks.

The "strategic autonomy" discussion also relates to the EU's ability to promote its interests more efficiently in multilateral settings. The general impression in Brussels is still that the EU, and Europe as a whole, has been punching far below its weight and that it is now time for a more ambitious, but also more efficient "coalition building" dynamic at the multilateral

level. This aspiration stirs several EU member states in particular to be more proactive and vocal in key multilateral situations, starting with organisations in the UN system. 2021 will probably provide more scope for transatlantic cooperation and coordination on issues of common concerns, including human rights, in key international organisations, given that the Biden presidency is likely to have more consideration for multilateral formats than his predecessor.

This coordination may be increasingly conducted under the "Indo-Pacific" label. While several EU member states have officially endorsed the Indo-pacific concept (in September 2020, Germany followed France, who had adopted an Indo-pacific strategy in 2019), serious consideration is currently being given to the merits of the EU itself endorsing such a posture.

Whether it be the Indo-pacific or Asia-pacific, the EU will continue its diversification policy towards the broader Asia region, acknowledging that it shares many of the strategic questions and dilemmas confronting its Asian partners. Brussels is conscious that it is in its interests to consider coalition building beyond Europe, both to reinforce leverage at a time of prolonged China-US rivalry and to lessen the impact of the trade and technology sanctions.

In the short term, however, the management of the pandemic overrides all other priorities. Given that large second waves of contamination are being experienced across most of Europe and the US, and that the economic consequences are already highly significant, it cannot be otherwise. In the COVID and post-COVID-era, Beijing will likely draw attention to its comparatively fast-paced recovery from both the sanitary and economic crises, to position itself as the engine of "global economic recovery", and more generally accelerate the pace of its diplomatic initiatives. China will

also aim at consolidating its position as a leading technological global power. Already, China's economic recovery plan following the epidemic is first and foremost focusing on domestic technological developments, designed to develop more autonomous digital ecosystems on its territory, to reduce its current dependency on some US and foreign products and services (including semiconductors). Ultimately, China's government seeks the autonomous capability to export comprehensive technological packages (not just 5G infrastructures, but also AI, camera, videoconference systems, drones, various smartphone apps and smart payment options) to a diversity of countries, but with a focus on developing and emerging countries. The 14th 5-year plan for the period 2021-2025, to be published in March 2021, is likely to confirm China's willingness to invest further in both the technology and green economies.

In July 2020, EU leaders agreed on a €750 billion recovery package to help the EU tackle the crisis caused by the pandemic. A fifth of this amount (€150 billion) is planned to be spent on digital investments. In addition to the recovery package, EU leaders agreed on a long-term budget for 2021-2027 of more than €1000 billion, designed to support priority investments in the digital and green sectors. The availability of this package (it is now going through the legislative steps and should be ready by 2021) and the skill with which it can be implemented will be key to shaping the economic resilience of the EU, but also its relative political, diplomatic and technological influence at a time of great power competition.

Alice Ekman

Senior Asia Analyst and CSCAP-EU coordinator, European Union Institute of Security Studies (EUISS).

Korean Peninsula Security Outlook 2021

Beomchul Shin



January 29, 2020. Members from the Republic of Korea (ROK) Air Force learn about using heavy duty equipment during exercise Silver Flag at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam.
Credit: US Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Helena Owens.

The precarious state of security on the Korean Peninsula in 2020 is reflected in the failure of efforts by the Republic of Korea (ROK) to hold dialogue with the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK). In fact, the ROK has failed over the past three years to get the DPRK to the negotiation table to address its continued nuclear development and local provocations. The new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and the advanced conventional weapons systems unveiled by the DPRK on 10 October 2020 provided a further glimpse of the DPRK's objectives. The ROK-US alliance also showed signs of lethargy. A year of negotiations on the Special Measure Agreement (SMA) concerning the vexed question of Defence Burden Sharing failed to reach a new compromise. Furthermore, COVID-19 prevented the proper joint training program from being fully carried out. Still, although the DPRK remains the same, the prospect of the new Biden administration in the US could

generate new opportunities for both the US-DPRK negotiations, and for ROK-US alliance collaboration.

The DPRK declared a head-to-head breakthrough against the US. The traditional New Year address was replaced with a resolution of the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party and the regime continued to hold out, demanding concessions from the US throughout the year. As with other states, the threat of COVID-19 and associated quarantine requirements adversely affected the DPRK's foreign policy, including causing dialogues to be interrupted. Economically, the Kim Jong-un regime faced the worst situation due to the continuing sanctions on the DPRK, the summer floods, and COVID-19, but they seemed to be vicariously satisfied with the 'monster' ICBM and the submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) that were unveiled at the traditional October

military parade. Kim Jong-un, who shed tears in his speech, smiled brightly whenever these state-of-the-art weapons passed by and appeared satisfied with his achievements. It was a year that demonstrated how helpless the so-called top-down dialogue had been in producing substantial results in the denuclearisation of the DPRK.

US-DPRK relations have been effectively severed, but inter-Korean relations are facing an even worse situation in the coming year. In June, the DPRK criticised the ROK government over the flyers distributed in the north by DPRK defectors, and then unilaterally obliterated the inter-Korean joint liaison office established in accordance with the agreement of the April 2018 Inter-Korean Summit. On September 22nd, the DPRK committed the atrocity of killing and burning the body of an ROK citizen who crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL) of the West Sea into DPRK waters. Nevertheless, the ROK government clung stoically to its aspiration to see a declaration formally ending the 1950-53 war and to emphasising the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. In reality, however, the prospects for inter-Korean relations in the new year do not look bright.

This year was the year in which the ROK-US alliance has been more difficult than ever before. The SMA negotiations on Defence Burden Sharing have been underway for a year, but without producing any results. By expressing its intention to pursue the Transfer of Wartime Operational Control within its term of office, even though the critical supporting step – the full operation capability evaluation scheduled for August 2020 was unable to be performed due to COVID-19 – the

Moon Jae-in administration exposed the annual ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting between its respective defence ministers held in October to some dissonance. The US's complaints about the ROK government's lukewarm attitude toward Chinese issues had been exposed through various channels. Perhaps in response to these circumstances, in October 2020, the ROK government decided to declare that its 'Three Noes on THAAD' from October 2017 had not been a promise to China. [In October 2017, the ROK government unilaterally declared that there would be no more Terminal High Altitude Area Defence ("THAAD") deployments, no joining the US missile defence system, and no ROK-US-Japan military alliance.]

2020 was the year in which the aftermath of the US-China competition had a significant impact on the Korean Peninsula. The Trump administration has been stepping up the intensity of pressure on China during this year. This is well described in a report published by the White House in May this year entitled "United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic

"The ROK-US alliance has been strained [but] this outcome was not the result of new or recent attitudes and developments but more a case of policy failures exposing hidden but pre-existing truths."

of China." This report categorises the problems that China present for US national interests into three categories: economic problems, challenges to American values, and threats to national security, and states that the US will mobilise not only diplomatic and military pressure but also economic, political, human rights and intelligence capabilities to defeat China's challenges. In fact, this year, there have been conflicts between the US and China over the issues of the South China Sea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, alongside the Trump administration's continued pressure on China through, for example, demanding that suppliers stop supplying semiconductors to Huawei, a Chinese IT company, for national security reasons. In addition, in terms of military security, it has launched the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD or "Quad"), which focuses on cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia, and has strengthened the solidarity of allies.

The Moon Jae-in administration in the ROK showed a reserved position in response to these US demands. It has avoided direct involvement, saying that the sanction against Huawei is a matter for private companies to decide on their own, and has expressed a negative stance on the US's QSD initiative. As a result, it seems that there has been an invisible distancing between the ROK and US officials, and that this adversely affected the aforementioned annual ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting.

Looking back, the DPRK nuclear threat has continued this year, and the ROK-US alliance, which can serve as a deterrent against it, has been strained. In the assessment of this author, however, this outcome was not the result of new or recent attitudes and developments but more a case of policy failures exposing hidden but pre-existing truths.

President-elect Biden appears to have a negative perception of Kim Jong-un. Calling Kim Jong-un a thug, he criticised President Trump, who held a summit with Kim Jong-un, for "granting only diplomatic legitimacy to North Korea." The Biden administration is expected to push for the bottom-up method of "holding a summit after substantial agreements between working-level officials," abandoning the top-down method of "solving problems through consensus between state leaders" promoted by the Trump administration.

The bottom-up negotiations are expected to take place in a way that working-level negotiators carefully examine any DPRK denuclearisation steps and the 'matching' US compensation measures. Any leaders' summit meeting is reserved for confirming detailed agreements and implementation arrangements already achieved. This method has the advantage of being able to bring substantial progress in the denuclearisation of the DPRK, but it has the disadvantage of taking a long time. Even if the US is in a hurry and the DPRK responds to negotiations immediately, negotiations will be possible only in June-July next year.

The question is, will the DPRK wait until then? If the DPRK follows its past behaviour, it will try to capture the attention of the new Biden administration through strategic provocations such as the launches of an ICBM and/or SLBM at the beginning of the year. As a result, there is concern that the DPRK's ICBM or SLBM test will be conducted before or soon after the inauguration of the Biden administration on 20 January or during the ROK-US joint military exercises in March next year. For Kim Jong-un, the pressure to provoke early movement comes from the continuing deterioration of the DPRK economy, due in significant part to UN and US economic sanctions.



August 24, 2020. Pacific Ocean. The Republic of Korea Navy destroyer ROKS *Seoaeg Ryu* *Seong-ryong* performs a replenishment-at-sea with the US Military Sealift Command fleet replenishment oiler USNS *Henry J. Kaiser* during RIMPAC.

There is certainly a possibility of an agreement being reached if negotiations are carried out. President-elect Biden mentioned the reduction of the DPRK's nuclear capability and the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula during his presidential campaign. It is not clear exactly what the reduction of nuclear capability means, but the next best thing that can be proposed if the DPRK refuses to denuclearise is a freeze deal. Among the experts on the Korean peninsula in the US, there are groups that argue that the DPRK's nuclear material and/or technology should be prevented from being leaked abroad, such as the Middle East, and recognise freezing as the first step. They also take the position that economic compensation may be provided for the DPRK freezing its nuclear activities. Such a freeze proposal could be fascinating, even attractive to the DPRK which is seeking to possess nuclear weapons. The problem, of course, is that in this case, the DPRK's nuclear weapons could become entrenched. Therefore, even if it is agreed to go down the path of a freeze, it is necessary to clearly agree beforehand on the final state of the DPRK's denuclearisation, that is,

a nuclear-free DPRK. Furthermore, a snap-back clause must be prepared to restore sanctions that were lifted if the DPRK does not take further denuclearisation steps.

If the DPRK intends to possess nuclear weapons, the Biden administration will continue with strong pressure. Intensive sanctions were imposed on the DPRK in 2017, but they have not been rigorously implemented since 2018. Therefore, the US is likely to try to pressure the DPRK by demanding that China and other countries fully enforce the existing sanctions. Considering the recent honeymoon between the DPRK and China, however, it seems unlikely that China will act as the US intends. How the Biden administration deals with China will affect the Korean Peninsula.

Since the DPRK views inter-Korean relations as a sub-element of US-DPRK relations, inter-Korean relations are likely to be affected by the progress of US-DPRK relations. There is a possibility that the DPRK will try to use the ROK government as a means to obtain favourable conditions for themselves when working-level negotiations between

the US and the DPRK proceed. If the ROK government pays undue attention to DPRK voices, there is a possibility that the DPRK issue could develop into a source of tension or conflict between the ROK and the US.

In the case of the ROK-US alliance, the birth of the Biden administration will bring new changes. Instead of unilaterally pressuring the ROK, the Biden administration is expected to demand that the ROK participate more in China-related issues. The SMA negotiations on the Defence Burden Sharing is likely to be concluded early, and the presence of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) troops is expected to remain stable. Even if the ROK government demands an early Transfer of Wartime Operational Control, the US is expected to oppose the plan until such time as it can be fully and properly assessed. Regarding the China issues, it is anticipated that the ROK will more actively participate in US efforts to restore its leadership such as conducting democracy summits and other US-centred networks. Since the ROK's cooperation on issues related to China is expected to lead to the US's cooperation on DPRK issues, policy coordination between the ROK and the US is expected to attract keen attention.

Dr. Beomchul Shin

Korea Research Institute for National Strategy.

Australia: The Art of Strategic Balance

Andrew O'Neil



July 21, 2020. Philippine Sea. From left, Australian Defence Force (ADF) HMAS *Hobart*, HMAS *Arunta*, guided-missile destroyer USS *Mustin*, HMAS *Canberra*, the Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan*, HMAS *Sirius*, the guided-missile cruiser USS *Antietam*, Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) JS *Teruzuki* and HMAS *Stuart* steam in formation during a trilateral exercise. Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jason Tarleton.

At the heart of Australia's strategic policy lies a paradox between persistent insecurity and a desire to be actively engaged in the world. Australia's fear of abandonment is often singled out as a negative feature of its national identity, but as Allan Gyngell observes, it has been central motivating factor in the rejection of isolationism by successive governments

Since the country's Federation in 1901, Australia has sought security in alliances while looking

to become enmeshed in global institutions that promote greater agency for small and medium-sized powers. Dependent on open trade routes for its wealth, Australia remains a major stakeholder in a rules-based international system. Creating and sustaining multilateral groupings to underpin free trade has been a priority since the 1970s, and more recent Australian backing of regional initiatives such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) builds on decades of support for a free trade zone in the Pacific.

The alliance with the US aims to deter threats but it also locks Australia into supporting a major power that often repudiates international institutions in pursuit of national interests. The Trump administration's rejection of the TPP was at odds with Australian policy, but there have been many historical instances where Washington's unilateralism has sidelined institutions valued by Australian policy makers.

Managing competing dynamics in national policy is hardly a unique

challenge for Australian policy makers; it remains a perennial challenge for governments worldwide. In 2020, this challenge became even more acute, with COVID-19 impacting on the foreign and strategic policies of states in myriad ways. One of the most salient competing dynamics has been rising nationalism as many states turn inward during a period where international cooperation has never been more critical to peace and security. The promotion of tighter border security controls in order to combat the pandemic, coupled with unprecedented pressures on health care systems and economies, means that COVID-19 has accentuated an existing tendency towards insularity. Nowhere was this been more evident than in the United States where President Trump attempted to divert attention from his administration's mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis by focussing on its origins, in Wuhan. This triggered a further deterioration in the already tense Sino-American relationship and reinforced the zero-sum logic underpinning interactions between Washington and Beijing.

While the Morrison government called for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19, it was careful to avoid directly accusing Beijing of culpability. Instead the government focused on building a coalition of like-minded countries that resulted in a joint Australia-European Union motion at the World Health Assembly meeting in May that called for "an impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation of the WHO-coordinated international health response to COVID-19". Nevertheless, Beijing was quick to condemn Australia's diplomatic

activism on the issue, accusing the Morrison government of being a stalking horse for the Trump administration. Although avoiding the stridency of the Trump administration – Trump and some senior US officials repeatedly labelled COVID-19 "the China virus" and "kung-flu" – the Morrison government continued to press for an inquiry despite Beijing's strong pushback.

This largely set the tone for the Australia-China relationship in 2020. Existing bilateral tensions over Chinese espionage directed at Australia's domestic system and Canberra's willingness to challenge Beijing on Chinese territorial claims and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific were exacerbated by COVID-19 but also by Beijing's apparent targeting of Australian beef, barley, and wine imports. Interpreted by the Morrison government as retaliation for Australia's public challenging of Beijing, China's moves provoked concern among experts that they marked the beginning of a more serious campaign to downgrade Australia as a trading partner. Although supporting Canberra's call for a COVID-19 inquiry, former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop noted that: "In my experience, it is possible to have robust private discussions with Chinese officials about all aspects of the relationship...they react badly when such discussions are in the public domain, particularly if such matters were not first raised in confidence". Yet, there was little evidence of the Morrison government backing away from its public criticism of Beijing in a context where the annual Lowy poll showed that Australian respondents supported tougher policies towards Beijing while at the same time they were more critical than in previous

years of cooperation with China.

The Morrison government's public criticism of Beijing wisely avoided the ad hominem attacks on China by Washington, despite some government backbenchers advocating a more muscular, Trumpian approach that treated China as a hostile power. Seen in the context of Australia's broader foreign and trade policy interests, the latter approach was always going to be a non-starter. Successive Australian governments, including the Morrison government, have consistently pursued policy positions towards Beijing that align with Australian interests and have shied away from endorsing the more confrontational approach of the US. In other words, like its predecessors, the Morrison government has been careful to draw a line between Australia's approach to Beijing and that of the US.

Despite opposition to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, no Australian government has authorised either joint or unilateral Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the region. Notwithstanding evidence of Chinese espionage directed at high value domestic targets, no Australian government has moved to expel Chinese diplomatic personnel. And, in spite of Beijing making life harder for Australian exporters, Canberra has not sanctioned any retaliatory measures. One obvious explanation is that Australia needs China a lot more than China needs Australia. Given the scale of Australia's trade surplus with China, this explanation appears compelling. But explanations based on material power asymmetries alone

can only take us so far. Although Australia needs China more than China needs Australia from a trade perspective, Australian governments rely heavily on the US for security assurances and the US is by far the single largest source of inward foreign direct investment in Australia. One could therefore argue that Australia has an equal if not greater incentive to emulate the hard balancing approach of Washington. Yet, despite increasingly tough rhetoric from Canberra, this has not happened.

The reasons for this can potentially be located in the US alliance rather than in the bilateral relationship between Canberra and Beijing. Critics of Australia's security alliance with the United States assume that governments in Canberra are motivated exclusively by fear of abandonment in their approach to alliance management. However, the other side of the alliance security dilemma – fear of entrapment – also pervades Australian calculations. Despite the deep intelligence networks and defence cooperation between both countries, in contrast to other US alliances, the Australia-US alliance reflects a degree of detachment in relation to joint military planning, strategic policy coordination, and the physical stationing of US military assets on the junior ally's territory.

This is no mere coincidence. Successive Australian governments since the 1970s have been reluctant to support proposals for basing US ships and aircraft on Australian soil. Notably, this reluctance has been a feature under pro-alliance conservative governments. In 2015, the Abbott Coalition government privately labelled as

“off the reservation” Pentagon claims that the US would be basing B-1 bombers in the Northern Territory, while in 2019 Prime Minister Scott Morrison ruled out any possibility that Australia might host US missiles in response to comments by US Defence Secretary Mark Esper following the termination of the INF Treaty. Moreover, Australian governments have been non-committal in response to informal approaches by Washington to formalise strategic dialogues outside AUSMIN, including bilateral interactions on extended deterrence that would mirror structured dialogues the US has with Japan and South Korea.

Yet, Australia continues to place strong emphasis on the role of the alliance in its strategic policy. Against this background, Canberra worked hard to maintain positive relations with the Trump administration between 2017 and 2021. Indeed, Australia was one of the few US alliance partners not to be on the receiving end of Trump's grievances about what he portrayed as parasitical allies. Australia's Defence Strategic Update, released in July 2020, reaffirmed Australia as a “staunch and active” US ally and noted that the “the US continues to underwrite the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific”. At the same time, the document underscored the need for Australia to “hold potential adversaries’ forces and infrastructure at risk from a greater distance, and therefore influence their calculus of costs involved in threatening Australian interests”. Lest any observers think that this represented a move away from the alliance towards a more genuinely self-reliant posture, the

centrepiece acquisition to enhance the Australian Defence Force's “deterrent effects” was the AGM 158C long-range anti-ship missile, which is being purpose built for the US Air Force and US Navy. This effectively locks Australia further into the US military procurement network.

However, Australia's inputs into the alliance remain modest and the country's defence spending over time has shown little change despite strategic guidance painting a deteriorating security climate in the Indo-Pacific. Although the 2020 Defence Security Update painted a Hobbesian picture of Australia's evolving strategic environment, as Hugh White points out, the Morrison government committed minimal additional spending to underwrite a defence force that is capable of deterring would-be adversaries, including China. It is doubtful that this approach will be sustainable in the years ahead as Australia's strategic neighbourhood becomes rougher and as Washington becomes more demanding of all US allies as the economic costs of COVID-19 bite US taxpayers.

The year 2020 witnessed continued emphasis on regional defence cooperation with like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific. Australia's ongoing engagement in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) process was central to this, but the Morrison government also sought to bolster the substance of bilateral partnerships with ASEAN members, particularly Singapore and Indonesia. Additionally, Australia expanded its footprint in defence support through the provision of COVID-19 medical supplies and expertise to vulnerable

“...the paradox at the heart of Australian strategic policy between insecurity and a desire to be engaged internationally shows few signs of abating.”

populations in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. But the single biggest development was the resurgence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“the Quad”) involving the US, Australia, India, and Japan. An informal security arrangement largely centred on naval cooperation, the success of the Quad since its initial formation in 2007 (and subsequent resurrection in 2017) has been contingent on the willingness of parties to risk offending Beijing, which has portrayed the Quad as an “Asian NATO”. A convergence of factors in 2020 – including a sharp deterioration of relations between New Delhi and Beijing and a keenness by the Trump administration to turbocharge coalitions directed at China – meant that the Quad assumed a much more prominent position in Indo-Pacific regional security than in previous years.

From Canberra’s perspective, New Delhi’s agreement in October to readmit Australia to the Malabar naval exercises with the US and Japan represented a watershed in the Quad’s evolution. Having withdrawn from the Quad

(and Malabar exercise) in 2008 citing Beijing’s sensitivities, Australia’s attempt to re-engage in Malabar in 2017 was resisted by New Delhi, partly because of resentment over Canberra’s earlier decision to withdraw but also (ironically) out of concern that readmitting Australia would be perceived in Beijing as unduly provocative. In the wake of a low-level border conflict with China in June, New Delhi’s inhibitions on this score rapidly dissipated. However, although Quad members may be converging privately in their view on the need to contain Chinese power and influence in the Indo-Pacific, there remains a public gap in the stated purpose of the coalition. While US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was keen to link the Quad at its October meeting to “protecting our people and partners from the CCP’s exploitation, corruption and coercion”, his Australian, Japanese, and Indian counterparts conspicuously declined to endorse this tough rhetoric.

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, the paradox at the heart of Australian strategic policy between insecurity and a desire to be engaged internationally shows few signs of abating. As captured in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, Australian policy makers see the Indo-Pacific as being “in the midst of the most consequential strategic realignment since the Second World War”. Over the next few years, we may see a greater appetite on the part of Australian policy makers for more innovative measures in response to this realignment, such as stationing US missiles in northern Australia

or possibly even formalising the Quad as a minilateral alliance. Much will depend on how China conducts itself strategically in the Indo-Pacific but a lot will also depend on whether the US is willing to sustain the costs of global leadership. Trump’s exit from the White House does not mean the end of “America First”, which will become a stronger impulse in the US once the costs of COVID-19 become clearer. Whatever policy levers Beijing and Washington decide to pull in the coming few years, Australia’s insecurity and its desire to be globally engaged will become less of a paradox and more of a mutually reinforcing dynamic in strategic policy.

Andrew O’Neil

Professor of Political Science at Griffith University.

Indonesia's Regional Security Outlook 2021: Indonesia as a Responsible Maritime Power

Gilang Kembara

Roughly five hundred years ago, the last remnant of the Majapahit Empire fell after being invaded by the neighbouring Sultanate of Demak. At its greatest extent, this last thalassocratic empire, spanned across Sumatra, to the western edge of Papua, and with tributaries in the Malay Peninsula, to the Sulu Archipelago. The Majapahit Empire greatly influenced the history of Indonesia, including providing the precedent for the modern boundaries of Indonesia after its independence. With the advent of European colonialism, and infighting between Indonesia's various ethnic groups, the nation's maritime reach was severely restricted with power concentrated terrestrially to inhibit Dutch colonial expansion to the far-flung reaches of the Nusantara. This "continental mentality" exhibited by colonial Indonesia remained entrenched after the independence of the republic, especially during the New Order Era of President Soeharto.

To understand how the "continental mentality" came to dominate Indonesia's strategic thinking, particularly its military thinking, we have to understand the effect of the Revolutionary War of 1945 – 1949. The core belief of Indonesian military strategists was the notion of resilience in conducting guerrilla warfare, which helped to maintain the independence of the beleaguered nascent Republic of Indonesia from the Dutch invaders. The combination of resiliency, and successful guerrilla warfare were later enshrined in Indonesian military doctrine of defence in depth, in the sense that any invasion would be faced by the combined might of the Indonesian army and a resilient population. This



February 25, 2020. Thailand. Service members from Japan, Republic of Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia military participate in an opening ceremony in Phitsanulok, Kingdom of Thailand, during exercise Cobra Gold. Credit: US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Julio Rivera.

doctrine led the Indonesian military, especially its Army, to become inward-looking, focusing on maintaining the population's will to fight and eliminating anything that they believed would sap the ability of the population to resist the invaders.

This is not to say, however, that maritime thinking has been completely absent from the national consciousness. Indonesians still fondly remember how they managed to assert territorial sovereignty over the vast swathes of seas that encompass the republic through the Djuanda Declaration of 1957. The struggle to assert and defend Indonesia's aspiration to be recognised and accepted internationally as an 'archipelagic state' was long, and arduous. As one academic assessment put it "Indonesia's ultimate victory, still remarkably little-heralded, was testament to the resilience, creativity, judiciousness and pragmatism of its diplomats." The Djuanda Declaration, and its subsequent legal campaign, was a watershed moment that rejuvenated the identity of Indonesia as a maritime

state.

The Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF), which was envisioned by President Joko Widodo sought to reignite Indonesia's maritime perspectives and identity. The president's vision sought to strengthen Indonesia's maritime diplomacy, maritime industry and connectivity, environmental management (including resource exploitation), defence, and culture. Jokowi's attempt to reconnect the nation with its maritime traditions came after it experienced a number of setbacks and humiliations at the beginning of the Reformasi era. The loss of Timor Timur (and the lucrative Timor Gap maritime boundary), and the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan to Malaysia, coupled with flaring secessionist movements and civil unrests had forced Jakarta to retreat to a stronger continental focus to maintain the cohesion of the republic.

But as political stability returned, Indonesia looked out once again over its maritime domain to face off new challenges, and explore fresh



January 8, 2020. Indonesia's President Joko Widodo during his visit to a military base in the Natuna islands. Credit: AFP.

opportunities resulting from changes in the maritime environment brought about by the actions of external actors. Realising attempts made by revisionist powers to alter the existing rules-based order, Indonesia is ready to set its future course as a responsible maritime power.

The Indo-Pacific: Opportunities & Challenges

The 2010s were marked by a consolidation of Asia as a global economic hub, the resurgence of China (and to an extent, India), and the decline of Western influence. Within the same decade, the term Indo-Pacific has swept in to replace the more commonly-used term of Asia-Pacific. Having been used in the past to denote the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions, the term Indo-Pacific has been strongly propelled by Washington's adoption of it and its incorporation in policy settings designed, in the view of many, to check China's rise within the region. The establishment of an Indo-Pacific region was further cemented by the US's attempt to create a grouping of like-minded democracies that roughly bounded the Indo-Pacific space, namely, Japan, India, and Australia. The grouping, which was reviled by Beijing due to its perceived purpose to contain

China's influence, sought to build the much-touted "free and open Indo-Pacific."

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), published in mid-2019, sought to establish a third perspective on creative ways to characterise the greater East Asia region, a perspective that emphasised preserving the centrality accorded to ASEAN during the days of the Asia Pacific. The AOIP focussed less on promoting a free and open region, but more on maintaining peace, security, stability, and prosperity. The implementation of the outlook hit a snag in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as nations started to better manage the pandemic, talks and discussions resumed once again on the future of the Indo-Pacific.

As the AOIP focussed on prosperity and stability, among many things, it is in the interest of ASEAN, and of Indonesia, to utilise the AOIP, to enhance the confidence of the international community to invest in and do business with ASEAN. The realisation that open conflict between the two great powers would effectively kill the economy is a well-known risk to Jakarta. Therefore, Indonesia's course of action is to proclaim to the world that the Indo-Pacific is an indispensable

“Realising attempts made by revisionist powers to alter the existing rules-based order, Indonesia is ready to set its future course as a responsible maritime power.”

region for ASEAN, and its role in preserving the status quo is a cause to be supported. Meanwhile, Indonesia also seeks to expand its economic arms overseas as well. The AOIP not only serves to attract external powers to come to Southeast Asia, but to expand the economic reach of the individual ASEAN member states.

President Jokowi's second term in office puts a heavy emphasis on economic growth, trade, and human resource development. With the infrastructure projects put in place during his first term, Indonesia is set to improve its industrial capacity to tap into the global supply chain network. In doing so, Indonesia will rely heavily on unimpeded maritime access to all four corners of the world. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's visit to Indonesia in October 2020 provided a breath of fresh air with his acknowledgement of the AOIP, which helps to secure Indonesia's interest to the north. Further cooperation has also been cemented with both India and Australia. As in the case of Japan, Jakarta's recently refreshed relationships with both New Delhi and Canberra draw attention to a shared vision of an Indo-Pacific that is centred on ASEAN and its mechanisms.

Indonesia has also taken note on the burgeoning threat of non-

traditional security issues, particularly transnational organised crime (TOC). A report compiled by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) regarding Transnational Organised Crime in Southeast Asia, published in 2019, has highlighted a substantial increase in the four most active transnational organised crime markets in the region. These are: 1) Drugs and precursor chemicals, 2) Trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants, 3) Environmental crimes (wildlife and timber trafficking), and 4) Counterfeit goods and falsified medicines. In light of this fact, Indonesia continues to put a strong emphasis on developing its maritime law enforcement capacities to combat illegal transgression within its maritime domain.

It had been expected that a maritime security bill would be passed by the House of Representatives in 2020. The maritime security bill will expand the role of Badan Keamanan Laut or Bakamla (Indonesia's Coast Guard) as Indonesia's principal maritime law enforcement agency, and clarify its relationship with various other agencies, such as Customs, and the National Police. The Bill is now expected to be passed in 2021. That being the case, we could see important further developments in the maritime security sphere throughout 2021, with a particular emphasis being put on revamped systems and structures that will more clearly separate matters of security and national defence in Indonesia's maritime domain from the other challenges like smuggling and transnational organised crime.

The South China Sea and Maritime Disputes

Within Jokowi's GMF vision, an emphasis of maritime diplomacy has been put at the forefront of the national interest. Given that Indonesia possesses one of the longest and most complex maritime international borders, it has a compelling interest in confirming its

internationally-recognised maritime boundaries as quickly as possible. Since 1971, Indonesia has signed around 18 maritime boundary agreements with its overseas neighbours. However, substantive work still needs to be accomplished in respect to various components of the maritime boundary. Further negotiations on Indonesia's EEZ are still needed with Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia, to name a few, and negotiations on the continental shelf boundary are outstanding with the Philippines, Palau, and East Timor.

The rule of law, and common consent are at the core of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy. It seeks to uphold the existing legal mechanisms that govern the maritime domain, and would attempt, to the best of its ability, to call out any acts of transgression that occur in and around its maritime areas. Chief among them is the South China Sea issue. Indonesia's position, laid out since 2010, asserted that China's claim to historic rights within the South China Sea is illegal, and that none of the Spratlys are to be considered islands entitled to an EEZ/continental shelf under UNCLOS. Although it doesn't refer directly to China, Indonesia's position has always implied that all states must comply with the principles of international law, including the 2016 arbitral ruling.

It is notable that between 2019 and 2020, 26 notes verbales, along with two diplomatic letters, and one official statement on the South China Sea issue from about 12 countries were recorded. Most of these diplomatic moves clarified their respective position on certain legal issues (e.g. the 2016 PCA Award), and on the South China Sea issue overall. Indonesia joined the foray by submitting its own note verbale in May 2020, and again in June 2020. These note verbales stress the fact that Indonesia doesn't recognise China's Nine-dashed line claims in the South China Sea

Despite China's insistence to hold

bilateral talks with Indonesia to justify its position vis-à-vis the South China Sea issue, Indonesia holds the belief that it doesn't need to entertain China's request to hold bilateral talks to resolve these overlapping claims, as Jakarta doesn't recognise the claims held by China under its Nine-dashed line. China's mention of an "overlapping claim" in "some parts of South China Sea" is believed to refer to the Natuna Islands and the waters around them. This was put in evidence under Indonesia's note verbale No. 148 of June 2020, which specified, among other things, that "no historic rights exist in Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China."

With the South China Sea issue a continuing thorn in ASEAN's side, Indonesia strives to push all ASEAN member states to produce a comprehensive and constructive outcome on the Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea. In the expectation that CoC negotiations will be continued in 2021, it is strongly in the interests of Indonesia, and of ASEAN as a whole, to prevent these CoC negotiations being driven solely by the interests of a single party. It would also be unacceptable to have a watered-down CoC that covers only the bare minimum simply to allow ASEAN and China to claim a political achievement. Indeed, Indonesia's role in the future is no longer constrained internally, but lies externally throughout the oceans. Indonesia doesn't aspire to rule the waves as it sometimes did in the past, but it owes it to itself to play a responsible part in developing the maritime regime in its neighbourhood and to prevent the interests of a handful of actors trumping those of the wider international community.

Gilang Kembara

Researcher, Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Thailand During the Pandemic: Building resilience in an increasingly polarised world

Kasira Cheeppensook



February 25, 2020. Thailand. The delegation of military and political leaders representing the seven partner nations participating in Cobra Gold 2020. Credit: U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Osburn Christopher.

One cannot portray the security landscape in 2020 and beyond without referring to COVID-19. The pandemic has and will have vast economic and social repercussions which could also affect security management as a whole. Thailand fought hard to keep virus transmissions under control, arguably at the cost of severe and ongoing economic losses, as well as control measures that may have infringed the rights of its citizens. Amidst the race towards successful vaccines, Thailand also realised that it cannot afford to be vulnerable and set out to become secure and sustainable in this regard. It initiated a collaboration of epistemic communities in the private and public

sectors to create a blueprint for the accessibility of COVID-19 vaccines for Thai people. This involved, inter alia, support for domestic R&D and vaccine production together with international R&D cooperation to encourage technology transfer. It is well understood that self-reliance in this area is empowering, and Thailand set out on the path to become a vaccine production base for ASEAN.

This has to be viewed against a renewed interest in the Indo-Pacific concept, beginning with the US version in 2018 which provoked criticism from China. States like Japan, India, and Australia embraced the concept in their foreign policies

with different interpretations. The following year, at the 34th ASEAN summit in Thailand, ASEAN issued the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Thailand attempted to realise the vision laid out in the AOIP, not least because it was championed as one of the key achievements during Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN. Thailand is a long-standing supporter of ASEAN centrality, especially its role in ASEAN-centred regional architecture, and of the notion of ASEAN in the "driver's seat" of the regional processes. The priorities set out in the AOIP fit well with the priority deliverables Thailand set for its chairmanship, be it connectivity, marine cooperation, or sustainability.

“It is in Thailand’s security interest to ensure its relevance in a strategic environment rendered ever more complex by US-China competition and the Quad.”

In the same year, France also issued an Indo-Pacific Strategy, followed by Germany’s policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific, intended for the EU and entitled, “Germany-EU-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together”. The German guidelines in particular complement the AOIP and, from the Thai standpoint, enriched the security debate through their emphasis on multilateralism and the non-traditional security agenda, such as environmental challenges. It seems that numerous relevant stakeholders agree that the world has a strong interest in ensuring peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

It is in Thailand’s security interest to ensure its relevance in a strategic environment rendered ever more complex by US-China competition and the Quad (comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia). US activism, in particular, may lead the Quad to becoming more formalised and institutionalised although the established regional architecture, especially the ASEAN-managed processes, may make it more difficult for the security agenda to be dominated by external powers. The AOIP set out to be more inclusive and to encourage opportunities to cooperate, a vision that was echoed in the German policy guidelines. The concept of Indo-Pacific was very

much politicised in recent US and, to some extent, French statements. Nonetheless, China was friendlier towards the AOIP, seeing it as not strategically targeting China. Thailand’s chairmanship of ASEAN helped to portray the Indo-Pacific as an area that will benefit from mutual respect and cooperation.

The AOIP may have potential to foster the ground for meaningful dialogue on maritime cooperation, especially the legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea that has been on ASEAN’s security agenda for quite some time. In the increasingly polarised world coloured by US-China rivalry and flagging US interest in the East Asia Summit, it is even more important to keep the channel of communication open and to consistently signify adherence to multilateralism and the rule of law to prevent unilateral actions from being normalised. Thailand performed well against these aspirations in the past, acting as an honest broker to facilitate the dialogue when it was country coordinator for China, and vigorously supported maritime cooperation with China at both the bilateral and multilateral levels in areas such as marine debris management, marine environmental protection, and mangrove wetlands conservation.

Thailand, on the other hand, has been increasing its military spending, something made even more interesting since the justification included the disputes in the South China Sea. When clarifying the procurement of submarines, Thai Royal Navy recognised that the possibility of a war breaking out was slim. However, the reason Thailand had to equip itself with submarines was because numerous incidents in the South China Sea could lead to clashes and further escalation. Thailand had to be ready. The South China Sea was referred to as “main

artery” for Thailand, according to the Chief of Naval Operations. There is a trend of increased military spending all over the world with China and the US at the forefront. Thailand will need to balance this against the economic slowdown as well as intensifying public criticism.

Thailand’s domestic security aspirations as laid out in the 20-year national strategic plan have had a broad base and include many of the parameters addressed by such measures as Global Peace Index (GPI) and the World Happiness Report. More specifically, these include the many factors shaping internal security - especially in the Deep South area - efficient intelligence and police work, readiness of the army and other security services, the loyalty of Thais toward key institutions, and the government’s effectiveness according to the World Bank indicators.

Looking beyond domestic security, Thailand included in its security strategy plan indicators such as increased security cooperation in every dimension with great powers and strategically significant countries. In this regard and as mentioned earlier, ASEAN holds its position as the core regional framework for Thailand’s strategic outlook. Moreover, Thailand views connectivity with great and regional powers such as the US, China, Japan, and India – and including regional groupings like the EU – as significant strategically. In its security outlook, Thailand also strived to direct and stabilise the region through becoming a recognised player in key areas, thereby putting itself in a position to lead efforts to improve standards. This strategy may, in due course, present opportunities to capitalise on the AOIP.

Non-traditional security issues remain a constant in Thailand’s security outlook. Thailand set

an agenda to try to standardise regulations to conform with international standards, as well as play a proactive role in negotiating international standards. Flagged by the US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report and the EU Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing ‘yellow card’, Thailand attempted to remedy non-traditional security problems such as human trafficking and IUU fishing which posed negative ramifications on human rights and the environment. The effort extended beyond the domestic scope when Thailand helped establish the ASEAN Network for Combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing (AN-IUU). Thailand assumed the role of coordinator for the AN-IUU networking between ASEAN member countries and outside parties. It also led in setting up an online platform for information exchange.

Beyond ASEAN, Thailand has aspired to set international ‘best practice’ standards in the multilateral arena. Together with its achievements in the control of COVID-19 transmissions, this also helped strengthen its position regionally. Thailand has highlighted its constructive role in promoting Universal Health Coverage (UHC) to ensure health security, and successfully tabled two resolutions on UHC at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Thailand co-convened the Group of Friends of UHC, an informal platform for the exchange of information among UN member states.

Finally, Thailand has taken a growing interest in digital security, being the first country in ASEAN to offer a commercial 5G network. Cybersecurity is firmly on Thailand’s security outlook, particularly in view of the US-China competition in this area and the trend towards technology decoupling. Since COVID-19, cyberattacks has

increased significantly, and many anticipate that 5G might be more vulnerable than its predecessors in this regard. Cyber threats can take various forms, including abuse; false content; fraud; information gathering; and unauthorised modifications. It is a matter of national security, but one that needs to be balanced with data protection and data privacy.

There have been concerns that Thailand might be negatively affected by the so-called US-China ‘trade war’ which soon turned out to also be a ‘tech-war’. In the case of India, where many Chinese apps were banned due to national security reasons related to the country’s sovereignty and integrity, the US was able to capitalise on the opportunities. China looked to Southeast Asia for new market opportunities, and since the trade war Chinese investments in Thailand, including the high-tech sector, have been on an expanding trend. Similarly, the ‘Made in China 2025’ (MIC 2025) initiative, which has focused on developing innovation and key high-tech industries, has the ultimate objective of putting China in a dominant position in the advanced technology market. This ‘future technology’ – such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR) and autonomous vehicles – is expected to have significant military and other strategic implications and therefore have a major bearing on international order. The great powers who owned advanced technology could create technological inequality.

The trends towards technology decoupling could result in discrete technological spaces, each with its own standards. Nonetheless, there may also be opportunities to avoid dependence on either and to build an area of compatibility with both. In this area as well as others, maintaining autonomy in decision-making is likely to become increasingly difficult.

Thailand understands that it needs a strong foundation for security to prosper, one that is linked closely to domestic political stability, an arena in which the country continues to face challenges and turmoil. The trust deficit could impact stability and make Thailand as well as its people more vulnerable to security threats. The pandemic and great power competition are going to continue to be determining factors that colour the security landscape and outlook. Thailand’s challenge is to find ways to maintain and foster resilience while also adhering to the rule of law, as well as balancing its national interests amidst the polarising trend within the prevailing rules-based multilateral order.

Kasira Cheeppensook

PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Science, and Fellow at the Institute of Security & International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

Malaysia's Regional Security Outlook: Continuity amid Disruption

Thomas Daniel

Building on key developments throughout 2019, 2020 promised to be an exciting and perhaps transformative year for Malaysia's defence and regional security outlook. Domestically, 2019 saw the preparation, tabling and adoption of Malaysia's first ever Defence White Paper (DWP), which looked set to be implemented from 2020 onward. On the regional front, Malaysia's approach toward the evolving strategic security environment was further bolstered by a new anchor – the ASEAN's Outlook in the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) that was adopted at the 2019 ASEAN Summit in Bangkok.

Predictably, the onset and continued ravages of the COVID-19 global pandemic has significantly impacted these considerations, and more importantly, the resources notionally earmarked to pursue them. A change of political leadership has also spelled possible changes, though it remains a distant second to the impact of the pandemic.

Within that context, this paper will cover the three major issues that have impacted Malaysia's 2020 regional security outlook. First, the adoption and possible future of the DWP. Second, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on border security and the increased

demands being placed on the security forces. Third, this paper will look at a longstanding security consideration for Malaysia – the South China Sea (SCS) dispute and how it is increasingly being subsumed within major power competition.

The Defence White Paper

The DWP was adopted in December 2019 and sought to engage a broad range of stakeholders – including the public – on defence, evaluate the evolving security environment and explore how Malaysia could enhance its defence readiness and resilience. It was far from a perfect product. The DWP remained vague on force



12 February 2020. Austria. Bilateral meeting between The Honourable Isnaraissah Munirah Majilis, Deputy Minister of Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change of Malaysia and IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi at the International Conference on Nuclear Security. Credit: Dean Calma / IAEA.

“The South China Sea dispute remains a major security concern for Malaysia, with its strategic wiggle room further narrowing throughout 2020.”

structure, budgetary and timeframe issues that have long plagued Malaysian defence planning. There was no overt mention of Malaysia’s sense of threat perception, or how to go about dealing with them.

Nevertheless, the DWP was groundbreaking in terms of how inclusive, whole-of-government and whole-of-society its formative processes were. This marked a departure from prior, generally opaque decision-making norms. The DWP firmly called for a more accountable and rationalised acquisition process, and sought to take some tentative, initial steps to restructure the local defence industry – long plagued by corruption and inefficiency – in the name of the ‘national interest’.

Relevant to Malaysia’s regional security outlook is how the then policy planners perceived the country in strategic terms – as a “maritime nation with continental roots”, whose geographic placement has allowed it to be a “bridging linchpin” between the Indian and Pacific Oceans through the Strait of Melaka and South China Sea. Besides the challenges and opportunities such placement brought, the DWP also argued that Malaysia ought to position itself as a regional middle power.

A political realignment in February-March 2020 saw the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan ruling coalition and the newly cobbled together Perikatan Nasional assume executive and legislative power. While the DWP is generally considered significantly less of a political document than the Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia, questions have been raised about the viability of the DWP as a guiding document for Malaysia’s defence and regional security outlook under new political leadership.

Current Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, on his first day in the job in March 2020, reaffirmed the importance of the DWP as a primary reference for the Ministry of Defence in its short, medium and long term planning. Further statements have indicated that supplementary studies might be commissioned to address some of the perceived shortcomings of the DWP. Additionally, the emphasis on maritime security, particularly domain awareness, has been followed up on with an announcement on upcoming tenders for the acquisition of desperately needed maritime patrol aircraft and medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial drones. This adds to several transport aircraft that are undergoing conversion for maritime surveillance roles, under the United States funded Maritime Security Initiative.

Moreover, in terms of its regional security outlook, Malaysia’s longstanding mantra of non-alignment, shared security and a preference for inclusive cooperation was reemphasised in the DWP. This aspect of how Malaysia views its defence priorities and posturing within the ambit of regional security is unlikely to change, no matter who the policymakers are. Any significant departure will probably be externally driven, that is, in circumstances where Malaysia finds itself being forced into drastic reactions.

Nevertheless, given that the attention of the Defence Ministry and its Minister have been more focused on supporting the nation’s response to the pandemic (see below), the ultimate fate of the DWP simply remains unknown. Despite statements to the contrary, given the history of a lack of continuity of trademark policies in Malaysia, it remains something for observers to keep an eye on.

COVID-19 and Border Security

As a part of the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the defence sector, particularly the military, was utilised on a scale not seen in Malaysia for a long time. Troops were deployed to assist in movement restrictions, logistics and the setting up of field hospitals to alleviate pressure on public hospitals inundated with patients in COVID-19 hotspots. The latter was seen especially in Sabah where the healthcare system came under tremendous strain after being hit with a third, more infectious wave of COVID-19, from September 2020. Military personnel also assisted the police, immigration and other local authorities in some high profile raids targeting illegal migrants.

The military has also significantly stepped up border patrols from March 2020, especially at sea and in coastal areas to address the risk of illegal immigrants seeking to enter the country. There was, and remains, a wide spread belief, based on the state of infections in neighbouring countries, that the unauthorised entry of these groups would present a significant health risk to Malaysia. In the months of April-May 2020, this led to several highly publicised turnbacks of boats filled with Rohingya refugees headed for Malaysia. A more comprehensive response, called Operasi Benteng was launched in late May 2020.

The impact of these developments has been twofold. First, the increased deployment of the military have demanded a commitment of significant human, technical, planning and fiscal resources. This has severely impacted the ability of the military to maintain the same level of engagement in other key priority areas. The significant economic cost of this pandemic will also see further cuts in defence acquisition and development plans. Defence spending has never been a priority in Malaysia, where it falls low in the pecking order against competing economic and political priorities for the national purse. Even orders for assets deemed to be of critical importance, like maritime patrol aircraft and drones, have been split to tranches and reduced in number.

Second, the Defence Minister is also the Senior Minister in charge of security matters and the government's de-facto lead minister for pandemic management in Malaysia. This dual role has seen one of the key policymakers on matters of defence and security more focused on leading the response to COVID-19. While this is certainly understandable, given the immediate national and political significance of the pandemic, the inevitable consequence has been a noticeable decline in significant engagements on strategic and defence related matters. Even the obligatory calls with his key counterparts have tended to focus more on the impact of the pandemic. Interestingly, this has seen another key player in Malaysia's regional outlook and formulation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, play a more visible role in formulating and driving the conversation on Malaysia's perspectives on key regional security developments.

The South China Sea Dispute and Major Power Competition

The SCS dispute remains a major security concern for Malaysia, with its strategic wiggle room further narrowing throughout 2020. The Chinese Coast Guard maintains a near permanent presence off Luconia Shoals. The operationalisation of China's reclaimed – now militarised – features figuratively halves the operating distance of Chinese maritime and aerial assets that used to be based in Hainan. Constant incursions by its maritime militia and fishing fleets continues, with Malaysia having no effective means of deterrence.

China's aggressive reaction against the Petronas-contracted West Cappella exploration activities in May indicates the possibility that any future Malaysian hydrocarbon activities in the SCS now come with a vastly increased level of risk. Malaysia also suffers the collateral spill over of Indonesia significantly militarising the Natuna Islands in response to its rising perception of a threat from China.

Yet the lack of options doesn't equate to inaction on the part of Malaysia. Malaysia has taken a more proactive 'lawfare' approach in reinforcing claims in the SCS, highlighting the importance of international law in resolving disputes and the explicit rejection of China's nine-dash-line. Despite its preference for quiet diplomacy, Malaysia's diplomats have ensured that efforts by some member states in ASEAN to minimise the dispute do not go unopposed, and that principles of international law remain included in the Code of Conduct negotiations.

However, the fact that the SCS dispute is becoming a more significant element in the broader US-China geopolitical dynamic, is a serious

concern for Malaysia. This risks the escalation of the dispute beyond the control of the claimant states, and has further impacted the centrality and unity of ASEAN. Several statements issued by Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein from July to September have indicated Malaysia's worry of being "dragged and trapped" within this evolving dynamic. While it has its backers, the approach by the US under the Trump Administration toward engagement with ASEAN member states have raised genuine worries that it is the US and not China that might be forcing ASEAN member states to make a choice.

This sentiment reflects a deeper instinct in influential segments of Malaysian policymakers, thinkers and practitioners – that while the US is the only power capable of confronting China in the SCS, its actions have and will ultimately lead to higher costs for ASEAN claimant states and the regional organisation as a whole. This might explain the apparent reluctance to openly criticise China over the SCS dispute, and less vacillation when it comes to highlighting how the US has contributed to the growing tensions. Much to the chagrin of the latter.

An important fact to keep in mind in examining Malaysia's engagement with major powers, especially in an era of geopolitical tussles, is the importance of trade. A major foundation of Malaysia's economic growth, its trade-to-GDP ratio has never dipped below 120 percent this decade. The security of Malaysia's trade routes, and the wider regional environment has been paramount to Malaysia's bilateral and multilateral engagements. While Malaysia cannot unilaterally influence major power dynamics, it will work within multilateral frameworks, with like-minded countries, to maintain a peaceful atmosphere conducive to that trade. Trade will also be vital to the post-pandemic economic



March 11, 2020. Malaysia. Malaysia Armed Forces Joint Force Headquarters Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Abd Malik bin Jiran officiates the opening ceremony of Bersama Warrior. Credit: Muhammad Firdaus bin Jamaludin, Malaysia Armed Forces Joint Force Headquarters.

recovery, regardless of the patterns of trade that will constitute the new normal. Thus, prioritising external engagements, and indeed choices, based on trade and economic growth will be a key factor that also influences Malaysia's regional security outlook.

Conclusion

The disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic hasn't so much transformed as shaken up Malaysia's security concerns, regional or otherwise. The shakeup has laid bare many of the longstanding challenges that Malaysia faces in its security outlook and added further layers of complexity. Moving forward, Malaysia continues to face challenges on both the traditional and emerging security concerns.

What is important for policymakers to keep in mind is that proactiveness, rather than reactivity, should be the order of the day. This is essential both in terms of planning for its emerging and evolving

security challenges, as well as taking stock of its multilateral options with likeminded countries, as the international order careens further into one that is hinged on major power competition rather than international cooperation.

Thomas Daniel

Senior Analyst, Foreign Policy & Security Studies, Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

Singapore's Concerns: Comprehensive Security Rebooted

Simon Tay and Jessica Wau



August 18, 2020. Republic of Singapore Navy Formidable-class frigate RSS *Supreme*, HMNZS *Manawanui*, and KDB *Darulehsan* conduct manoeuvres in the Pacific Ocean during Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC). Credit: Royal Canadian Navy photograph by Leading Seaman Valerie LeClair.

For decades, the case has been made that the agenda of security concern goes well beyond military issues. Tied to their early history of nation-building, countries in ASEAN have often emphasised concepts of comprehensive security that link not only to domestic stability but also economic prosperity and social cohesion. Perhaps never have these wider views of security been more prevalent.

Between the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-China rivalry, the impacts on economic growth and social stability have increased quite dramatically in both breadth and depth. The pandemic is not only a test of health systems, nor is the US-China rivalry merely a matter of diplomacy; there is an ongoing test of governance and of society. This is especially so as the shutting down of borders and the economy aggravate the sense of survival and self-sufficiency as countries seek to recover from a health crisis, a global recession, trade wars and technological competition.

The challenge to globalisation and the rules-based international order has grown among neighbours and also within societies. These were already emerging trends and concerns that have accelerated and become more complex with the pandemic and Sino-American conflict.

Countries must approach the emerging challenges in ways that understand how the multiple issues interlink and can undermine security in the fullest sense of that word. In many ways, the current situation is rapidly rebooting comprehensive security concerns. None more so than in Singapore.

In this brief essay, we will begin by looking at the impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns on the economy and the growth of nationalist protectionism. Secondly, we consider the increasing Sino-American contestation which some are beginning to discuss as an inevitable conflict and “war” whether hot or cold. Finally, we suggest the potential impacts on the global rules-

based system of particular concern to small and open Singapore.

Pandemic, Lockdowns and the Long Shadow of Protectionism

Singapore has drawn strength from its openness to the global community and often acts as a hub to connect the region. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only crippled Singapore’s engines of growth but also brewed a sense of fear and resentment against openness.

On the economic front, Singapore has had to set aside S\$100 billion – nearly 20 per cent of GDP – to provide relief measures for its citizens. It is the first time the government has dipped into its reserves since the Global Financial Crisis in 2009, to support an economy where the unemployment rate has already exceeded the peak of that crisis. Actions to mitigate contagion of the virus this year led to supply chain chocks and disrupted trade, which Singapore relies heavily on for its economic growth and domestic consumption, much more

“The motivating factors for these shifts are mainly geopolitical, and the danger remains that Singapore and other countries will be pressured to align with one side or another.”

than other countries. The economy in 2020 is estimated to suffer a 6 per cent contraction with some sectors that depend on regional and global engagements especially hard hit. Although trade and supply lines are being restored, the next few years will continue to be challenging.

As of the end of 2020, the pandemic has stabilised in the country with low-to no-cases among the resident community. But the Singapore government’s handling of health concerns has fluctuated; being acclaimed as a “gold standard” early on but then experiencing a notable deterioration requiring “circuit breaker” measures that impacted daily life for the society and the economy.

Despite the spike in overall numbers, the main contributor for the overall number of cases in Singapore was confined to outbreaks suffered in dormitories which house foreign workers and did not reflect transmission in the larger local community. In response, throughout the second half of 2020, Singapore has worked to improve its system of management with efforts that have increased testing capacity by almost tenfold, introduced electronic tokens and tracing apps, and to expand

capacities in hospitals and health care facilities. Unless a vaccine is proven and rolled out across Asia and the world, a hub like Singapore will somehow need to manage the system and generate trust in order to open up slowly and carefully.

Domestically, Singapore held General Elections in July amidst the pandemic, and this spotlighted a number of issues. One of these was about the openness of the society to foreigners, who were perceived to have taken away job opportunities from Singaporeans, and increased calls to protect citizenship privileges. While not all felt this way, and other countries also have experienced a similar upsurge in protectionist-nationalist sentiments, if protectionism casts a long shadow, this can have particular repercussions for Singapore’s future policies and positioning as an open society and global hub.

Sino-American Competition and Conflict

Singaporean politics and security were also impacted by the Sino-American rivalry. While this storm has boded ill, it has not been without some silver linings, including a ‘tech rush’ of sorts is manifesting with Chinese tech giants like Alibaba, Tencent and Bytedance (the owner of TikTok) expanding their presence in Singapore, alongside their American competitors. The shift in global value chains also creates opportunities for Singapore to reach out to both sides of the Sino-American competition and attract and anchor investment across ASEAN as a non-China alternative. This is notwithstanding that the bifurcation of technology and supply chains would be detrimental to economic efficiency and potentially impact the unity of ASEAN if different members align more with one side or another. The motivating factors for these shifts are mainly geopolitical,

and the danger remains that Singapore and other countries will be pressured to align with one side or another.

If so, what will Singapore decide? This has been a central geopolitical concern in Singaporean thinking about its security, and this was a live question in the last year.

Generally, Singapore, has worked hard to engage with the Trump administration and, compared to many others in the region, is more like-minded about the need to balance against China. In September 2019, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong met the US President in New York to reaffirm their commitment to promoting free, fair, and reciprocal trade and to also renew the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in Singapore, extending it for another 15 years. Yet even to Singaporean observers, there have been many signs that suggest a trend of US disengagement – most apparent in the American leader’s absence at the annual East Asia Summit, hosted by ASEAN, since 2018.

In contrast, China’s engagement with the region has continued and indeed stepped up with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as with assistance in dealing with the pandemic. Singapore is now actively participating in the financing of many BRI activities and more broadly as a hub for China’s growing business presence in ASEAN. With China posting positive quarterly GDP figures as it emerges from the pandemic, the economic importance and influence of China will likely grow in the immediate future.

Changes in Singapore’s articulation of the Sino-American question can be noted, even if Singapore continues fundamentally to advocate for an American engagement in the region. In a 2020 Foreign Affairs op-ed

piece, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged how China's stake in the region has grown: "Increasingly, and quite understandably, China wants to protect and advance its interests abroad and secure what it sees as its rightful place in international affairs." A similar articulation of Singapore's views was made in PM Lee's keynote speech at the 2019 Shangri La Dialogue.

A contrast may be drawn to statements made by Singapore immediately after the South China Sea arbitration in 2016, which drew a stern reaction from Beijing. In contrast, when the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo formalised support for the tribunal ruling rejecting China's maritime claims in the South China Sea, Singapore and ASEAN as a whole were relatively muted in response.

In this period, more than a few countries in the region are rethinking their policy towards China and the US. For Singapore, while fundamentals remain in place, nuances may be discerned and there is considerable debate and divergences among prominent former diplomats and public intellectuals on the issue.

This is still in line with a fundamental position for Singapore, that countries should not be forced to choose between one side or the other. This is further allied to a strategic emphasis on the importance of an open regional architecture, in which influence is never exclusive and deepening ties with one does not mean going against the other. While power and political influence are recognised as realities of international relations and security, Singapore continues to emphasise the importance of upholding a rules-based international order.

Can Rules Survive and Evolve?

The ability to engage multilaterally

has worked in a rules-based international order that has helped small and middle powers to thrive. There is concern that this multilateral system is fragmenting – and ironically because of actions taken by the US which has been the maker and mainstay of that order since the end of the cold war.

Many in Singapore remain cautious about the growing talk of a "Cold War 2.0"; after all, while conflicts did not occur on Soviet Union or American soil, proxy conflicts were found in the Asia-Pacific theatre. Even short of war, the dangers of a war mentality applied to Sino-American competition are manifold and emergent. They include a legitimisation of breaking the normal rules so that it is only power and might that matters, of forcing an either/or choice in relations, and the weakening of international institutions.

Singapore has been watchful over the undermining the Paris Agreement, and responded by continuing and indeed stepping up commitments to address climate change in tandem with partners. Similarly, the weakening of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) are major concerns. With the weakening of the WTO, Singapore has joined in the 'Multi-party interim appeal arbitration arrangement' (MPIA) to WTO – a coalition that is broad but which in Asia initially only includes China, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand. In the WHO context, Singapore is notably involved in COVAX – a global vaccine initiative to distribute two billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines around the world by the end of next year.

These efforts point to a wider strategic response that Singapore is making in the current security context: to reach out to and work with other non-great powers, especially ASEAN and Asian

partners (with continuing ties with Japan and India and an uptick in engagements with South Korea), as well as the European Union and others further away.

At the time of writing, the US has held its elections but without a clear final result. Whoever eventually occupies the White House, most analysis in Singapore points to the clear bipartisan support for the US to continue to be tough on China. In this regard, 2020 has been a critical year for the broader re-examination of relations between both the US and China, and what Singapore and other countries between can and should do. The pandemic has additionally sharpened that awareness and accelerated the trends.

Singapore can wish but cannot directly improve the US and China relationship. But it has sought to increase its abilities to secure its own position if relations continue to deteriorate. This is not only in its relations to each of the two great powers, but also in its efforts for regional community, a rules-based international order and working with other countries. These efforts are set in the context of avoiding a "war" mentality, and the need to build consistent and steadfast engagement with other countries, taking a multilateral approach across a broad range of issues, especially in recovering and reconnecting in the wake of the pandemic. For the security not only of Singapore but many of the countries caught between the US and China, there is nothing more, and nothing less to be done.

Simon Tay

Chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) and associate professor of international law at the National University of Singapore.

Jessica Wau

Assistant director (ASEAN) at SIIA.

The Indo-Pacific Regional Architecture: the Quad, Inclusivity and ASEAN Centrality

Le Trung Kien

In the Indo-Pacific region, the intensifying tension between the US and China in trade, technology, public health and diplomacy, the deterioration of Australia-China and India-China relations and China's rising influence across the region are, among others, claimed as the factors for the revitalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) involving the US, India, Japan and Australia since 2017. This paper argues that in the context of the rising tension between the Quad and China, ASEAN has the central position, both geographically and politically, to leverage its ASEAN centrality to encourage the inclusive, peaceful and integrated evolution of the Indo-Pacific region.

The Quad began in 2007 as a means for the US, India, Australia and Japan to coordinate their response to the 2003 tsunami in the Indian Ocean and its aftermath. After a flurry of activities, the Quad was abandoned in 2008 in face of hesitation from its member and Beijing's extremely negative reaction. The experience of the Quad during 2007-2008 demonstrated that perceptions of a containment posture directed at China would make it difficult for the Quad to invite regional countries to sign up to its vision and approach. However, since 2017, the Quad has been revitalised through a series of informal meetings, military drills and a measure of policy coordination. The areas of cooperation range from connectivity, infrastructure development to security matters,



February, 2020. Vietnamese Minister of National Defence Gen. Ngo Xuan Lich (left) and Russian Defence Minister General Sergei Shoigu (right) sign a joint vision statement on Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation for 2020-2025 period.
Credit: The Socialist Republic of Vietnam Online Newspaper of the Government.

including counterterrorism, cyber and maritime security. The declared objective of the Quad is to advance a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. If it is to happen, then Southeast Asia accounts for a significant part of such a vision. Economically, Southeast Asia represents the world's third largest population market and the fifth largest economy. Geographically, the region sits right at the conjunction point of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and straddles vital sea-lanes of transportation between the two oceans. Geopolitically, the ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms have played a central role in the broader region's multilateralism. At the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in July 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated, "ASEAN is literally at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, and it plays a central role in the Indo-Pacific vision that America is presenting".

Against this backdrop, three key questions could have important implications for the future of ASEAN.

The first question is whether the tension between Quad members and other states, particular the US and China, will lead to the erosion of a stable and peaceful environment in Southeast Asia. There are concerns that the Quad may still be a relatively narrow instrument focused primarily on serving as a security counter to China. In November 2017, Quad countries started to develop a strategy for keeping the critical sea routes in the Indo-Pacific free and open. As India is inclining towards the Quad, there is discussion of the possibility of the Quad permanently institutionalising joint operational military exercises. The addition of Australia to the Malabar naval exercises will bring all the Quad countries together in an annual military drill. Any risk of a military

“ASEAN can seek to encourage and facilitate the convergence of views towards an open, transparent, inclusive and rules-based regional architecture in a myriad of ways...”

collision between Quad members and China in and around the Southeast Asia, whether accidental or otherwise, is something that ASEAN is keen to avoid. As a group of small and middle-sized countries, ASEAN depends on a peaceful environment for economic development and regional integration. In addition, there are non-traditional security challenges that require China's cooperation. For example, as the upstream country of seven of Asia's largest rivers, including the Mekong River, with a series of upstream hydropower dams, China has pivotal responsibilities for the future of sustainable freshwater supply in the region.

The second question is the impact of the possible economic decoupling between Quad members and China on ASEAN's broader regional integration. The outbreak of COVID-19 is accelerating the adjustment of the Quad countries' supply chain to lessen their strong dependence on China. Concerns related to security and unfair competition from China have led the US to implement various measures aimed at lessening supply chain exposure to China, especially in high-technology areas. Japan and Australia have also taken further

steps to reduce perceived over-reliance on China's economy. In June 2020, Australia and India agreed to work together on diversifying their supply chain networks. Japan, India and Australia are reportedly seeking to build more resilient supply chains to counter China's dominance. In addition, the Quad countries have increased their coordination on this economic development with a view to providing an alternative supply chain network for regional countries. The prospect of a division between different economic blocs and a less integrated regional economy is a mixed blessing for ASEAN, a prospect that could too easily do more harm than good.

A further matter of concern is how ASEAN countries can position themselves in these shifting regional supply chains. In addition to the long-term presence of Japan's investment in Southeast Asia, more economic engagement by the US, expanded trade with Australia and closer digital cooperation with India is welcomed by ASEAN. On the other hand, China has always been one of ASEAN's most important economic partners. It may take decades for other markets to become an effective alternative to China given its compelling advantages such as a large pool of skilled labour, huge domestic market and an efficient logistical infrastructure. For example, even if the Quad countries place their factories in ASEAN member states, the most cost-effective source of necessary parts and materials for manufacturing will still come from China.

As the result, there are two challenges for ASEAN in securing an integrated and development-conducive environment. The first is how to get both China and Quad countries positively engaged with the development trajectory of Southeast Asia and to see that ASEAN states are well-positioned to take advantage

of the shifting network of regional supply chains. The second challenge is how to avoid both regional technology fragmentation and being considered as “choosing sides” with different major powers' initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), Blue-dot and the Economic Prosperity Network.

The third question is how the institutionalisation of the Quad will affect ASEAN centrality and consequently ASEAN's role in the broader regional multilateral architecture. The rebirth of the Quad in 2017 initially generated concerns from some ASEAN countries. Indonesia initially saw the Quad as a potential strategic coalition of ‘outside’ powers without ASEAN's involvement. Singapore warned against forming rival blocs or countries having to take one side or another. Until now, Quad countries have reaffirmed their strong support for ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN-led regional architecture. So far, ASEAN is still considered one of the most influential groupings in the region. This is a good starting point but only a first step. On the sidelines of the annual US-India Strategic Partnership Forum, the US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun said in response to a question, “There is certainly an invitation there at some point to formalise a structure like this”. The magnitude of impact of any such development to ASEAN depends on the type and nature of such formalisation or institutionalisation.

Looking into the future, as trade and geopolitical tensions escalate across the region, ASEAN remains strategically placed to fulfil a critical function in the Indo-Pacific. According to Australian National University academic Evelyn Goh, ASEAN is well-known for its hedging strategy in which ASEAN employs soft balancing to persuade the US to increase its presence in the region, while continuing to engage

with China at various levels and to involve other regional powers. At this stage, there is a need of a new relationship management strategy that seeks to divert the major powers from confrontation in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN has niches in this area as both Quad members and China reaffirmed their support for ASEAN centrality. Although major powers possess the ability to act as they wish, Southeast Asia still has leverage because it is such an important objective in the strategy of each of them. China cannot realise the BRI without the engagement of Southeast Asia. Quad countries cannot realise the IPS without recognising ASEAN's position and role as outlined in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

In this connection, ASEAN has several options to consider. First, ASEAN can try to limit the impact of political issues on the economic realm while at the same time strengthen the ASEAN Community. Externally, ASEAN member states would strengthen their trade, investment and tourism with all major and regional powers. Internally, ASEAN would continue the building of ASEAN Community, especially strengthening the ASEAN Economic Community and boosting intra-regional trade and investment for closer integration. An ASEAN with greater economic resilience would have more bargaining power when dealing with major powers, including Quad countries and China.

Second, ASEAN can seek to play a role as an honest broker that engages major and regional powers together in a constructive way. Among regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN has the necessary mechanisms in place and an extensive multilateral network on which to draw in place. The imperative within ASEAN to seek consensus despite the variation of views among member states, has arguably made the association more

capable of handling relationships with major powers. This role would provide ASEAN the opportunity to make a stronger contribution to protecting stability and peace in Southeast Asia against turbulence emanating from elsewhere. ASEAN-led mechanisms such as East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) should continue to facilitate communication and economic exchange among Quad members and China to avoid strategic miscalculation and to foster understanding of each other's red lines. As an honest broker, ASEAN cannot take sides, but should stand by international law and fundamental principles such as those set out in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). ASEAN can seek to encourage and facilitate the convergence of views towards an open, transparent, inclusive and rules-based regional architecture in a myriad of ways including, leaders' joint statement, communiqué or chair's statement of the relevant summits hosted by ASEAN and even direct diplomatic engagement when opportunities arise.

Regardless of how opportunities to engage the major powers present themselves, it is important for ASEAN to be prepared to seize such opportunities and respond proactively. To avoid being caught between the Quad and China in any dispute is essential for the stability and prosperity of ASEAN. In the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN has the central position not only geographically but also politically. The association can therefore leverage ASEAN centrality to promote an inclusive, peaceful and integrated Indo-Pacific region. On June 23, 2020, ASEAN adopted the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), put forth by Indonesia. The AOIP presents an ASEAN-centred Indo-Pacific strategy that is more consistent with ASEAN's principles of

inclusiveness and consensus building. The Outlook also leans strongly toward a normative, political and diplomatic approach. In addition, ASEAN also needs to speak with one strong voice on critical issues related to its security and development. This is no easy task given the 'ASEAN way' and the varied and complex relationships that ASEAN members have with China and the Quad countries. As the result, it is time for ASEAN to further strengthen its cohesiveness and responsiveness, which in turn reinforces ASEAN centrality as the 'primary driving force' to guide ASEAN and its external partners toward an inclusive regional security architecture committed to compliance with and the defence of shared norms and principles to guide the peaceful coexistence of all states. If any lesson for Southeast Asia can be drawn from the experience of the last 30 years, it is that cooperation rather than geopolitical competition among major powers is more conducive for regional stability and prosperity.

Le Trung Kien

Senior Researcher, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

A Re-elected Government with Less Appetite for Geopolitics

Robert Ayson

If you'd asked New Zealanders in late 2019 what they thought would be dominating the local headlines a year later, there was an easy answer: one election at home and one election abroad. These would answer the big political questions of 2020. Could Jacinda Ardern earn a second three-year term in Wellington and second and could Donald Trump become a two-term President in Washington DC?

Nor would it have been difficult to forecast New Zealand's leading foreign policy question in 2020: how does one deal with the implications of China's rise? This issue has been in the minds of New Zealand's policy community for several years, and there was little sign of that changing. Dealing with a more powerful and confident China was also the leading foreign policy issue for Australia, New Zealand's very close ally. China's growing role had also been affecting the pattern of influence in the South Pacific, New Zealand's primary area of strategic interest.

Further into the region, China's re-emergence as a great power has for some time been the leading geopolitical consideration for New Zealand's traditional partners in Southeast Asia and the main external condition in which ASEAN operates. China was also bound to provide the principle foreign policy focus for whoever would be sworn in as President on 20 January 2021, just as it would be the leading issue for America's allies and partners in Asia.

But like your average Australian, Malaysian, or Korean, your average New Zealander could not have been expected to foresee the issue that would dominate all of our lives in



October, 2020. Jacinda Ardern and the Labour Party claimed victory in the 2020 election. Credit: Getty Images.

2020: COVID-19. For a while at least, the pandemic has become an independent variable. The two elections quickly became verdicts on how well the incumbents have dealt with the virus. With the United States falling well short of an effective response, Trump's election failure in early November became all but inevitable. By contrast, having led New Zealand into an internationally enviable position in containing the spread of COVID-19, Ardern's already strong position became unassailable.

But the coalition government led by New Zealand's Labour Party has changed. With its populist, anti-immigrant stance made redundant by the virus, New Zealand First is gone, having lost all of its seats in parliament. This means saying goodbye to Winston Peters, the venerable Foreign Minister in a cabinet of younger colleagues. As an experienced Asia hand with an eye for shifting geopolitical currents, Peters was sceptical about China's increasing regional role, especially in the South Pacific. In a series of

speeches he went out of his way to attract America's interest in New Zealand's close neighbourhood.

Meanwhile his New Zealand First colleague Ron Mark took advantage of New Zealand's growing concerns about Beijing's strategy, including in the South China Sea, to argue for urgent replacements for ageing defence equipment. The result was almost unprecedented in the recent history of New Zealand defence capability decision-making. As Defence Minister Mark secured replacements for the ageing Orion maritime surveillance aircraft – the P8 Poseidons which will have significant antisubmarine warfare capacities. Before leaving office he did the same for the overworked C-130 Hercules transport aircraft which will be succeeded by C-130Js. Both decisions reinforce New Zealand's interoperability with traditional partners, including Australia and the United States.

The Greens, the other party holding ministerial portfolios in the first

Ardern government, did not stand in the way of these new defence commitments. They now become Labour's only partner in government with two ministerial portfolios. And once the virus no longer dominates the scene, progressive foreign policy causes, including climate change, human rights, and development issues in the South Pacific are likely to attract an increased share of the second Ardern government's attention.

Correspondingly, there may be less bandwidth available for geopolitical ruminations: New Zealand officials may find that there is less enthusiasm in Cabinet for this sort of thinking, and may question whether a National Party government some time down the line would be that way inclined. Moreover, having run up a large debt trying to keep kiwis in jobs and New Zealand companies afloat during the strict COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, it is difficult to see defence and foreign affairs having a prime seat for funding requests in subsequent years. The pools of money that Peters and Mark extracted for their portfolios may get a bit smaller now that these two politicians are no longer around. Their lesser known successors in these roles are not among Labour's most influential politicians whose main focus will be on domestic policy challenges.

Yet the external policy demands facing New Zealand have not vanished. While some problems have been overshadowed by the acute international crisis brought on by the pandemic, others have been illuminated and exacerbated. For example, the COVID-era has placed extra strains on the multilateral rules-based approaches to international politics, where problems are addressed through negotiation rather than plays of power. This has long been a foundation of New Zealand foreign policy. It has made Wellington an

enthusiastic and early joiner of cooperative endeavours when these favour the small as well as the strong. From seeking temporary spots on the UN Security Council to joining new multilateral forums which have ASEAN at their centre, New Zealand has been quick to snap up opportunities to be inside these tents.

A transnational pandemic ought to be one of the low hanging fruit that is custom made to show this cooperative machinery at its finest. But this opportunity has been missed. Regional cooperation, at least of an inclusive and integrative sort, has not shone. Where have the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit been when they have been needed? How much has APEC, which New Zealand chairs in 2021, made a difference? And given the rapid spread both of the virus and of travel restrictions applied by nearly every nation state to protect their populations, there are now more obstacles to the more open and integrated world that New Zealand policy has long encouraged.

With multilateral ventures hardly shining bright, New Zealand has been seeking out what might be called coalitions of the trusted – fellow polities and economies amongst whom supply chains can be salvaged and travel slowly bought back to life. The philosophy is not a new one for New Zealand in Asia: there are echoes of earlier minilateral building blocks which can encourage wider patterns of cooperation eventually. One example is New Zealand's involvement with Singapore, Brunei and Chile in the P4, the forerunner of what became the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. The same foursome featured in an April 2020 ministerial announcement on maintaining supply chain connectivity in the COVID-era which also featured Australia, Canada, Laos, Myanmar and Uruguay. But opening up has

been a slow process even among closest and most trusted partners, as the repeatedly postponed idea of a travel bubble between New Zealand and Australia demonstrated.

Some opportunities for cooperation have come in Indo-Pacific guise. New Zealand was never an early adopter of this way of talking about the region: Asia-Pacific and South Pacific worked just fine. But bowing to the almost inevitable Wellington eventually settled on a familiar formulation: New Zealand would step inside Indo-Pacific tents whenever principles of inclusivity and openness applied. This was code for avoiding new groupings that were established deliberately to exclude others in the Asia-Pacific region, especially China. In making this cautious step in 2018, New Zealand was following a similar script to ASEAN, whose strategy, forged by Indonesia, conveys the idea of Indo-Pacific regionalism with Southeast Asian characteristics.

Two years on, New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that New Zealand was involved in talks on COVID-era cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners - Australia, the United States, India, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. In that acknowledgement the Ministry highlighted ASEAN-centred forums as models of best practice. So far, so consistent. But through other glasses, this Indo-Pacific group looks remarkably like a Quad Plus affair with the United States, India, Japan and Australia sitting alongside some of their like-minded partners. Unlike its close ally Australia, New Zealand is neither a member of the Quad nor an advocate of it. New Zealand-India relations remain barely noticeable. But New Zealand and Japan have talked up the benefits of Free and Open Indo-Pacific cooperation. Moreover, keeping the United States regionally engaged has been a highly valued prize in the Trump

“With multilateral ventures hardly shining bright, New Zealand has been seeking out what might be called coalitions of the trusted...”

era for New Zealand among many others. Moreover, in a 2019 Defence Assessment New Zealand explicitly positioned its South Pacific interests in an Indo-Pacific context. That it did so at a time when its concern about China’s role in the Pacific was rising should not be lost on observers.

There is more. In the middle of 2020, New Zealand joined a Ministerial level discussion on economic cooperation with Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. This Five Eyes consultation, promoted by Scott Morrison’s government, came as Washington was advocating economic decoupling from China – and information technology decoupling also. But while the Ardern government had earlier declined a 5G telecommunications upgrade bid from a local company which included Huawei, it’s unlikely that New Zealand would want to do without the economic benefits of a strong commercial relationship with China. That’s even more so when you are trying to reboot your economy from the COVID-era which has hit tourism and international student revenues

Wellington has watched on as Canberra’s relationship with Beijing has become increasingly brittle. There hasn’t been much enthusiasm in New Zealand for copying this formula. At points they have argued in parallel:

in separate announcements New Zealand and Australia expressed their concern about Beijing’s new National Security Law for Hong Kong. But Wellington offered a muted response to Scott Morrison’s proposal for an international investigation into the origins of COVID-19, an idea to which China took considerable offence. Moreover, New Zealand’s advantages of having a greater degree of autonomy from Washington in comparison to loyal ally Australia have been magnified in the Trump era.

Which brings us back to two elections and the China question. Biden’s arrival in office is cause for many major sighs of relief from the second Ardern government. The world’s most important democracy is now in more responsible hands. Biden’s Whitehouse will have a more positive outlook on some of the things that matter to New Zealand – multilateral diplomacy, climate change cooperation which recognises the problem as a clear and present danger, and promoting a rules-based order at home as well as offshore. Although Biden has to cope with the realities of US protectionist sentiments and is unlikely to bring the US into the TPP, his Administration will be more inclined to see trade agreements as things that can work for more than one party. That’s crucial for New Zealand and many of its partners in Asia.

American policy will seem more reasonable and articulate. That alone will change America’s role in the region. But on China, Biden and the Democrats shares many of the Republican’s concerns, which are in fact concerns of the Washington policy establishment. Just as Hillary Clinton would have been firm on Beijing had she been elected, Biden will adopt a similar path. In contrast to Trump’s haphazardness, this will be firmness consistently applied.

And while Washington will be much less prone to impose tariffs on its allies and partners in Asia (to the relief of Japan, Korea and others), it will expect more from them in joining the pressure on China. Those expectations will also be clear and consistent. That means more certainty but it also means more geopolitical competition to which New Zealand and many in ASEAN are allergic. What more can you do for the team in the South Pacific, and Southeast Asia too, New Zealand and others will be asked. Working out what to do with these expectations will take some adroit diplomacy from the Ardern government. But it will be far better to have the challenge of navigating Asia’s shifting currents, which continue to move in China’s favour, without the awfulness of COVID.

Robert Ayson

Professor of Strategic Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

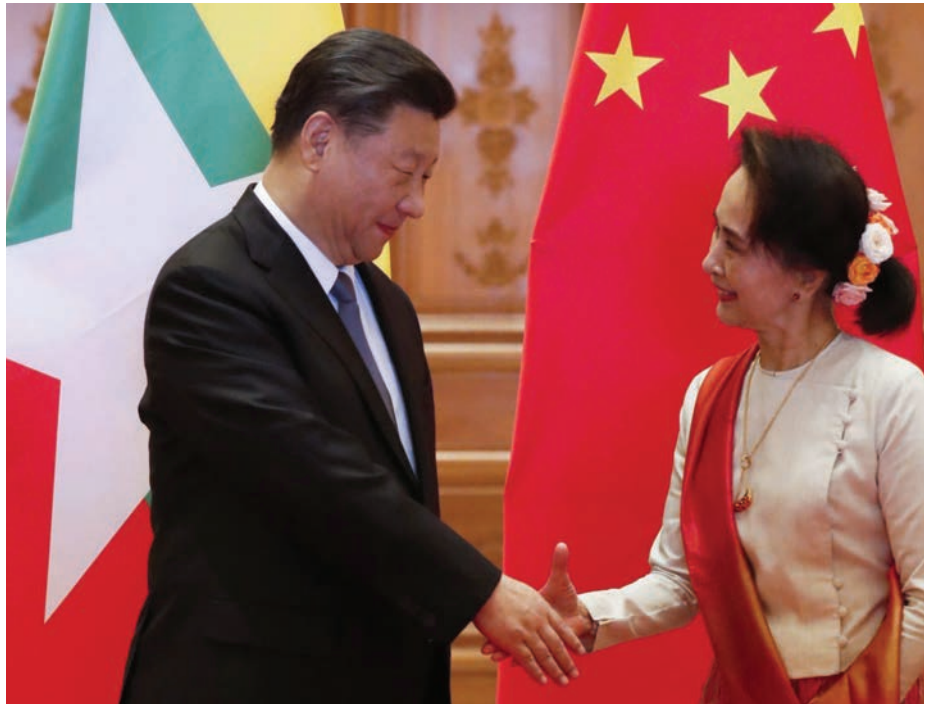
At a Crossroads: Myanmar's Evolving Security Challenges

Aung Zin Phyo Thein

Myanmar has endured successive armed conflicts since gaining independence in 1948. The country's wealth in natural resources and strategic location between India and China has not been sufficient to prevent it from being a long-suffering victim of ethnic disharmony and violence. Myanmar's political climate has been characterised by complex structures and increasingly complicated relationship dynamics between a host of key actors. The constant vying for even a modicum of leverage among these actors has continued, resulting in net setbacks for the country and its most vulnerable populace.

This history has had significant impact across Myanmar's socioeconomic and political infrastructure and has also impacted the country's relations with its neighbours and regional powers. What can be seen is that the complicated nature of Myanmar's ongoing security challenges not only paralyses most development initiatives but also renders the country more vulnerable to these challenges.

Myanmar's most critical security challenges span numerous fronts. These include the following: sporadic but intensifying armed engagements between Myanmar's Armed Forces (the Tatmadaw) and a myriad of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs); a spluttering peace process between EAOs and the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led civilian government; contentious relations with external actors; and the potential for extremist terrorism to further overload the already burdened peace-building initiatives. These challenges have evolved and continue



January 18, 2020. Chinese President Xi Jinping (l) and Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi shake hands before a bilateral meeting at the Presidential Palace in Naypyidaw. Credit: AFP/Nyein Chan Naing.

to exacerbate one another, aided by impasses on the development front and politicking – two vices that have long entrapped Myanmar's citizens in a cycle of conflict, poverty and jaded hopes.

The Rakhine's crisis, which has attracted global attention over the past few years, was prompted primarily by the August 24, 2017 attacks by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) terrorists on 24 police outposts in the state. The subsequent fallout and mass clearance operations resulted in over 700,000 refugees fleeing to Bangladesh. In addition to ARSA, there has been an intensifying conflict with the Arakan Army (AA). Formed in 2009 and playing into the disenfranchisement of the Rakhine community (with Rakhine state being the country's poorest, and largely neglected by the civilian government). ARSA and AA represent two distinct

challenges moving forward.

In the case of ARSA, skirmishes with the Tatmadaw have been close to negligible. This has been attributed to shifts in ARSA's area of operations and in its activities. Within camps in Bangladesh, ARSA has sought to enforce its authority among refugees and engaged in kidnapping, extortion, rape and extra-judicial killings. In October, fighting broke out in Kutapalong refugee camp between ARSA and the rival Munna gang over the illicit drug trade, resulting in the deployment of the Bangladeshi army. ARSA's presence within the camps has been ubiquitous. Forced recruitment and the enforcing of Sharia law have built up perceptions of ARSA as the de facto governing authority within the camps. Their austere rule has the potential to turn refugees against ARSA, yet the chances for radicalisation also cannot be ruled out.



October 15, 2020. UMS *Minye Theinkhathu*, gifted by India, pictured during the Myanmar Navy's Fleet Exercise 2020. Credit: CinC Defence Services, Myanmar Navy.

In 2017, a group of 47 Rohingya imams issued a fatwa forbidding jihad. Yet this fatwa came with a disclaimer. While recognising that direct conflict with Myanmar would result in defeat, the fatwa called on their community to achieve the following objectives: 1) elect an amir 2) self-correction and 3) obtain sufficient firepower to begin jihad against Myanmar. The addition of this last objective could be interpreted as favouring a pragmatic delay over actual pacification and should be a signal to authorities on both sides of the border that the risk of extremist terrorism has not abated. The illicit drug trade ARSA has engaged in is a probable source of funding for these endeavours.

Complicating the crisis has been the emergence of another Rohingya armed group, the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA), operating out of northern Rakhine. The ARA has proclaimed a willingness to peacefully coexist with others working to

develop the Arakan region. ARA are likely seeking to take advantage of increasing Rohingya disenchantment with ARSA's tactics and leadership. It is imperative for Myanmar to develop a national strategy that incorporates both counter terrorism and deradicalisation measures. Existing multilateral initiatives, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) or the East Asia Summit (EAS) may be utilised, given Myanmar's relative lack of experience and resources in this arena. Special taskforces consisting of security personnel, trained experts and civil society actors are also worth exploring.

In contrast, the AA, officially designated as a terrorist organisation, has engaged in some of the fiercest fighting with the Tatmadaw over the years of Myanmar's civil war. Over 20,000 Rakhine villagers have fled the fighting in 2020 alone, which has also seen a sharp spike in civilian deaths. The tactics the AA have employed

against the Tatmadaw appear to have the objective of delegitimising the military as the supreme security actor within the region, and, by extension, the Myanmar government's authority in the eyes of Rakhine citizens. This has manifested itself particularly in the increased intimidation, abduction and killing of local administration officials the AA sees as Tatmadaw collaborators – a depressingly effective tactic undermining central government control. Their exploits have continued being popular among Rakhine citizens. Two notable events involving the AA in 2020 provide a glimpse of the fragility of order and legitimacy in Myanmar.

The first involved the AA releasing a video allegedly showing two Tatmadaw soldiers who had defected to the AA and confessed to their role in the 2017 crackdown in Rakhine state. It was further alleged that the two soldiers had been transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. The lack of

scrutiny and ready acceptance of these soldiers' statements from non-governmental organisations (such as Fortify Rights) and civil society actors indirectly gave credence to the AA's aim to be the leading security actor.

The second incident involved the October 2020 kidnapping of three NLD candidates for the 2020 general elections in Rakhine state an incident further exacerbated by the cancellation of voting in more than half of Rakhine State the following month by the Union Election Commission (UEC), acting on the advisory of the Tatmadaw – controlled Ministries of Defence and Border Affairs. Voting in selected areas of some other states had also been cancelled, provoking speculation that popular non-NLD candidates were being side-lined. Again, the perilous conditions in Myanmar seemingly allowed the AA to leverage a criminal act to achieve important political objectives.

Another example of challenges feeding off each other relates to the peace process. Government interest in these negotiations is widely perceived to have diminished during the NLD's first four years in government, with the most notable impasse coming in 2020. At the 21st Century Panglong Conference, eight non-signatory EAOs boycotted attendance of the event owing to the government's designation of the aforementioned AA as a terrorist organisation.

Lost opportunities to build on ground gained has also evolved into a consistent feature. The best example of this could be seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The announcement of the country's official COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan (CERP) had been followed immediately by the formation of the Coordination and Cooperation Committee to work with both signatory and non-signatory EAOs.

The Tatmadaw also announced a 4-month unilateral ceasefire in May. This created an opportunity for all of Myanmar's security actors – the government, Tatmadaw and EAOs – to confront the common threat of the virus. This opportunity was more squandered than capitalised on, derailed by mistrust over the sincerity of ceasefires and the continuing trust deficit between the government and the Tatmadaw.

Thus, there has been a substantial erosion of trust in the government as a mediating force across its tenure thus far. This had not been helped by perceptions of unrepresentative governance of ethnic states, symbolised by controversial infrastructure projects that locals continue to have little say in. A failure to address environmental grievances, coupled with broken promises of transparency (as seen in the unaddressed fate of the Myitsone dam) have left locals and ethnic minority leaders frustrated and apprehensive of the government's capacities.

A large majority of these projects are those that can be traced to neighbouring China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), while promising a gateway of opportunities, traverses conflict areas within Myanmar and projects that lack well-rounded, impartial oversight can readily exacerbate existing inequalities. From Kachin's Myitkyina Economic Development Zone project to the Kyaukphyu Deep Sea Port in Rakhine state, calls have been made by ethnic political leaders and residents for transparency and equitable resource distribution.

China's diplomatic relations with Myanmar will continue being of immense importance. China's role as a peace broker between Myanmar and EAOs has been a central part

“The country's wealth in natural resources and strategic location between India and China has not been sufficient to prevent it from being a long-suffering victim of ethnic disharmony and violence.”

of Myanmar's peace process. Yet a few notable developments have characterised this relationship in recent years. In the immediate fallout from the Rakhine crisis of 2017, Myanmar pivoted towards China, appreciating the latter's protection of Myanmar at the United Nations Security Council, as well as embarking on infrastructure development projects across the country. However, Myanmar has managed to push back against an overtly asymmetrical relationship with China, demonstrated by the re-scaling and re-structuring of the Kyaukphyu Deep Sea Port and the New Yangon City Development project respectively. These important adjustments should not be construed simply as repudiations, but as a firm signal to China that Myanmar insists on being the ultimate authority on its strategic interests.

With its neighbour to the West, Myanmar's ties with India have seen increased cooperation across defence and security, with the notable transfer of a Kilo class submarine from India to Myanmar. Renamed the UMS Minye Theinkhathu, the submarine complements the



April 2020. Keng Tung, Myanmar. Mawk Kon Local Development Organization is providing IEC and care kit to returning migrants in collaboration with labour officials, ATIP, General Administration Department, Social Welfare and health workers. Credit: ILO Asia-Pacific / Flickr.

Kalatan MultiModal Transit Transport project. As in the case of China, Myanmar's foreign policy of neutrality will continue to prevail, but is expected to be challenged. With Bangladesh, existing diplomatic impasses arising from the Rakhine crisis have largely remained stagnant, although further cooperation in anti-terrorism campaigns will be paramount in normalising and enhancing ties.

Given that this current array of complex, intertwined challenges is constantly evolving, it is crucial for Myanmar's government actors to evolve with them. This is where Myanmar lies at a crossroads – confronted with the options of remaining stagnant in its approach to security, or adapting to changing

risks. Redefining security should be made a national priority – not only must it reflect a cessation of conflict for stakeholders, but it must be one that prioritises safety for current and future citizens and their livelihoods. COVID-19 had given Myanmar the chance to unite behind a common enemy – a chance which had gone begging. To not lose any further opportunities, it is important for Myanmar to act with strategic tact and address each interconnected challenge separately, while always remaining aware of these inter-relationships. Robust and timely channels of communication with external diplomatic actors must also be made to ensure that others recognise that Myanmar is striving for its goals to the best of its ability and resources.

Aung Zin Phyto Thein

Ad-hoc Research Associate, MISIS.

Sino-American Competition in Cambodia: A 2020 Retrospective

Pou Sothirak



March 16, 2020. Cambodia, China kick off Golden Dragon Exercise. Credit: VNA.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of US-Cambodian relations. It is also a year in which Cambodia's relationship with China continued to expand (e.g. the finalising of the new China-Cambodia trade agreement). Beyond this, 2020 has shown itself to be extremely eventful for Phnom Penh as it continues to find itself at the centre of Sino-American competition in Southeast Asia. Reaping the full potential benefits from both the US and China necessitates Cambodia sustaining a posture of balanced engagement with the two most powerful states in the world.

The most notable event of the year has been the long-awaited revival of Washington's Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) in the form of the new Mekong-US Partnership (already being referred to simply as "the Partnership"). While LMI provided over \$3.5 billion in assistance to Mekong subregional partner states over the course of its existence, in recent years it had become somewhat moribund, leading to questions about Washington's long-term commitment to both the subregion and to Cambodia. The announcement of the new Partnership together with fresh commitments of development and humanitarian funding as well as pledges of significant new

private investment have largely stemmed those concerns. Washington has conspicuously framed the Partnership as strong on regional collaboration – underlining its consistency with the missions of the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Concomitantly, the appointment late last year of a new American ambassador, Patrick Murphy, has resulted in something of a charm offensive by the United States in Cambodia – regularly highlighting new US investment, supporting the education sector, and providing emergency COVID-19 pandemic relief funds alongside a



September 11, 2020. US Deputy Secretary Stephen Biegun participates in the Mekong-US Partnership Virtual Ministerial Meeting, reaffirming Washington’s commitment to the future of the Lower Mekong Initiative. Credit: VOA.

generally ramped up program of public diplomacy.

Nevertheless, there remains a significant level of distrust between Phnom Penh and Washington – reflected most clearly, perhaps, in the continuing controversy over the question of the future of Cambodian security policy. On the positive side of the ledger, the first steps were taken to resume US-Cambodian military cooperation (suspended since 2017), with the American side pledging to support the training of Cambodia’s officer corps, with a particular focus on blue-helmet peacekeeping – an area where the kingdom has been particularly active in recent years.

However, controversy over Washington’s claims that the government is permitting the construction of a Chinese naval base on Cambodian soil continues. The release of new satellite imagery by the Center for Strategic and International

Studies (CSIS) in September, showing the destruction of an American-funded building that had served as the Tactical Headquarters for Cambodia’s National Committee for Maritime Security at Ream, reignited the long-running debate and resulted in what has become a now standard pattern of claims and denials on the issue. This question is expected to remain at the core of US-Cambodian relations for the foreseeable future and seems likely to ensure that despite improvements in the relationship over the last year, any apparent bilateral equilibrium will be recognised as inherently unstable.

Beijing, at the same time, continued to press forward with the strengthening of its own ties with Cambodia, this year’s highlight being the inking of a fresh Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA). While the text of the agreement has yet to be released, it is broadly expected

that the FTA will yield strong gains for Cambodia’s agricultural sector (increasing exports to China) while further deepening the integration of the two economies. At the subregional level, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism (LMC) entered the first year of its consolidation phase, with increased project funding to Cambodia and other partner states and continued discussion as to the future home of an envisioned LMC Secretariat (the initiative is presently headquartered at China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs). While the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) experienced a very steep learning curve, including significant missteps that led to something of a BRI 2.0 re-launch last year, LMC – a much smaller scale initiative – has generally been viewed quite positively both within Cambodia and the region. Diplomats who have engaged with the LMC have noted their appreciation for the

“Cambodia should not be seen as favouring China at the expense of the security concerns of its ASEAN partners that are claimant states in the South China Sea...”

predictability and consistency of LMC aid and investment programming.

In a further gain for China, Beijing committed this year to increased transparency and sharing of data concerning water flows along the Mekong River – a core issue of contestation and a topic of intense importance to Cambodia in light of the significant number of the kingdom’s citizens who rely on the river for food security. While criticisms and questions continue to circulate as to whether Beijing will fulfil its pledge by significantly expanding the data that it shares with downstream states, China has created a significant opportunity here to “reset” its Mekong river diplomacy and to build increased trust. In light of the impact on Cambodia’s rural population of an extreme drought earlier this year, the issue of the river and its long-term sustainability remain central to Sino-Cambodian relations.

One clear point of differentiation between the US and China has been in how each side has engaged with the kingdom. As noted above, while Washington continues to engage in official dialogue, it (along with Cambodia’s other major Western partners, e.g. Australia, Germany,

France, Sweden, and the EU) has doubled down on public engagement and building stronger relations with civil society, educational institutions, and a particularly strong focus on youth engagement.

Conversely, Beijing continues to focus overwhelmingly on state-to-state contacts, generally limiting its engagement to government entities or other entities and institutions holding some sort of “official” status. The one exception here being China’s private sector which has been the primary source of FDI in Cambodia for some time now. Whether BRI-related investment or independent thereof, China’s private sector continues to make its presence felt in Cambodia – most visibly through the garment and construction sectors. However, the effects of the slowdown in the global economy that occurred due to COVID, exacerbated by capital controls and liquidity issues in China, has had an impact on Chinese investment in the kingdom, with many building projects being placed “on hold”. This has been particularly conspicuous in Sihanoukville, a city transformed by over \$30 billion in investment, primarily from China, giving rise to questions as to the future of this giant project. The pandemic also made abundantly clear just how dependent Cambodia is on its tourism sector, not least the millions of Chinese tourists who visit the kingdom each year. That flow has come to an abrupt halt – yielding urgent calls for a more rapid diversification of the economy away from overdependence on tourism and the country’s other two main drivers of economic growth, namely, construction and the textile industry.

Cambodia continues to reach out to and engage with other partners. Japan remains Cambodia’s longest standing and most consistent partner, continuing to build its own strong credibility as a “steady, reliable” partner that does not bring the

baggage or challenges that relations with the region’s two great powers inherently entail. Befitting its status as the centre of Southeast Asian geopolitics, two additional actors have begun to make their presence felt: South Korea and India. Seoul continues to expand its New Southern Policy, with Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) projects now a regular part of the development landscape together with more significant outreach across the board in Cambodia. While India, already present in the subregion through its Mekong-Ganga Cooperation initiative and expanding its footprint via Delhi’s “Act East” policy, has begun to play a larger economic role in the kingdom via its “Quick Impact Projects” and gradually increasing investment.

While South Korea remains outside of the minilateral Quad grouping (the Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), the expansion of initiatives on the part of all five countries has allowed analysts to begin to get a clearer picture as to how Cambodia will navigate Sino-American competition. China’s largesse in investment and aid to Cambodia will certainly not be matched by any other single state actor. This has persistently raised the question of how Cambodia can avoid becoming entirely dependent on China given the sheer scale of its financial role. As 2020 comes to an end, a counterweight to China is now coming into view.

Over the course of the last year the Quad has significantly consolidated its role. China’s military conflict with India resulted in intense pushback from Delhi and the signing of a new military agreement with the United States. Australia has also seen a considerable deterioration in its relationship with Beijing, with events reaching their nadir as two Australian journalists fled China under diplomatic protection.

In the case of Japan, its new Prime Minister, Suga Yoshihide, has hinted that Japan will continue along the pro-Washington path set by his predecessor, Abe Shinzo. At this time last year, the Quad was widely viewed as an American-led institution in which Washington was attempting to drag three somewhat reluctant partners into a new bloc designed to preserve the Indo-Pacific status quo. Today, the Quad appears to be firing on all four cylinders. For Cambodia, there are both positive and negative elements to these developments. On the one hand, the consolidation of the Quad as a clear counter-weight to China gives Cambodia more options to play each side against the other in order to negotiate better deals on loans and investment; to avoid over-dependence on either actor; and to adhere to a more robust multilateral foreign policy strategy. Conversely, Quad consolidation could also be a harbinger of deeper conflict to come in the region – particularly in light of growing tensions in the South China Sea – placing Cambodia in a strategically challenging position, intensified by its relatively small size.

The stage is set. In 2020, Cambodia finds itself in a very challenging strategic environment. Sino-American competition in Southeast Asia presents Cambodia with both dangers and opportunities. Given that both countries have played, and continue to play, an important role in boosting Cambodia's economic and security development, how can Cambodia most effectively balance its relations with these two giants?

In order to maximise its economic, diplomatic and political returns, the kingdom should avoid bandwagoning with Beijing against the US. The logic here is that, as a small state, it is essential to avoid over-dependence on any single power for the kingdom's future development. Cambodia must find a pragmatic way to balance its

relationship with the two giants such that the country's own interests are advanced rather than compromised.

Cambodia should conceptualise its relations with the US and China in the context of its place in ASEAN. Seeking peaceful co-existence with China alone cannot guarantee long-term stability for Cambodia, given that there are lingering animosities between China and various states in Southeast Asia concerning its assertive position in the South China Sea. Cambodia should not be seen as favouring China at the expense of the security concerns of its ASEAN partners that are claimant states in the South China Sea seeking peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in accordance with international law. In the absence of such a perspective, Cambodia's relations with its ASEAN partners could rupture and yield severely negative consequences for the country's own security in the long run.

Cambodia's foreign policy orientation should be more pragmatic and neutral when it comes to how the kingdom engages with the world's two great powers. At the same time, Washington should treat Cambodia with due respect as a nation whose soul is not yet lost to China, but rather as a nation that is attempting to reconfigure its foreign relations with all friendly countries, including the US.

In short, Cambodia should avoid putting all of its eggs in one basket. As a small country, it is in the best interests of Cambodia to find the courage and determination to acknowledge our own shortcomings and to try to reset national foreign policy toward a more balanced engagement with all powers.

2020 has been a significant year for Cambodia, with developments occurring at a pace that even local analysts have difficulty keeping up

with; 2021, hopefully, will provide a bit of breathing space and a chance to take stock and evaluate next steps. With a new administration taking office in Washington; Cambodian national elections due in July; and continued questions as to whether Sino-American competition will intensify, things are likely, however, to be even busier in the coming year.

Pou Sothirak

Executive Director, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.

Special Supplement

AUSCSCAP/ASIALINK The Virus and Regional Order - Initial Assessments

Road Map of Post-Pandemic Asia May Look Different

By Greg Earl, Contributor, Australian Financial Review



April 30, 2020. Malaysian medical works wear PPE to protect against transmission of COVID-19. Credit: YuriAbas, Shutterstock.

Leading observers on Asia are debating whether nations in the region will consider new approaches to diplomatic and economic engagement.

It may be the new great divide: has COVID-19 changed international relations or just aggravated tensions which already existed?

From the isolated perspective of the moment, there is a rising sense of change: from predictions that the just-in-time manufacturing networks at the heart of Factory Asia will be

wound back to the idea that science will play a bigger role in government decisions.

But from the broader perspective of history, the uncertainty caused by chafing between old and new superpowers may have simply moved to a new theatre, while the nation state has re-emerged as the bedrock of official life.

This ambiguity about what will drive diplomatic decision-making across the region as lockdowns are wound back seems to cut across

the views of strategists regardless of their countries or institutional backgrounds.

A new collection of essays from some of the region's leading former policy-makers, academics and commentators published by the Council for Security Co-operation in the Asia Pacific's (CSCAP) Australian arm and Asialink shows how the pandemic has sparked a vibrant debate about new approaches to diplomatic and economic engagement.

But the question as to how they might be implemented lingers as the Pacific Forum's Ralph Cossa argues: "Some commentators are seeing the crisis as a game-changer, but that is far from certain – the tendency once the crisis has passed may well be to simply lapse back into old habits and patterns."

Yet former Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran sees a world transformed with no return to a status quo, which means it is even more important to "think hard about the possibilities and be prepared to counter what we don't like and to support what seems more promising".

Between these polar views of change in the post-pandemic world, there is nevertheless much commonality on

what are the key issues: China-US relations; the future of globalised economics; the effectiveness of diplomatic architecture; and ways of preparing for the next pandemic.

And on the latter point, there is some welcome optimism amid the less surprising doleful views about the first three.

Peking University's Zha Daojiong argues that despite recent tensions over the management of the live animal trade and vaccine distribution, they remain productive arenas for regional collaboration.

And he argues: "The Asia Pacific does still have one network after another made up of science and health interests that do not always require political/diplomatic approval by the sovereign states. Preserving the professional integrity of these cross-national networks, in an ironic way, may well be a surer path to a less worrisome future."

This sentiment is supported by The Times of India's Indrani Bagchi, who points out that a largely unnoticed meeting of South Asian health professionals showed that while most of these neighbours dislike each other, "keeping co-operation at the professional level on areas that affect everyday lives could take the sting out of, say, the India-Pakistan non-relationship".

This is where these essays offer useful insights for Australia regardless of whether it is facing up to a game-changed or recidivist neighbourhood, because they offer more subtle points for re-engagement than the one-dimensional prism of the US-China conflict.

Former Singapore senior official Peter Ho notes that Korean chaebols (business conglomerates) are particularly good strategic thinkers; Cossa says some business will leave China for Vietnam, Bangladesh,

Indonesia and South America; and the University of Malaya's Nurliana Kamaruddin predicts tighter emigration laws across a region which has seen an explosion of legal and illegal people movement.

The case for Australian policy-makers to pay attention to these sort of sub-currents is only underlined by the lack of consensus among the writers over how to deal with a rising China, beyond some acceptance its power has probably grown amid a decline in trust.

"The world focus on the rise of China will include its growing influence in health emergencies and global governance - much to the chagrin of Western countries," argues Thai commentator Kavi Chongkittavorn in an assessment at odds with the common Australian view.

But it is broadly aligned with Ho, who says: "China is likely to emerge from the crisis more confident. Beijing will learn some important lessons. It will conclude that this is not a very reliable world, and that China's indigenous economic capabilities should be built up."

However, the Indian contributors are less accepting of a China-centred region, with Bagchi asserting that: "As we clear our blinkers, it should be clear that if a Western-dominated UN system did not suit India, a China-coloured one does not either."

And Saran warns that China will be emboldened to advocate its authoritarian model requiring other countries to have "a powerful counter-narrative which should embrace a clear understanding that 'Asian' and 'authoritarian' are not synonymous".

At a time when middle powers such as Australia are pondering how to operate in a post-coronavirus world in coalitions of the willing or revamped existing institutions, the key arms of regional diplomatic architecture do

not emerge from these essays in glory.

This ranges from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) all the way to the United Nations General Assembly.

But Kamaruddin puts this failure in a useful regional perspective by arguing that while the European Union was naturally expected to deal with the health crisis in an integrated manner and has not, this expectation did not apply to ASEAN.

So, the scope still exists for it to learn and evolve from the pandemic.

Nevertheless, while there is a tendency to see ASEAN as ineffective, Tsutomu Kikuchi, from the Japan Institute of International Affairs, still sees it as the best starting point for other countries to develop a new way of managing US-China rivalry.

"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," he says in a call for using the pandemic to create a new rules-based order not dominated by either China or the US.

And in an interesting prediction from an observer from Japan, a close US ally, he says there already are indications "that the 'rest of Asia' countries are moving beyond a US-China order".

This optimism can draw support from some counter-intuitive criticism of the superpowers within these essays.

One of Indonesia's longest-serving international strategists and supporters of the country's relationship with the US, Jusuf Wanandi, says the pandemic has damaged American prestige in the region and brought into question the future of the US alliance system.

But Pou Sothirak, a commentator from Cambodia which is often seen as a Chinese vassal state, says: “China needs to win real trust from all corners of the globe. To this end, it must work harder to address allegations of an early cover-up in Wuhan, and also to be more transparent in revealing the Chinese experience and scientific research.”

So, on balance, what does the future hold for trans-border co-operation in the most populous and still fastest-growing part of the world after a once-in-a-century disease shock?

The Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam’s Dang Cam Tu says the perceived inefficiency of established regional and global institutions in an hour

of need has opened the way to mini-lateralism – where small coalitions of countries try to resolve problems.

Tsinghua University’s Li Li fears more ideological competition and deglobalisation when such a common threat as a pandemic should provide a basis for more co-ordination.

Wanandi agrees that the pandemic has underlined the need for more international co-operation. But he worries the failure of the Group of 20 economic powers to deliver anything concrete and the attacks on the World Health Organisation raise concerns about the future of international institutions all the way up to the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund.

In a warning that the diplomatic landscape can still quickly change, Saran observes that while Asia looks to have done better in coping with the pandemic, there is a way to go as it reaches into more vulnerable states.

So, he concludes: “Whether there is an ‘Asia versus the West’ dimension to the post-COVID-19 debate will depend on what happens from here.”

Greg Earl was The Australian Financial Review correspondent in Jakarta, Tokyo and New York.

This article first appeared in the Australian Financial Review on May 28, 2020.

A Pandemic of Modern Piracy: The Decline of Regional Order

By Dr Choi Kang, Acting President and Director, Center for Foreign Policy and National Security at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Scarcely a single country in the global community has been spared the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I write, the number of cases is more than five million and the number of deaths is more than 300,000.

Countries in the Indo-Pacific region—except a few in the Southern Pacific—are feeling the devastating human, political, economic and social impacts. People say that the world after COVID-19 will never be the same – and some expect recurring virus waves. The speed of COVID-19’s spread and the magnitude of its impact has made the role of multilateral responses and cooperation an urgent topic.

Will countries join hands to fight COVID-19, and any future virus invasion?

A pandemic requires transnational—regional and global—responses.

Such threats do not respect national boundaries. The cold reality, however, is that regional and global multilateral cooperation is far from common. Countries slip into individualistic approaches – even if, theoretically, they accept the need for cooperation.

Thinking about the two different types of crisis response—collective or individualistic—there are circumstances that push players towards cooperation. Regional states are likely to gravitate toward a collective response when regional countries are similarly affected – or when the source of the crisis is extra-regional; or when these regional states clearly understand the nature of the threat or expect a solution to be readily available. The Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s had these characteristics. Regional countries formed ASEAN+3 (ASEAN + China,

Japan, and Korea) in a joint effort to overcome the crisis.

When a crisis seems to threaten regional states unevenly, the incentive for cooperation weakens. The less affected countries are tempted not to pay the bill of cooperation. Also, if one country in the region is identified as the source of the threat, then other regional countries will be hesitant to build a coalition which might ostracise that country. Clearly, the greater the relative power of the source of the threat, the weaker will be the motivation of the others to ostracise that power.

In such conditions, it is not surprising to see regional countries opt to confront a crisis individually – and looking across the Indo-Pacific today, we are certainly witnessing a fragmented response. Closed national borders are creating their own crisis

in regional value chains and national economies; countries are betraying their supposed allies, hijacking one another's protective gear at the airport. There are signs of a pandemic of modern piracy.

Against this trend, voices urging a joint response have been feeble. Existing institutions that should have been part of a global response to the pandemic, have been discredited.

The United States once led in rebuilding the global system on the ashes of World War II. France and Germany once spearheaded cooperation among European countries to preclude further devastating wars. To a certain degree, ASEAN countries showed collective leadership in an uncertain post-Cold War security situation – proposing the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). It was also ASEAN—in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis—that suggested an informal summit of China, Japan, Korea and ASEAN countries - laying the basis for the ASEAN+3 Summit.

There is no such regional or global leadership today.

As to leadership from the major powers, US-China strategic competition—which started well before the pandemic—continues strongly. The US blames China in colourful language for starting and not containing the virus. Trump accuses the WHO of being a puppet of the Chinese government, agreeing to cover up China's mishandling of the outbreak. China, on its part, derides the extraordinarily large number of COVID-19 cases in the US. China even suggests that the virus was deliberately planted in an attempt to discredit China.

The global community is losing confidence in the superpowers. Spectators from all directions have been aghast at the US mismanagement of the pandemic at home. The US threat to the WHO, and Trump's "America First" remark regarding COVID-19 vaccine development, fly in the face of any quest for global cooperation. China has been no better. The illiberal state-enforced containment of Wuhan, a Chinese quarantine model, is not seen as a viable answer by the large community of liberal states. Chinese

'mask diplomacy' has also failed to restore China's image – not just because of the poor quality of the Chinese products, but also because of the brazen-faced Chinese propaganda involved.

The self-destructive behaviour of the superpowers, combined with the global community's declining confidence in them, makes the world's post-pandemic trajectory bleak and uncertain. Responding to COVID-19 is a heavy task, but shaping the future world order looks even harder.

Choi Kang is Acting President and Director in the Center for Foreign Policy and National Security at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, South Korea. He writes extensively on the ROK-US alliance, North Korean military affairs, inter-Korean relations, crisis management, and multilateral security cooperation.

Where to Now for Middle Powers?

By David Capie, Associate Professor, International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Making predictions about the impact of COVID-19 on Asia's strategic environment is a risky endeavour. With international borders locked down, economies near standstill, and infections still rising in parts of the world, it's hard to anticipate the challenges we will face in the next few weeks, let alone a year from now. But a few months into the first global pandemic in a century, perhaps we can at least identify three broad trends. These are the way the

virus represents a threat to human security, the challenge it poses to economic security and the way it has exacerbated pre-existing trends in geopolitics.

First and foremost, COVID-19 is a threat to regional and global public health. Although the virus has inflicted a heavy global toll, Asia appears to have performed better than much of Western Europe and the Americas. Asia-Pacific nations have had a range of experiences

tackling the COVID-19 virus, some clearly more successful than others. Categories such as democratic vs authoritarian, rich vs poor, big vs small do not seem to provide a simple guide to success. What is clear is that states have relied overwhelmingly on individual, national-level responses and there has been little in the way of coordinated or deep regional cooperation. For all the oft-stated importance of the ASEAN-centred architecture, or groups like the

East Asia Summit or APEC, they have been largely irrelevant to the pandemic response.

Global institutions like the United Nations Security Council and UN agencies like the World Health Organisation have also faced criticism. One challenge as we emerge from the immediate virus response is to find ways to sustain and strengthen regional and global institutions and make sure they are able to perform their functions effectively and credibly to tackle future crises. Is there a need for stronger mechanisms to share information and assist with the response? What role is there, for example, for the development of regional reserves of critical medical supplies?

Second, following the immediate public health emergency, another crisis looms in the form of a deep global recession. The International Monetary Fund predicts that the global economy will shrink by around three percent over the next year, the first contraction seen since 2009. World trade is estimated to drop by 15 percent as supply chains are disrupted and economies shuttered. This will have particularly devastating impacts in the developing world, where governments lack the social safety nets to protect the most vulnerable. The World Bank has estimated almost 50 million people will fall back into extreme poverty.

The pandemic has also given new energy to debates about how best to organise the global and regional economy. Critics of globalisation and advocates of decoupling have seized on COVID-19, pointing out how dependent many countries are on distant supply chains even for essential medical equipment and drugs. Doubtless all governments will want to reduce that vulnerability as much as possible, but the danger is that in doing so we'll also see

a swing towards a much broader protectionism. It's vital to recall the lessons of the 1930s and avoid retreating into economic nationalism, autarky and 'beggar thy neighbour' policies. Closer economic integration and free movement of goods and services have been key to growing prosperity around the Asia-Pacific over the last four decades.

That's why it is especially welcome to see groups of small and middle powers standing up to support free and open trade. Here there are some interesting ad hoc groupings emerging, including the recent joint statement by Singapore, New Zealand, Australia and UK trade ministers, a Singaporean convened initiative around the operation of ports, and recent meetings of the US, Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand to share experiences from pandemic responses and commit to the supply of medical equipment.

Finally, the pandemic has consequences for the geopolitics of the region. One view is that it will simply accelerate underlying trends in favour of Beijing. China has been quick to claim the success of its approach to controlling the virus. As states seek to rebuild their economies its market will be more important than ever. In contrast, the Trump administration's chaotic response and its reluctance to take on a global leadership role (as the US did in the fight against Ebola) has only further underscored doubts in the region about American credibility.

But another perspective is to argue both China and the United States will emerge from the current crisis with their reputations damaged. China's initial handling of the virus was partly responsible for its dramatic spread. Beijing's continued assertiveness in the South China Sea, its use of disinformation, and

its heavy-handed response to calls for an investigation into the cause of the pandemic have further hurt its image. To many in the region, neither Washington nor Beijing offers much in the way of appealing leadership.

And US-China relations look likely to only get worse, no matter who wins the presidential election in November. This will increase the pressure on small and middle powers seeking to navigate a path without alienating one or other of the great powers. And it will also make it harder to reform or strengthen the institutions that are essential to produce meaningful solutions to human security, economic and geopolitical challenges. It might be that as we try and imagine a post-COVID-19 region the best we can hope for is for cooperation to evolve cautiously on an issue-by-issue basis, based around new coalitions of trust or competence. That would make for a much more complicated and worrying regional security picture than we have seen in a long time.

David Capie is Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies, Associate Professor in International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington. His research interests focus on conflict and security issues, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, and New Zealand's foreign relations.

Why International Institutions Matter: (And How They Are Letting Us Down)

By Jusuf Wanandi, Senior Fellow and Co-Founder, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

United States-Southeast Asia relations were deteriorating before the virus. Since Donald Trump became U.S. President over three years ago, Southeast Asia has not been enamoured with his policies. They are selfish and nationalistic – and pay almost no attention to the region. As a U.S. priority, on a scale of 1 to 5, the region at most ranks at three, if not four.

Some in Southeast Asia are closer to the United States – such as Singapore and Vietnam, and one body of opinion in the Philippines. This group, it must be said, cannot voice anything negative about the U.S. and Trump. Nevertheless, the poor performance of Trump on COVID-19 in the U.S has been obvious. It is seen as the reason that the virus has spread so extensively – and it has damaged American prestige.

This said, Indonesia has also been lax. For two months, while the Chinese were struggling against the virus, Indonesia did not commence testing or make preparations to strengthen the country's healthcare system. The government was not transparent at the beginning, in January and February. Also, the government was not speaking with one voice. Indonesia, it seems, might record more cases in the future – certainly if it proceeds with testing more people, which is a prerequisite for a plan to overcome the virus threat.

With respect to international cooperation, the G20 promised a lot, but there have been no concrete actions so far. In terms of regional cooperation, APEC has done nothing.

ASEAN was slow, and still there have been no concrete actions, even after the recent ASEAN virtual conference. The Chinese and ASEAN Foreign Ministers certainly met in Laos in February of this year and promised to cooperate on the Coronavirus – but here too there is no action so far. ASEAN+3 recently held a virtual conference—and the results were promising—but time is of the essence, and the process of implementation is still not clear.

Looking ahead to the post-COVID-19 era, it may really be true that the COVID-19 pandemic will be a game-changer – and in many fields of activity. Although international cooperation has been late and lax—maybe due to the very quick expansion of the virus, and the unpreparedness of many governments—the need for international cooperation is today dramatically obvious. Experiences in the last two months have made this need clear to all.

Since the virus will last until a vaccine is made ready for the public (probably 12-18 months), international cooperation will continue to be needed – especially if the virus expands in Africa and other areas where countries have inadequate health-care capabilities.

More important is cooperation in the economic field – cooperation right now and certainly after the pandemic has spread everywhere. It will be necessary to help the weaker countries and economies with food, medicine and work.

Thinking of the longer term, post-

COVID-19, some key questions—not necessarily new—have become sharper. First, there is the matter of how we can re-establish the global and regional economies again – handling trade, finance and debt problems, as well as agriculture, energy and environmental issues. How can we promote a more open economy, with stable security and politics – and what is going to happen to globalisation?

A further long-term issue concerns the need to maintain the UN system of rules and institutions. We also have to ask what the future holds for the World Health Organization and what changes might be demanded for the Atlantic Charter institutions, the IMF and the WTO.

As for regional institutions, there is the matter of maintaining ASEAN and its different institutions, following their weak response to the virus.

Finally, post-COVID-19, serious consideration must be given to the future of the U.S. alliance system – especially if the U.S. does not want to participate anymore. In this region, there will be concern about how a reduced U.S. involvement will play out in the South China Sea disputes.

Jusuf Wanandi is Senior Fellow and co-founder of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). A lawyer by training, he has served in various national and international organisations in the course of his career, including Secretary of the Indonesian Supreme Advisory Council. He writes extensively on political and security developments in the Asia Pacific region

Divide, Cook and Consume

By Victor Sumsky, Director, ASEAN Centre, MGIMO University

In a rising tide of ‘non-medical’ commentary 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 globalisation. In other words, this second line of thinking sees deglobalisation 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 deglobalisation, 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 the current US-China confrontation, however, is hardly justified.

The truth is that globalisation—as conceived by Washington strategists in the early post-Cold War era—was basically a megaproject to eternalise 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 crystallised 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 globalisation 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 destabilising 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.

Victor Sumsky is Director of the ASEAN Centre at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Dr Sumsky’s primary focus is political histories and present day developments in and among Southeast Asian nations, international relations in East Asia and its security problems.

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

By Dr Tsutomu Kikuchi, Adjunct Senior Fellow, Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA); Professor of international relations, Aoyama Gakuin University



China's top diplomat, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi.
Credit: Alexandros Michailidis, Shutterstock.

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 criticised 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 principal 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 the 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 proactive and creative in responding to China-US developments. It may be necessary to act bilaterally, minilaterally 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 the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP-11). Substantiating ‘ASEAN Centrality’ is critically important in this 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.

Dr Tsutomu Kikuchi, adjunct senior fellow at Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA); Professor of international relations, Aoyama Gakuin University. His areas of expertise include international political economy of the Indo-Pacific, and Japanese foreign policy.

Perspectives: Asia is Uniting Around Virus Crisis

By Kavi Chongkittavorn, Senior Fellow, Chulalongkorn University

As a general observation, one consequence of the virus crisis is that governments worldwide will have more powerful tools to keep their populations in check. They will also be backed by stronger nationalist sentiment - which they can use both to respond to the outbreak and to further their own agendas.

This said, the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to better inter-state coordination and cooperation on public health issues among more developed nations. No country wants to quarrel about a disease they know they cannot fight alone. In the recent G20 statement, the leaders of the world’s most advanced economies

pledged to do whatever it takes to overcome the pandemic. They promised to inject US\$5 trillion in fiscal spending to prop up the global economy.

For the United States, the virus crisis has been challenging in terms of the country’s international positioning. Mr Trump has been doing all kinds of media spinning - labelling the virus “a hoax” and generally downplaying its severity. He has portrayed the virus as a foreign enemy and himself as a war-time president who will save the country from a COVID-19 invasion. He knows his engagement with the virus will determine the fate of his presidential bid in November, and he

won’t let this opportunity slip away, whatever the cost.

In terms of US influence in Asia, the postponement of the ASEAN-US special summit in March pushed back plans to promote the joint US partnership with the lower Mekong riparian members, with Thailand and Vietnam jointly playing a leading role. Washington wanted to rejuvenate its engagement with this subregion - with new funding and partnerships – but with the ongoing pandemic, current ASEAN chair, Vietnam, has had to focus on ASEAN economies and livelihoods.

Strategic competition between the US and China will continue, and in fuller

form – though there may be moments of reconciliation. The competition will go beyond trade, technology, cyberspace and climate change to include global public health issues.

Each country has already blamed the other for the virus's origin – and in speaking of the “Chinese virus”, Mr Trump has displayed his deep-rooted prejudice. Although he has changed his tone recently – including in a phone call with President Xi - the damage has been done.

China will come out of this crisis in a number of ways strengthened. It will be more difficult for the US to persuade other countries, especially in Europe, to adopt its rhetoric against China. Also, emerging narratives of China's role in the world will be multifaceted and broad, extending beyond the Belt and Road Initiative. The world focus on the rise of China will include its growing influence in health emergencies and global governance - much to the chagrin of Western countries.

The way China successfully put down the virus has now been adopted by numerous Western countries - with or without acknowledgement. According to their State Council Information Office, China has dispatched aid to 89 countries and four international organisations. The China Institute of International Studies has also prepared an impressive report on China's response measures – for the benefit of people outside China. With

details on the ten measures employed by the Chinese government to fight the virus, this document in itself will assist China's soft power.

China's relations with other major powers in Northeast Asia also appear to have improved as a result of this crisis. Japan, South Korea and China will take a major pause to consider the dangers across their shared frontiers and their common fate. Who would have thought that South Korea, which has had serious strategic tension with Beijing, would welcome an assistance package from China? In a similar vein, China has thanked Japan for its generosity in assisting with the virus. Mutual sympathies expressed by their respective citizens speak volumes in Northeast Asia. Historical grievances and border disputes will not disappear overnight - but leaders in these three countries will be able to look back on this current time as one of shared anxieties and worries. It is possible, in fact, that the delayed Tokyo Olympics will provide a perfect opportunity to unite Asia's economies. Prime Minister Abe, it should be recalled, has already predicted that the Games will be proof of a human victory over COVID-19.

New diplomatic rapport in Northeast Asia would benefit the Asian region more generally. ASEAN, which has an excellent relationship with its Plus Three partners (China, Japan, Republic of Korea) and has in fact helped build bridges between them

in the past, can work with them now to achieve the dream of the so-called East Asia Community. Also, planning is currently underway to recalibrate the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). If it is viewed as a neutral platform, there will be potential—in the COVID-19 context— to cooperate on a comprehensive human security framework.

For ASEAN itself, the virus crisis has been a lesson in the need for closer cooperation. Although ASEAN leaders have expressed strong commitments on paper, in reality there has been a lack of coordination including a failure to harmonise border-crossing protocols. A positive development is Thailand's proposal for an ASEAN Response Fund. Pooling resources from the ASEAN Development Fund, ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Fund and Cooperation Funds with each Plus-Three country, this money would then be used to purchase medicine and medical equipment – and to assist vaccine-related research.

Kavi Chongkittavorn is a journalist with the Bangkok Post and senior fellow at Chulalongkorn University. His writings focus on regional developments and his research interests are US foreign policy toward Southeast Asia, especially with Thailand; the future of Indo-Pacific and regional security architecture

Perspectives: From the virus, a stronger more confident China

By Peter Ho, Former senior Singapore civil servant

The world before COVID-19 was already complex but this pandemic has made it more so. The spectrum of views about what the post-COVID world will look like is wide, but there is little doubt that the pandemic will

be a game-changer. Much depends on how long the crisis lasts. The longer it runs, the more embedded the changes will be and the less will be the tendency to fall back on old patterns.

Aspects of the globalised world we have come to know will change. In many areas, existing trends will be reinforced as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis.

Most obviously, the contestation between the US and China is likely to deepen. America's handling of the crisis is generating a lot of hard thinking. Its political culture is polarised. If Biden wins November's Presidential election, his victory will likely be narrow and Trump's supporters may attempt to delegitimise it, leading to even more polarisation. But at this time it seems more likely that Trump will win, and as a result will feel further empowered. In this case tensions between the US and China will be exacerbated. This in turn could lead to what has been called a "G Zero" or non-polar world. This global reordering may have happened anyway but the COVID-19 crisis will accelerate it.

China is likely to emerge from the crisis more confident. Beijing will learn some important lessons. It will conclude that this is not a very reliable world, and that China's indigenous economic capabilities should be built up. Euro-Asian trade already exceeds US-China trade and with the American market at increasing risk, China will also focus even more on Europe, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will become more important. Its early assistance to Italy was not by chance.

Overall, Beijing's COVID-19 diplomatic approach has been to emphasise cooperation in addressing the pandemic, contrasting with the perception of Washington's more narrow domestic focus. Advice and equipment to help combat the pandemic has been provided not only to Europe but also to Africa and the South Pacific - and even to New York.

Criticisms have been levelled at China for its initial handling of the pandemic, especially in the West. Decisions about identifying epidemics and acting accordingly are not easy (as Singapore learned during the 2003

SARS epidemic) and it's clear that there were costly early failings on the ground in Hubei and in Beijing. But while some of the criticisms may be justified, in the longer term they may simply be seen as part of the "blame game" being played between Beijing and Washington.

The US for its part had two months warning of the pandemic but still struggled with it, with a lasting reputational impact for the country. The Trump Administration's unsympathetic handling of international institutions has come to a head with the decision to freeze funding for the WHO. There is now an inherent question about how much reliance can be placed on American leadership. In Asia, many governments will continue to harbour suspicions about China, but they will hedge their bets even more.

Japan's calculations in all this will be complex, not least because it faces big questions at home where there is a secular trend towards slow but steady decline, largely because of the country's ageing demographics, and there is a danger of its creative energy being depleted. There is much more optimism in South Korea and, incidentally, some very good strategic thinking within the Chaebols.

ASEAN's response to the pandemic has included some virtual meetings, but not much more as every government remains focussed on its own problems. The national efforts have been uneven. Singapore has addressed the threat head on and has now taken further steps to deal with second and third waves of infection. Malaysia has made some tough decisions, Thailand has imposed effective restrictions and Vietnam has done well, having learned some hard lessons from the SARS outbreak. But the Philippines is struggling, and there is great potential for the COVID-19 pandemic

to affect Indonesia both in terms of its health impact and in regard to the economy. Significant problems could surface post COVID-19, demanding much more regional collaboration and maybe even a high level of international assistance.

International education is one area which will be hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. China among others may conclude that it will be preferable to invest much more in their own institutions. The initial impact (including for Australia) has been huge. There is a real question about how far it will build back to what it was prior to the pandemic.

Peter Ho is Senior Advisor to the Centre for Strategic Futures, Singapore. He is also the current S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore at the Institute of Policy Studies. He has previously held numerous other government appointments including running Singapore's Ministry of Defence; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and oversaw national security and intelligence, before his appointment as Head of the Civil Service in 2005.

Perspectives: Unite to Fight the Common Enemy

By Li Li, Senior Research Professor, Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University

When the world is wondering how the global order will evolve thanks to the rapid changing international power configuration and whether an increasing strategic competition between the United States and China will lead to a new cold war, the sudden and unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be fast-forwarding the transformation of world politics.

Unfortunately, the trajectory so far is depressing and in the absence of proactive intervention we will be greeted by a “new” world which we would like to try our best to avoid.

First of all, the pandemic is accelerating deglobalisation. It has caused the disruption of global supply chains. For example, many manufacturing industries outside China were hit due to component shortages caused by lockdowns in China.

Currently, factories back to work in China are facing similar problems, as well as reduced overseas demand with many other countries in lockdown. In the current difficult times, many countries feel insecure due to dependence on overseas supplies of basic medical equipment. If the major supplier is your rival, the concerns multiply.

It seems certain that major powers will develop self-reliant supply chains for crucial industries when they recover from COVID-19. The Trump administration is encouraging U.S. companies to move their production lines out of China and back home by promising to cover the moving costs. Therefore, the decoupling with China proposed in the U.S. before COVID-19 seems to be maintaining its pace.

Second, the pandemic adds fuel to ideological competition. From the very beginning, the interpretation of the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 has been filled with political bias.

When COVID-19 broke out first in China, the West conventionally attributed it to the Chinese political system. The lockdown in Wuhan was broadly branded as violating human rights.

However, the outbreaks in Europe and the U.S. as well as many others in the world indicate: first, humankind has shared pride and prejudice in relation to nature; second, political elites from different political systems are faced with the same dilemma in terms of how to provide both health and bread in an unprecedented pandemic era. Similarly, with the West currently suffering higher infection and death tolls, there have been doubts raised about democracy’s ability in dealing with severe infectious disease, as well as a worldwide public health crisis.

They overlook the fact that there are democracies such as the Republic of Korea and Germany who have been successful so far in the battle. Notwithstanding the fact that the Chinese model and the Korean model are both proving successful and effective in fighting COVID-19, despite their different political systems, there is an undercurrent that the battle is increasingly viewed from the perspective of “model competition” between major powers. If this trend cannot be stopped, we will be not far away from a new cold war characterised primarily by an ideological confrontation.

Third, the pandemic may further

boost the rise of nationalism in many countries. The COVID-19 pandemic creates a lot of problems and forces every government to focus on domestic challenges while restricting their capability to provide assistance (from the medical to economic) to other countries.

Take the European Union as an example. Even the pro-EU factions in Italy are complaining of not getting timely and sufficient support from the EU. Out of fear of being infected, some Germans are opposed to Merkel’s decision to help treat patients from France and Italy in Germany. Some French people were even attacked recently in Germany.

The rise of nationalism will cast a shadow on multilateralism and the lack of international cooperation (especially between major powers) in the battle against the COVID-19 will reinforce the rise of nationalism.

To sum up, I am pessimistic about the COVID-19’s impacts on international politics. If a significant common threat like the COVID-19 cannot make us unite and coordinate, it will not only cost us more in beating it, but also lead us to a new unfavourable world in nobody’s interests. It is the time to take some joint action.

Li Li is Senior Research Professor at the Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University, and Director of the Center for South Asian Studies. She has written extensively on India and South Asia, Middle East politics, and US relations with the Islamic world. Her current research interests include China-India relations as well as politics and security in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. She regularly provides advice to government.

Perspectives: Deglobalisation, Authoritarianism and Asia's Post-Virus Future

By Shyam Saran, Former
Indian Foreign Secretary

When the dust settles after the COVID-19 crisis the world will be transformed. There will be no return to the status quo. This is not to say there will be a complete break from the past. The new landscape will be recognisable because many of the changes we should expect will be intimately related to pre-existing trends which will be accentuated and accelerated by the pandemic and its consequences.

Counter-globalisation and populism are among pre-existing trends that will be accentuated. The language of 'sovereignty', already in increasing vogue, has been amplified among many governments - especially in regard to economic policies. Recognising anew the vulnerability of critical supply chains, governments will want to adjust their trade policies and to accept, for instance, the need for more 'on-shoring'.

To the extent that this move towards greater economic autarchy leads to higher domestic costs, it will be accepted as a necessary trade-off between national economic efficiency and sovereign risk. With the organisation itself already in trouble because of its inability to appoint appellate judges, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) world is now dead. There won't be a sudden lurch to conflict, but in the longer term economic interdependence as a force



March 14, 2017. Factory workers assemble automobile parts, Linhai, Zhejiang Province, China. Credit: Jenson, Shutterstock.

for international stability between nations will be weakened.

The trend towards strengthening the role of governments will also be accelerated by the crisis. Already underway after 9/11 and the Global Financial Crisis, this trend will be furthered by the interventionist roles governments have played in responding to the pandemic and to the consequential economic—and potentially social—crises.

This trend comes together with another that was already underway: digitalisation, already moving forward rapidly, has now been accelerated by the use of technology to deal with the COVID-19 crisis, including in monitoring and controlling communities.

In some cases these developments will encourage more authoritarian styles of government—again, a pre-existing trend—while in others they could lead to the re-emergence of something like the welfare state model.

The existing multilateral system has been exposed by the crisis, in part because of its own weaknesses but in larger part because of the absence of international leadership. By contrast

with the roles of the G7 and G20 at the time of the GFC, their recent meetings achieved nothing and indeed revealed weakness and division. Yet while multilateral institutions are seen to be wanting, the globalisation genie can't be put back in the bottle. The multilateral system will therefore need to be renovated.

The China-US relationship will remain critical in the post-COVID-19 world, but in this area too what we are most likely to see is the reinforcement of existing trends: both are playing the blame-game, and there seems little chance that the two will get together in the interests of some higher purpose.

For both Washington and Beijing, critical domestic questions remain to be answered. Will the hydra-headed crisis consolidate Trump, or will it expose 'Trumpism'? Will America's prestige, already tarnished by its default on global leadership, be further damaged by the appearance of incompetence in managing the pandemic? How will the pandemic and its handling affect November's Presidential election?

For China, trust in the regime, both at home and abroad, has been diminished by its delay in disclosing the virus. Xi Jinping is now taking a gamble in easing the restrictions introduced early in the pandemic. Premier Li Keqiang seems however to be more wary about declaring an early victory in case there is another outbreak, resulting perhaps from the large numbers of Chinese returning from overseas and the huge numbers of people crossing into China from neighbouring states. Questions must also arise about whether the economic crisis will disrupt Xi's signature policy, the Belt and Road Initiative.

At the regional level, ASEAN has been exposed by the nature of the COVID-19 challenge. The initial threat, the pandemic, is essentially domestic; the response has had to be to mobilise domestic capabilities, but the ten states are very differently placed to do this. Some of the same could be said of the EU. In South Asia, Prime Minister Modi has taken a lead by reaching out to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders, but

much remains to be done.

On the brighter side, the door may have been opened to new thinking about regional trading arrangements. With the global system in turmoil, there may be a case for drivers of growth closer to home, in our own neighbourhoods, as it were.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific idea may have lost some credibility as leaders have become preoccupied with their own issues, but it should not be written off. In the post COVID-19 landscape, China will press its intent and the 'countervailing coalition' must persist.

Whether there is an 'Asia versus the West' dimension to the post-COVID-19 debate will depend on what happens from here. At this stage Asia looks to have done better in coping with the pandemic, but there is a long way to go as it reaches into Indonesia and more vulnerable states. China will advocate an authoritarian model, arguing that it has been shown to have the tools and the capabilities. This narrative will be pressed hard

over time and will have some appeal to leaders like Prime Minister Victor Orbán, who was already trending that way in Hungary. We will have to understand this narrative, and have a powerful counter-narrative which should embrace a clear understanding that 'Asian' and 'authoritarian' are not synonymous.

In all of this, we are groping in the dark. There is a long road ahead, but we must continue to think hard about the possibilities and be prepared to counter what we don't like and to support what seems more promising.

Shyam Saran is a former Indian Foreign Secretary. A distinguished career diplomat, he has played an important part in India's rise in the world. He has undertaken postings to Beijing, Tokyo, Myanmar and Indonesia. Ambassador Saran has served as the Prime Minister's personal representative at G20, G8 and climate change summits. As the Prime Minister's personal envoy, he played a key role in securing the 2006 US-India civil nuclear agreement.

Perspectives: ASEAN Rises as the West Falls

By Nurliana Kamaruddin, Senior Lecturer, Asia-Europe Institute (AEI), University of Malaya

The COVID-19 pandemic will bring a shift in security concerns with a greater focus on human/non-traditional security, and also on the question of what goes to make up 'human security'. Pandemics will be high on the list.

The current pandemic will also bring new perspectives to broader security issues. Before the pandemic the issues in focus around 'mobility' were illegal people movement and cross-border crime. Now, a strong community health element will take priority for governments – and may even become a reason for tightening travel

restrictions. This element could lead to governments justifying the use, or reinforcement, of draconian migration laws in their countries.

How and why countries engage with or rely on regional organisations will also be re-assessed.

In Asia, states have asserted control over and within their own borders. ASEAN has acted in this crisis pretty much as it always has acted, and there has been no expectation that ASEAN would 'step up'. ASEAN's established role is to support the national efforts of its

member countries – and the national governments of member countries continue to prioritise security within their own borders. This said, the virus crisis might actually benefit ASEAN in the long run, as the grouping could take advantage of the spontaneous cooperation effort that is happening now in order to establish deeper goodwill amongst the member countries.

Here there is a contrast with the EU. In the EU there has been an expectation of greater unity, collaboration and co-ordination. Yet, as it turned out, governments

reverted to national responses – asserting control over borders and people movements.

One perception in Southeast Asia is that the US is imploding. There is an influential view that China will emerge from the pandemic in better standing than the US. In these circumstances, it is possible that smaller (regional) states will look to realigning in their relations with the major powers.

At the same time, such smaller states have seen they cannot rely on the big powers to help in such crises - and this will be an impetus to greater self-reliance.

Looking at responses to the pandemic, there are indications that some of the Western states are ill-equipped to deal with this type of health security challenge – compared with some countries in the Asian region. Also, Asian security priorities seem to differ from those of the West. Asian citizens have shown that they are more ‘comfortable’ with their governments asserting authority – for instance, by ordering a lock down and restricting the movement of citizens.

COVID-19 could also lead Western countries to lose ground in dealing with security challenges in Asia. In particular, there is a view that the economic repercussions of the pandemic could impact on the future US security role in the Asian region. China has an advantage here – in that the structure of the Chinese economy means China is likely to be better placed to rebound than the US.

Domestic politics, it should be observed, have not gone away during the pandemic. The Malaysian and South Korean governments are enjoying greater public approval as a result of their handling of the crisis; and they will likely seek to capitalise on this development.

The big question, of course, is how the failure of US leadership will play out. Will it be seen just as a Trump failure? Or, will it be seen as a failure of US institutions and of the American leadership elite more broadly? We should remember that those institutional structures—and the elite itself—were not held in the highest regard before the pandemic. Trump’s election, in fact, could

be seen as evidence of such a lack of regard within the US national community.

Finally, in looking for signs of an upside in this current crisis period, the COVID-19 development has certainly provided examples of people and communities rising above economic, social, religious and racial divides. In these circumstances, we can ask if COVID-19 might just, in the long run, lead to a greater emphasis on what we have in common, rather than what sets us apart?

Nurliana Kamaruddin is Senior Lecturer at the Asia-Europe Institute (AEI), University of Malaya. Her specialisation is international security and development cooperation. With a PhD focused on state-led rural development programs, her research interest includes international development, non-traditional security, governance and international cooperation with an area focus of East Asia.

Perspectives: Cooperate or capitulate

By Zha Daojiong, Professor, School of International Studies, Peking University

The methodology necessary in responding to the COVID-19 crisis demands a level of international cooperation more comprehensive than we have achieved before. A ‘my-nation-first’ strategy ought to be viewed as seriously redundant.

In terms of health cooperation, COVID-19 is a powerful reminder of the burden of infectious disease in the world—with the ecological interactions of people with animals in China, and live animal trade between China and its neighbouring

countries, the most obvious targets for collaborative action. Development and distribution of vaccines is another desirable area.

Within the East Asian region there have been examples of cooperation. It was a positive development that, amidst the crisis, foreign ministers of China and ASEAN met in Vientiane, Laos, in February 2020, to map out specifics of cooperation. Foreign ministers of China, Japan, and South Korea also jointly made similar pledges a month later. Sub-national

actors like sister cities, investors and ethnic diasporas made up the backbone of empathy and support among the peoples of these nations.

In East Asia, it was in the wake of the SARS outbreak (2002) that ‘health security’ entered the routine agenda of diplomacy between ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea (10+3). Substantial progress has been made in controlling morbidity and mortality of both humans and animals that result from infectious disease. Networks of consultation

and cooperation have nestled well with such programs as the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (since 1952), and the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (since 2000).

COVID-19 ought to help open the door wider to expertise-driven cooperation – aimed at strengthening infectious health surveillance, analysis and reporting.

There are difficulties, however, in achieving deeper international cooperation – even though the practical necessity is obvious. For instance, it has proven vital for the world's scientific and medicine-making communities to have fast and full access to autopsy-specific data regarding cause and effect inside the body, including physical samples. Also, some countries may be more prone to outbreaks of viruses that are proven or suspected of migrating from animals to humans. We need detailed information on this. It is also critical to have fairer play when it comes to access to medicinal and other treatments developed on the basis of identified samples.

Despite these obvious requirements, jurisdiction-based legal and competitive commercial considerations—as well as national pride in seeking breakthroughs in medical technology—continue to

complicate the implementation of pledges of responsible cooperation.

The issue of viral sovereignty arose in 2007 in Indonesia, when the Indonesian Minister of Health refused to share samples with the WHO after the outbreak of a strain of Avian influenza. A trade-off between virus data sharing and access to medicine and vaccines (developed to contain that very virus) helped obtain a reversal of this policy in 2008. Concerns about viral sovereignty, however, have not been limited to developing countries. For example, the United States confirmed the patentability of genes through case law in the 1980s. Also, China passed legislation in 2019 to strengthen governmental oversight of international sample sharing. During the current crisis, the pattern of behaviour of the United States under the Trump administration, and the way key member governments of the European Union have been securing medical equipment, convey a dangerous 'winner takes all' crisis management philosophy.

Practical, medical imperatives for global cooperation, as convincing as they are, continue therefore to be confronted by the geo-strategic environment that exists across the Asia Pacific today. Real diplomatic advances in public health cooperation are still not on the horizon. Frictions

and rivalry between the United States and China—the two actors capable of leading the rest—show few signs of abatement. The unfortunate fact that the United States is topping the rest of the world in cases of registered infections and deaths, understandably, casts a powerful hurt on the sense of pride on the part of the leaders and elites of that great nation. Such emotional factors need to be taken seriously in assessing the possibility of enhanced symmetric cooperation.

Amidst these reasons for anxiety, an optimistic observation is that the Asia Pacific does still have one network after another made up of science and health interests that do not always require political/diplomatic approval by the sovereign states. Preserving the professional integrity of these cross-national networks, in an ironic way, may well be a surer path to a less worrisome future. To what degree such cooperation could affect change in geostrategic considerations remains to be seen.

Zha Daojiong is Professor at the School of International Studies, Peking University. His areas of expertise include the politics of China's international economic relations, particularly the fields of energy and natural resources, development aid and the economics-political nexus in the Asia-Pacific region.

Perspectives: US-China ties going backwards

By Ralph Cossa, President Emeritus and WSD-Handa Chair in Peace Studies, Pacific Forum

While it's become commonplace to say that the COVID-19 crisis will lead to a 'new normal' in international affairs, it's not at all clear what that means or indeed what 'normal' has been in recent years. Some commentators are seeing the crisis as a 'game-changer', but that is far from

certain – the tendency once the crisis has past may well be to simply lapse back into old habits and patterns.

In some areas, patterns and attitudes that are already evident will be accentuated. To take one example, those who have been suspicious of

China will have even more reason to be suspicious, while those who have been excusing China and overlooking its negatives will have even more excuses to offer.

Some trends that were already underway will be accelerated. This is

so in regard to US-China trade. US business was already turning away from China. Xi Jinping's policies have been discouraging Americans. China's business culture is increasingly one in which 'rule by law' is prevailing over 'rule of law,' and anyway market forces have been working against China - it is becoming more expensive. This trend away from China towards other markets and suppliers is likely to be accentuated as China looks less attractive in the wake of the pandemic and others, like Vietnam, where the business culture at this stage is a lot better, become more attractive. In fact, I have been saying for a while now that 'China is the present, Vietnam is the future.'

There is an argument to be made that in the commercial world globalisation will be eroded, and it has been in some ways. It is likely for instance that as a result of the pandemic, stock-piling of goods judged to be strategically important will become more common at both the national and business levels, and it is likely that more of these sorts of goods will be manufactured at home rather than imported. But at the end of the day business will go where it's cheapest, and this is likely to lead to more manufacturing opportunities not just for Vietnam but also for Bangladesh, Indonesia and (for the US) South America as more companies pull out of China.

It's hard to see the US-China relationship going any way but backwards. This is usually the case in an American election year. This year, with China's failings more evident and with the pandemic hitting the US so badly, the political class will focus even more on China and in particular the Administration will want to blame China.

As to the future of American foreign policy, a lot depends on the result of November's Presidential election.

Historically it has been said that US foreign policy is defined more by continuity than change, but that rule will not apply this year: the differences between the policies of the two candidates in this election are very different. The pundits are of course making their predictions and many see Trump being re-elected, but this is only April and November is a long way away.

It is important here to understand the context of current US policy making in respect of China. Two distinct views are in play. President Trump sees the relationship almost exclusively in economic terms, transactionally, and seeks instant gratification from it. It doesn't matter to him that the ruling party in China is Communist. Secretary Pompeo on the other hand takes an ideological view: his concern is no longer just about China's behaviour, it is much more about the fact that the regime is Communist. Reflecting this, US embassies have been instructed to stress in all their dealings with their hosts that China is being ruled by a Communist Party. This can turn a struggle for influence into a new ideological Cold War with little opportunity for compromise or cooperation.

Some of China's diplomacy has been effective as the crisis has developed, extending as it has as far afield as Europe, Africa and the South Pacific. But it is also being seen for what it is – an attempt to offset the cost of China's early failings as the pandemic developed. In addition, some of what China has done has not gone well - for example, ventilators that didn't work in the UK. And of course the claim that the US military brought the virus to Hubei was not only silly in itself but triggered a 'blame game' from which no one is benefiting.

While it is too early to pick 'winners' and 'losers' among those

responding to the pandemic, it is worth noting that Taiwan has done well in managing the crisis – and as a result its stocks have improved further in Washington. The Moon Administration in South Korea is also seen to have done well, which has already paid dividends domestically. Japan is now facing a second wave, but will probably emerge quite well. ASEAN has been a useful 'club' with some notable economic achievements over the years, but it has offered nothing in this particular crisis. There has been no 'ASEAN response' to the pandemic; each country has acted on its own.

As to multilateral institutions generally, there is a continuing need for bodies like the WHO, but the COVID-19 crisis has been a timely reminder that many of them—especially the WHO—need serious reform. The extent to which the US plays a part in this will depend, again, on what happens in November.

Ralph A. Cossa is President Emeritus and WSD-Handa Chair in Peace Studies, Pacific Forum. He sits on the boards of numerous foreign relations organisations throughout the Asia-Pacific region. As a recognised expert on U.S./Asia-Pacific foreign relations and policy, he is a regular participant in conferences for political, economic, military, and business leaders in countries around the world.

Perspectives: Re-writing multilateralism post-COVID

By Indrani Bagchi, Senior Diplomatic Editor, The Times of India

When we emerge from our lockdowns and COVID-19 is on Season 1 on Netflix, what will the new world look and feel like? I suspect a lot like the present one. Wars, conflicts and terrorism will continue; China will remain aggressively expansionist; ISIS will lift its travel advisory; the Middle East will remain a mess; Pakistan will keep its terror factory going; Xi, Putin and Orban will be presidents for life; and the United States might just re-elect Trump.

But a lot will change. India, for instance, will need to rethink some of its precepts and priorities in both domestic and foreign policy. The multilateral universe, global supply chains, health as a strategic asset, tech and bio warfare. India's global ambitions. China. All will need an upgrade.

The crux of the changes we are likely to see in the future lies in the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon but its response is intensely local.

For one thing, the whole idea of multilateralism is being re-written as we speak. If the UN was a 1945-era institution before, it is beyond obsolete today. The world's top talk-shop is yet to have a serious discussion on COVID-19 as a peace and security issue, which it is, largely because China and Russia are opposing terms like 'transparency' and 'ceasefire', and the US just doesn't care. The UN General Assembly, which is really a platform for an annual airing of global politics, just passed arguably the most inane resolution on COVID-19, pledging 'solidarity'.

The world's top health body has so blotted its copybook, it's laughable - from being a cheerleader to



The World Health Organization has played a major role in supporting regional countries. Credit: EQRoy, Shutterstock.

China's subterfuge and secrecy, the WHO has played directly from Beijing's playbook, unconscionable in hindsight, and ruinous for its credibility.

Japan's deputy PM Taro Aso blisteringly called it the Chinese Health Organisation, excoriating it for refusing to declare COVID-19 an international emergency in January, which would have bought time for everyone. Will the WHO question China about its actual casualty figures, or the source of the outbreak? Unlikely, which will leave huge gaps in our knowledge, and constrain future actions.

Meanwhile, Taiwan, kept out of the WHO under Chinese pressure, showed exemplary success in tackling the virus. This tells you a lot about how skewed the system is. The UN Human Rights Commission, already reeking of prejudice, is silent over Xinjiang and the Wuhan lockdown, but loses sleep over Jammu and Kashmir. Different departments in the UN are fully paid-up cheerleaders

of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As we clear our blinkers, it should be clear that if a western-dominated UN system did not suit India, a China-coloured one does not either.

India should not mourn this 20th century brand of multilateralism. Creating a new multilateral order is important — one could argue that the current world 'disorder' is fertile ground. The pandemic risks turning us into Hobbesian entities, as each country fights its own battles, so burden-sharing is important. Even more important is setting the rules for a new order.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that complex global supply chains, a mantra of present trading systems, are overrated. Our vulnerability is not that we don't make defence equipment, it is that we're following a China-led manufacturing strategy. That should change.

The overwhelming dependence on China needs reducing, a thought that is uppermost in many parts of the world. As India furiously reopens shuttered Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API) units which fell to Chinese predatory pricing, it is important to revise manufacturing and trade strategies — certainly in the short and medium term, trade, like technology, might follow the same coalitions-of-the-willing path.

Health is now a strategic asset, right up there with technology, defence and security. India will be judged not only on how we tackle the Wuhan virus, but what it says about governance, crisis management and how a democratic system prepares for the day after.

The unspoken thought keeping security experts awake - irrespective of whether the Wuhan virus was an innocuous zoonotic transfer, or a lab leak - is could this be the face of a future war? Could our investments in 5th Gen defence equipment be overturned by a virus, cleverly placed?

In 2007, Estonia had exactly this moment in the realm of cyberwarfare, prompting the world to adopt new security protocols and cyber governance. Could this be another such moment? India, with a demography that could easily be a vulnerability rather than a dividend, will have to think and work differently, factoring in both state and non-state actions.

It's likely therefore the future of multilateralism could be smaller groupings, more cohesive, and among countries that show the ability to come together to not only address large-scale crises, but pool resources to provide global public goods and platforms for the world to use without being 'indebted', rather based on more overt principles of fairness.

At the operational level, this 'coalition of the willing' should take on a more concrete and real-world shape - the Quad-Plus for instance, involving key countries in the Indo-Pacific, needs to re-imagine cooperation where freedom of navigation is not merely parading warships on the 9-dash-line, but involves real exchanges focusing on putting regional economies back together again.

In the neighbourhood, a fairly unsexy meeting between South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) health professionals went unremarked. But it was important. In South Asia, where most neighbours dislike each other, keeping cooperation at the professional level on areas that affect everyday lives could take the sting out of, say, the India-Pakistan non-relationship. India should lead, focus on a neutral tone and outcomes, which can continue even when India takes military action against Pakistani terror.

In the post-COVID-19 world, the questions we should be answering therefore can be summarised thus:

How will the US emerge as a global power? It's clear they haven't dealt very well with the pandemic. But the US is also unique in its powers of innovation and resurgence. How will they be used to rejuvenate the US?

The US-China rivalry. How could that play out and what are its implications in the region and world?

China shows no signs of being a less aggressive or nakedly expansionist power. It might believe it has emerged stronger in a post-COVID-19 world. I have my doubts but this is a central question that we should answer.

• How will India emerge in a post-COVID-19 world? Its strategic policies are not likely to change, but a degree of economic nationalism may happen.

- The state of the multilateral institutions - which will survive, and which will need to be recast, like the WTO and WHO?
- What happens to global supply chains, as countries attempt to diversify away from China?
- Many elements of the current world order will continue — balance of power, terrorism, historical conflicts, trade disputes, nuclear weapons, climate change. What will be the global institutional framework to address global challenges?
- If smaller coalitions are the way to go, which I believe, what is the future of the Quad, or even the Quad-Plus (Quad + Vietnam, New Zealand and South Korea).
- If China is successful in 'annexing' the South China Sea, what would be the regional consequences?
- What is the extent of political and economic nationalism as each country battles the virus and its aftermath in their own way?
- Will the European Union survive?

Indrani Bagchi is senior diplomatic editor with The Times of India. She interprets foreign policy issues and global trends from an Indian perspective, covering the US, China, Pakistan, terrorism, nuclear weapons, and national security issues, among others.

Perspectives: The state is back while the virus is in

By Dang Cam Tu, PhD, Deputy Director-General, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies - Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

COVID-19 is leaving its imprint on almost all aspects of life. While the pandemic is not necessarily a game-changer by itself, it is a reminder of pre-existing factors, trends, and values. It is also a catalyst for changes and shifts already expected to take place in the long term. COVID-19 has raised multiple cross-cutting questions, involving several fundamental dynamics in the strategic and foreign policy environment.

At the outset, there is the question of resilience, at all levels - national, regional, and global. They go hand in hand. The traditional emphasis of Southeast Asian politics on 'national resilience' as a prerequisite for 'regional resilience' sits well in this battle against COVID-19. The pandemic has tested the cross-cutting issues of efficiency, legitimacy, relevance and resilience of institutions - nationally and internationally. Good governance and institutional efficiency have been in high demand and without them, critical problems could not be resolved – undermining legitimacy, relevance and resilience as a result. In this sense, COVID-19 has been a powerful reminder that the standing of national, regional, and global institutions and players depends above all else on their performance - especially with regards to crisis management.

While the pandemic highlights that national, regional, and global resilience are mutually reinforcing, it has also shown that the state is back - mainly in the 'self-help' guise. So far there seems to be limited enthusiasm for regional and international cooperation to fight COVID-19 –

rather the opposite, with nationalism, populism, xenophobia, trade, and territorial disputes on the rise. This makes the argument for globalisation a much harder sell, and lessens the appetite among states to pursue international collective action.

One reason that international cooperation has not been strongly supported, and that countries have been dealing with the pandemic largely on a national basis, is the perceived inefficiency of regional and global institutions in the hour of need. COVID-19 has drawn attention to a widening gap between the demand for, and the supply of, regional and global governance and leadership. One factor is that the Trump Administration's role in multilateralism has waned even further – while Chinese leadership has yet to materialise, and to be accepted. Pessimism and scepticism about multilateral institutions continues to increase.

In this context, and aware of the time and resources that would be involved in implementing the reform of existing multilateral institutions, there is currently a tendency to prefer unilateralism. One consideration is that in such unilateralism, there is a potentially greater role for small and medium-sized countries. They have more opportunity to take leadership initiatives.

A further cross-cutting question concerns US-China relations and their impact on regional and global strategic landscapes. COVID-19 is exacerbating the strategic rivalry between the two powers. This rivalry had been in play before the crisis, with a deepening trust deficit

between the two powers – and the foreign policies of each of them being influenced by ultra-nationalistic tendencies. China's more assertive expansion of its influence, including in the South China Sea—when other countries have been focusing their efforts and resources on battling the pandemic—has fuelled antagonism towards China in the US, as well as increasing vigilance and concern in many other countries.

A new intensity in Sino-US strategic competition makes it more difficult for smaller countries to navigate their relations with the two rivals and increases pressure to choose sides. Alignment arrangements might become more exclusive, regional and global governance be less effective, while power projection, force development and deployment become more competitive. The trend of economic decoupling between the US and China is accelerating, with significant implications for other countries.

Looking ahead, the public health crisis feeds into both healthy and unhealthy trends in the strategic and foreign policy environment. To promote the healthy over the unhealthy, there needs to be renewed commitment—nationally, regionally, and globally—to collective efforts in building resilience. It is critical to enabling the entire world to succeed against current and future challenges. For the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN-led institutions and arrangements are still the most relevant for channelling such efforts.

The pandemic, in conclusion, serves as a reminder of the real necessity for resilience and good governance

at all levels - in order to deal with challenges which are growing in both ferocity and scale, and with which no country can successfully contend on its own.

Dang Cam Tu, PhD, Associate Professor, Deputy Director-General at Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. Her main areas of research and publication include international relations in Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific,

ASEAN, and Vietnam's foreign policy and relationships with key players in the region. The views expressed are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution she works for.

Perspectives: No Time for ASEAN Members to Self-Isolate

By Pou Sothirak, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

COVID-19 is more than a health crisis. Issues such as international peace and security are now involved. Also, globalisation and multilateralism are in retreat.

In combating COVID-19, regionalism might be assumed the ideal solution if regional states can collectively work together instead of quarrelling with one another to deliver concrete actions. To date, however, no real regional response mechanism has proven an effective solution to this crisis. Besides issuing joint statements, I have not yet seen any concrete actions from ASEAN or the ASEAN Plus Three.

Instead, what I see playing out are individual initiatives taken at the national level. Each ASEAN member state and the Plus-Three countries (China, Japan, South Korea) has adopted national measures and has responded to the outbreak individually. The response has not been collective.

Regionalism cannot, or will not, work when governments everywhere try to isolate – turning inwards, enacting unilateral bans on travel, imposing trade restrictions. In the current crisis, in fact, the application of the exclusivity of state sovereignty over national territories has been in a way not seen in modern history.

In terms of multilateral responses, I see only the efforts of the World Health Organization (WHO) to help

countries prepare for, respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic – focusing particularly on the most vulnerable. Whatever the final judgement on its effectiveness, the WHO has provided concrete support to regional states, including Cambodia.

Besides the WHO, I see bigger and stronger states helping the weaker ones. In the case of Cambodia, the bilateral support comes from countries like the United States, Japan, China, and Germany, as well as from the World Bank and the EU.

Humanity, of course, needs both national and regional responses to put COVID-19 behind us. At the moment however, states have adopted a realist approach – stressing the role of national actors in calling the shots.

As for the major powers, instead of searching for—and strengthening—regional (or global) responses to the epidemic, big and powerful states are quarrelling with each other. If these developed countries can't find common ground at this time, we cannot hope for an effective regional response now, or in future crises. With this in mind, all states should put aside the blame game. They should focus on working collaboratively on an effective regional response – and they should encourage their best scientists and health professionals to cooperate in producing a cure as quickly as possible.

Knowing that this virus crosses national borders, a regional response makes a lot more sense. If individual states retreat into isolationism, nationalism and protectionism, this undermines collective responses – for instance, by encouraging unnecessary competition for medical commodities and their components. Ideally a regional response would identify and create new multilateral mechanisms to cooperatively manage, mitigate and respond to pandemics while at the same time strengthening national public health care systems.

The major power attracting much regional discussion is China. We see articles praising China and its approach for the effective handling of COVID-19 in Wuhan, and other articles contending that China has suffered a tremendous loss of trust in the global community for allowing the virus to spread. These latter commentaries blame China for its failure to contain the initial outbreak – and for not acting in a timely manner, thus misleading the world regarding human-to-human transmission.

Those praising China note expressions of gratitude from recipient countries for China's goodwill in offering medical assistance, masks and ventilators. China is seen as being successful in cementing solidarity with ASEAN – applying the long-standing principle of helping each other in difficult

times. China has also succeeded in bringing ASEAN member-states closer to one another than they themselves have previously achieved – doing so by stressing assistance at all levels, and sharing best practices through cooperative mechanisms.

The cementing of China’s global influence through soft power diplomacy can only be achieved if China emerges as a lead country ready to address COVID-19 as a global health crisis – a lead country standing ready to collaborate with the international community to confront this challenge. China needs to win real trust from all corners of the globe. To this end, it must work harder to address allegations of an early cover-up in Wuhan, and also to be more transparent in revealing the Chinese experience and scientific research. China has to take full responsibility for its actions

without suppressing information and punishing those who raise the alarm.

To return to the multilateral arena, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) is a key forum for cooperation involving not only China but also Japan and South Korea, but its performance is disappointing. While the APT has made declarations about joint collaboration to address COVID-19, there has in fact been little practical action.

If we consider COVID-19 in the context of peace, security and development, the current APT is a dated concept. It will have to evolve and reinvent itself if it is to be able to respond effectively to current trends – especially as we anticipate major changes to the global order, post-pandemic. In the present context, I am tending to see the Indo-Pacific concept as more relevant than the

APT. This is primarily because the COVID-19 pandemic raises strategic politico-security concerns between the two global powers, the US and China. But how the Indo-Pacific concept can, or will, address the COVID-19 pandemic is still an open question.

Pou Sothirak is Head of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace. Previously secretary of state at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, he remains an advisor to the Cambodian government. He has extensive experience in international relations through his time as a visiting senior research fellow at Singapore’s Institute of Southeast Asia Studies (ISEAS) and as Cambodian Ambassador to Japan.

Perspectives: ASEAN COVID Initiatives Have Failed

By Herman Joseph S. Kraft, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science at the University of the Philippines

Thinking about how the pandemic crisis has affected the strategic environment, one fascinating observation is that responses to the pandemic have been counter-intuitive.

The Rajaratnam School for International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore, a leader in studying security in the region over the past decades, has been examining non-traditional security issues and multilateralism – and has emphasised how much the region has come to rely on cooperative mechanisms. They have even pointed to the importance of regional cooperative arrangements in addressing pandemics. Security thinking in general has been premised on transnational cooperation and resource-sharing between national

governments. Furthermore, ASEAN-led multilateral initiatives have been the venue where these discussions and efforts achieve institutionalised form – albeit, often tentatively.

What has not been given sufficient attention is how much these mechanisms have failed to promote cooperation. What the current pandemic exposes most of all is not just the weakness of these institutionalised forms, but also how dependent they are on the willingness of the most powerful states to work within their framework. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced those invested in the region’s security architecture to face the question of how viable that architecture has proved to be – particularly when

member states give preference to the pursuit of increasingly competitive interests and aggressive policies, rather than to engagement in multilateral processes.

As to the most powerful states, the central question is how will the US and China manage their relationship in the face of their intensifying rivalry? Related to this is the issue of the global economy. With the key responses to the pandemic having led to the curtailment of national economic growth in many regions across the world, will the post-pandemic recovery feature a renewed commitment to multilateral institutions and cooperation – or will it see the intensification of great power rivalry?

Certainly, the pandemic was not responsible for the course taken in the relationship between the US and China. But the crisis has highlighted the political ramifications of that course. More importantly, given the growing tendency exhibited by both powers to look inwards and assert nationalistic claims in the face of global crisis, is there room for an alternative to the geopolitical choice of “US or China” that seems to bedevil countries in the region?

The growing need, it seems, is to pursue the strengthening of multilateral options. With the proven weakness of ASEAN-led mechanisms, however, there may be need for another path towards rebuilding a regional security architecture that can manage, or at the very least contain, the more extreme effects of the rivalry between the US and China. This should also be seen in terms of economic relations. How do you rebuild the regional economic system (now the centre of gravity for the global economy in this century) without falling into the trap of having to choose between the US and China?

These questions force everyone to confront an emerging reality. The post-Second World War order built

around US hegemony (the post-Cold War order is really just its extension) is ending. The US may remain the most powerful country in the world (or in the minds of a significant part of its population, the “greatest country in the world”), but it does not seem to be willing to continue to assume the mantle of leadership – to attend to broader “global” interests alongside its own national interests.

It might be said that this is a momentary world condition – due to the Administration of President Donald Trump. Nevertheless, the fact that Trump enjoys a significant amount of support within the electorate indicates that the values he represents (“making America great again”) resonate among Americans.

Can the genie be forced back inside the bottle? Or is this narrower, more inward focus the new normal for the US? Is the global geopolitical and geoeconomic order going to face an America that is polarised domestically? Or will we face an America that will behave no differently from other powerful states in putting its interest first – if necessary, at the expense of the well-being of other states? Is American exceptionalism a thing

of the past? Should we, with such questions in mind, be rethinking our security calculus – a calculus that has been based largely on acceptance of American primacy?

Finally, what does all this mean for countries like the Philippines? Are countries that are caught in the middle of these developments involving great power politics condemned to ‘suffer what they must’ – the fate decreed by Thucydides?

In an ideal world, the COVID-19 pandemic should have led to a renewed commitment to cooperative security. It does not seem to be going in that direction. Instead, it would appear to have made the slope toward competition and conflict more slippery.

Herman Joseph S. Kraft, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of the Philippines. His area of work and publication are issues concerning ASEAN, regional security in Southeast Asia, security sector reform, human security and intra-state conflict in the Philippines.

Perspectives: Myanmar Needs a Strong ASEAN to Fight Coronavirus

By Aung Zin Phyto Thein, Research Associate, Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies

As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, the Asia Pacific region stands at a crossroads. Not only has the pandemic accelerated existing socio-economic tensions across countries – it has also deepened strategic competition between Beijing and Washington.

The pandemic has delayed grand strategy initiatives by major powers within the region – from China’s Belt

and Road Initiative to Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, as well South Korea’s and India’s respective eastward looking policies. US influence in the Asia Pacific continues to spiral downwards – fanned in no small part by the Trump administration’s repeated stress on the virus originating in China, and also by the rising death toll in the US.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity for the region. It is a chance to reset – specifically, a chance for existing multilateral bodies within the Asia Pacific to reset and reshape the foreign policy environment. This might include a focus on achieving greater accountability to the region’s citizens.

We have seen countries offering much needed aid to others in the region. Despite persistent wariness and concerns over an expectation of a strategic quid pro quo, the Chinese government to date has used four international organisations to channel aid to more than 80 countries in our region and beyond. Chinese state-owned and private companies delivering infrastructure investment projects in Myanmar, for example, have been active in donating a range of medical equipment to authorities within the country. Optimists have regarded this as a simple act of kindness, devoid of considerations about a quid pro quo.

South Korea has also displayed a welcome responsiveness to the acute needs generated by the pandemic, with the government and South Korean companies jointly pursuing so-called ‘test-kit diplomacy.’ LG Group, for example, secured 500,000 testing kits, valued at USD 132 million, to aid local response efforts in Indonesia.

However, it is imperative that the Asia Pacific community of states make a concerted effort to shift from reaction to a proactive response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. There are existing multilateral institutions designed to handle emergency responses – in the case Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) network, the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre), the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre and the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre. In April, the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 formulated a series of resolutions aimed at combatting the virus – notably strengthening

the aforementioned institutions and enhancing cooperation with external partners.

Yet this is simply not enough. The limitations of ASEAN institutions have been well documented and, though a welcome step forward, multilateral initiatives tackling COVID-19 should not, and must not, stop with the adoption of well-intentioned resolutions.

Take Myanmar as an example. Innovators among engineering companies and students, driven simply by a sense of duty to aid Myanmar’s COVID-19 battle, have been creating makeshift ventilators, disinfection robots, setting up misinformation monitors and volunteering as contact tracers.

Similar, and even more successful, endeavours can be seen in neighbouring Vietnam, where technology, coupled with the same innovative drive, has seen the development of rapid testing kits and one-of-a-kind ‘rice ATMs’. The brainchild of local entrepreneur Hoang Tuan Anh, rice is stored in elevated vats and dispensed through plastic pipes to individuals waiting with bags. When a button on the ATM is pressed, a volunteer receives notification through a mobile app and releases the rice.

Multilateral institutions providing local entrepreneurs with timely access to funding and to platforms for technology transfer can be crucial steps in harnessing this collaboration, innovation and drive within the Asia Pacific. Instead of simply waiting for whatever windfall may emerge from the diversification of production beyond China, such access would demonstrate a commitment not

only towards the greater well-being of the region, but also a powerful willingness to change practice.

Concerted multilateral responses and action should not end with the eradication of COVID-19. Rather, it should be sustained and signal a new beginning regarding multilateral response initiatives within the Asia Pacific. The post COVID-19 foreign policy environment cannot be defined simply by the challenge of recovering from this crisis. We must seek broader and enduring change.

Healthcare must be prioritised as a policy end-goal for the region, as opposed to merely being a time relevant tactic for soft power leverage. Effective institution-building and reform are essential in making the 2020s the decade when the Asia Pacific realises its full potential – taking a united stand not merely against COVID-19, but also against the pace of tumultuous deglobalisation. Asia Pacific decision-makers and institutions have a choice to make: to reform and take advantage, or not?

Aung Zin Phyo Thein, Research Associate, Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies. As an independent analyst, Aung Zin Phyo Thein has a focus on the Belt and Road Initiative in Myanmar.

CSCAP STUDY GROUPS

Study Groups are CSCAP's primary mechanism to generate analysis and policy recommendations for consideration by governments. These groups serve as fora for consensus building and problem solving and to address sensitive issues and problems ahead of their consideration in official processes. CSCAP currently has active study groups on the following themes –

Ongoing study groups:

- Non-Proliferation and Disarmament
- International Law and Cyberspace
- Rules Based Order
- Women, Peace and Security

CSCAP MEMBER COMMITTEES

CSCAP membership includes almost all of the major countries of the Asia Pacific and also includes the European Union:

Australia
Brunei
Cambodia
Canada
China
European Union
India
Indonesia
Japan
Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea
Republic of Korea
Laos
Malaysia
Mongolia
Myanmar
New Zealand
The Philippines
Russia
Singapore
Thailand
United States of America
Vietnam
Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (Associate Member)

CSCAP PUBLICATIONS

CRSO Regional Security Outlook (CRSO)

The CRSO is an annual publication to highlight regional security issues and to promote and inform policy relevant outputs as to how Track One (official) and Track Two (non-official) actors can, jointly or separately, advance regional multilateral solutions to these issues.

CSCAP Memoranda

CSCAP Memoranda are the outcome of the work of Study Groups approved by the Steering Committee and submitted for consideration at the Track One level.

CSCAP General Conference Reports

Since 1997, the biennial CSCAP General Conference, is designed to be an international forum where high ranking officials and security experts from the Asia Pacific region meet every two years to discuss security issues of relevance and to seek new ideas in response to evolving developments in Asia Pacific security. The forum is usually attended by approximately 250 participants; making it one of the largest gatherings of its kind. Through its publications, CSCAP's recommendations have been well received by the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).



COUNCIL FOR
SECURITY COOPERATION
IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

