

Post-Pandemic Global (Dis)order

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COVID-19 has swiftly swept through the world. Yet, our understanding of it remains woefully limited. All we have as a reference is the Spanish flu of 100 years ago, which, nevertheless, may provide a glimpse into the future world.

There might be two reasons why the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic could spread the virus all over the world and claim tens of millions of lives despite the fact that travel by land, sea or air at the time was extremely inconvenient. First, medical technology was extremely backward at the time. It was probably a very short one-way path for patients from becoming infected with the disease to being diagnosed with it and ultimately succumbing to it. Second, the pandemic occurred just before and after the end of the First World War. At the time, the world order had completely collapsed. Not only did countries fail to cooperate with each other to fight it, they continued to regard each other with deep suspicion. Thus, it is highly suspect that they could communicate with each other swiftly, provide mutual medical support and coordinate border controls.

Struggle between the great powers never subsided during the 20 years between the end of World War I and the outbreak of World War II. The victorious nations forced onerous compensation on the defeated ones. The defeated nations remained indignant and resentful. And all countries found themselves torn internally by the onslaught of communism or fascism, and their economies devastated by varying degree of depression. The first global organization (the League of Nations) created after World War I to maintain order could not maintain peace or promote cooperation at all. Hence, historians generally regard this 20-year period not as a succession of crises, but as a 20-year Crisis.

Having learned the lesson hard way, following the end of World War II, all countries gathered to establish a more potent world body, the United Nations, as well as a number of specialized agencies, such as the World Health Organization, to take

charge of important areas of global concern. The pivotal force behind this new initiative was the United States taking the lead to build a new global order spanning military, financial, energy, technological and other areas. To its credit, this new order indeed created 70 years of world peace and prosperity.

Few could have imagined that after Mr. Trump entered the White House, he would spearhead unraveling this global order. It was even more unimaginable that COVID-19 would choose this crucial moment to ravage all of mankind in a kind of perfect storm, much like the Spanish flu enveloping the earth just when the old order was collapsing. Imagine the clock going back several years to when the post-WWII was still robust. All it would take would be the U.S. standing up calling for cooperative action, then every country would quite possibly pitch in to fight the pandemic.

Looking to the future, the short-term outlook for the world depends on two factors. The first is, of course, when there will be a breakthrough in finding treatment for COVID-19 and which country will be the first to achieve that breakthrough. Second, will the international community, especially the great powers such as the U.S. and China, temporarily set aside their differences and move toward cooperation. No one knows the answer to the first question, and few are hopeful regarding the second.

The long-term outlook depends on how the international order evolves. There are three key factors: First, will the U.S. continue to dismantle the global order in order to "push back China"? Second, how does Beijing, which has to react to this, respond to the US offensive? If Xi Jinping intends a third term as China's President, will he continue to be more defensive, or more offensive, or seeking a mixture in his reaction to US initiatives? Third, how will other countries react? Choose sides, go their own way, or establish a third bloc?

Before the answers to these questions become clear, we can be certain of four things for now. First, U.S. competition with China will continue unabated. What the U.S. has done is almost entirely in line with the hegemony theory of international relations. According to this theory, the hegemonic country formulates rules, maintains order, and dispense rewards and punishments. However, over time, the hegemonic power's resources are gradually consumed, other countries catch up technologically, and the hegemonic power's populace slips into decadent complacency, undermining

its drive for leadership. Eventually the hegemonic power will be replaced by a rising power. Mr. Trump is worried that China is such a rising power. Judging from Republican Party documents publicized recently, he even hopes to use anti-China stratagem to kill two birds with one stone—maintain US hegemony worldwide and winning re-election domestically.

Second, although the global order has not yet disintegrated, it is slowly crumbling. The signs are obvious in such areas as climate change, human rights, trade, and health. And warning signs are flashing in the military, technology, and financial areas. This means that the United States is increasingly reluctant to shoulder its leadership responsibilities; the international organizations originally responsible for specific issue-areas would be less willing and able to coordinate among nations; and the decades-old norms and rules would be increasingly ignored.

Third, because public opinion in each country is more pronounced than a century ago, and COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the health and life of the people, the foreign policies of all the countries will be more constrained by domestic public opinion than ever before. Between the competing political systems of the U.S. and China, who will better coordinate its internal and external policies will gradually become apparent.

Fourth, in response to the impact of COVID-19, each government will spend more resources domestically at the expense of external exigencies. For example, Mr. Trump's pandemic relief funding accounts for nearly half of the annual federal budget, which of course will be to the detriment of defense appropriations. Ditto for other countries. Under these circumstances, selfishness and self-help is likely to become commonplace in international relations. And paying lip service will be far more probable than rendering a helping hand to others.

In such a new chaotic world with large tectonic plates shifting rapidly, Taiwan, which is situated at the edge where the plates collide, must anticipate what might happen next, remain vigilant at all times, and avoid wishful thinking if it is to be able to prosper and stay out of harm's way.

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