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Securitization and Climate Change
by Sitong Lin

**Shinzo Abe's Politics in Japan:
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The Future of Asia
by Poornima Vijaya

Geopolitical Influence of Italy on the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road"

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“ADVANCING DIVERSITY”

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The Future of Asia

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Why did we not all see this coming? It is perhaps the most repeatedly asked question in apropos to the Covid-19 pandemic. This question carries substantial merit considering the many devastating global challenges surprising us in the past decade. These unanticipated developments shocked the world. Governments are particularly fearful of events requiring fast-moving decisions and policies sans the knowledge of its consequences- "They will lose public support if things go wrong." A paradigm shifts inwards towards the domestic level of governance, thus retreating from global institutional cooperation, appears to be the spontaneous response. The inability to anticipate and respond to international events, therefore subsequently, contributes to the debilitating principles of global institutional governance.

Anterior to the pandemic outbreak in 2020, nations across the Asia-Pacific were confronted by numerous democratic challenges. Continued political fragility, recurrence of military interventions in politics, violent conflicts, intensifying autocratization, the rise of populist narratives, spiralling ethnic nationalism, democratic backsliding, fading of checks and balances, and the spread of disinformation is, is wholly challenging the Asia-Pacific (Seah et al., 2021). States such as Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines witnessed austere crackdowns on critics, free speech, and political opposition. Myanmar returned under the military junta, the people of Thailand held pro-democratic protests, and Duterte granted himself 'thirty special powers' temporarily to manage the Covid-19 crisis. Such clampdowns, including dissent and press freedoms prevalent in defacto democracies like the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia and Malaysia are resumptions of democratic backsliding over the last few years (Croissant, 2019: 3). The surge in authoritarian governance model, especially in the past decade, has posed a phenomenal threat to US national interests. Furthermore, newer democracies in the Asia-Pacific have endured political coercion, corruption, violation of human rights, and deterioration in civil liberties and political institutions (Brands, 2018: 63). These growing trends, along with the assertive rise in the Chinese regional sphere of influence, undermine the progression made by the US in promoting sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and upholding of liberal-democratic institutional world order. The outbreak of Covid-19 worsens the foregoing democratic backsliding with institutions incapable of coping with pressures presented by the pandemic. Ethnic minorities such as Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh, migrant communities in smaller states such as Laos,

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Cambodia, and East Timor, and attitudes of xenophobia, anti-Asian hate crimes, and scapegoating worldwide further destabilized the overall social order, leaving scope for greater public unrest if left unaddressed (Ding and Kananack, 2021). This is, furthermore, exacerbated by malignant actors such as China, aiming at reviving its civilizational history with an underpinning motivation towards regional hegemony.

What is "The New Normal"?

"The New Normal" of the post-pandemic world is predicated on significant socio-economic challenges with rising inequality, poverty, and unemployment (Connell and Campbell, 2021; 518). The Asia-Pacific region faces a slowdown in economic activities, thus deepening its vulnerabilities to political instability.

These testing times call for unprecedented policies on stimulus and relief packages, therefore offering the nations of the Asia-Pacific under its regional institutional frameworks, such as Asia-Pacific Economic Council (APEC), to engage, coordinate, and cooperate on initiatives towards regional integration, identity, and common development for all (He and Feng, 2020: 152).

However, dialogue does not denote cooperation, and cooperation is not coordination; hence, to overcome any constraints, institutional grouping should be necessarily built on economic resilience indicative of growth in regional economic infrastructure. It is crucial to boost international network connectivity and growth opportunity- yet, in inclusive terms.

With the intensifying rivalry between Beijing and Washington in their backyard, the nations of the Asia-Pacific are left with little choices in manoeuvring strategies fitting their national interests. By resisting US pressures to distance themselves from China, the Southeast Asian nations are indicating the need to engage the major powers constructively. The ongoing technological war against Huawei has created strategic divisions in ASEAN. On the one hand, Vietnam opposes Huawei due to rising scepticism, and on the contrary, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and the Philippines are installing and strengthening Huawei 5G in their domestic telecommunications networks. However, US treaty allies in the region fear their technological decisions in accepting Huawei will restrict sharing of intelligence sharing, thus creating a further strategic dilemma in the region (Acharya, 2021).

In the light of failing structural conditions, it seems only natural for smaller and middle power to reinforce their balancing strategies- economically, military, and politically- mainly with the ruling elites preoccupied with problems of legitimacy and governance at home. These political elites wrestle with the neighbourhood's post-pandemic recovery and political stability, with daunting economic and strategic uncertainties, thus necessitating a wide range of partnerships- near and far (Ullah and Ferdous, 2022: 110).

The unprecedented flux in the region's strategic environment has significant implications for regional integration and cooperation. The Asia-Pacific states intend to highlight their strategic balancing through neutrality, hedging and constructive engagement, by simultaneously broadening multi-track diplomacy with multi-layered alignments with numerous agencies. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEAN-plus continue to present themselves as indispensable to promote converged strategic hedging, scilicet, pursuing bilateral, multilateral, and multilateral efforts on the chessboard of geostrategic competition of- "Low Politics," including supply chains, trade production, cooperation on public health and infrastructural developments; and, "High Politics," implying defence partnerships and military modernization agreements. Nevertheless, strategic hedging is not a desired choice for the competing powers, considering its riskification, it is, still presented as the second-best mechanism for all the players in the region, as it provides these agencies with space, platform, and channels for pragmatic, cooperative yet, cautious partnerships (Kuik, 2022).

Competing Hegemons of the New International Order

It would mean something with the dreadful crisis were a one-off. At the same time, unfortunately, the tragedy of the Asia-Pacific order is motivated by aggressive ethno-nationalistic sentiments directing the uncomfortable truth- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intends an assertive revisionist revival of the ancient Chinese civilization. The CCP shares diversely different norms and interests compared to the larger international community, into which it has so momentarily integrated its foreign policy measures. In its best interests, China frequently engages with autocratic leaders of Russia, North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and many more, serving Xi's economic, political and authoritarian interests (Jain and Lee, 2021). Close and dependent ties with China secured strong support from Cambodia as Prime Minister Hun Sen specially visited China in support of handling the pandemic. Revered and cherished friendships between authoritarian Duterte and Xi- "I highly cherish the friendship and good relations with President Xi Jinping." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022) evidently, underscores democratic backsliding in a US ally nation. Historically, there are several instances in history exposing us to the miscalculations by the US- towards integrating and reforming the Chinese political system with behaviour and politics that is acceptable to the West. On the contrary, Chinese politics in the Xi Jinping Administration has distinctly moved from integration into the western-liberal order towards concentrating their efforts on perfecting the surveillance system, regulated by "market totalitarianism." Thus, the competing hegemons present the post-pandemic world with an appalling dilemma of global and regional integration minus solidarity (Bougon, 2018).

The past years and the challenging pandemic have exposed fault lines in the America-led World Order, thus, indicating a decline in Pax-Americana.

Trump's hostilities with trade, attack on NATO allies, withdrawal from crucial international agreements such as the trans-pacific partnership (TPP), Iran nuclear deal, Paris climate accords, resentment toward autocratic regimes, and such on, has concomitantly forged the decline in a liberal, international, rules-based order (Ikenberry, 2018). 'With foes like that, who needs enemies?'- resonates with democracies all over the world rallying for an expansion of G7 to include South Korea, Australia, and India in Democracy 10 (D10), concerting coordinated retort to Beijing's rising autocratic sphere of influence (Brattberg and Judah, 2020).

For the American leaders to harness domestic public support for a revival of Pax-Americana, will require a formula created to generate prosperity for all. The absence of certainty in American foreign policy has directed open questions to the post-pandemic US. Pressures from within and threats from outside are, in unison, the decline of the Pax- American global order.

Finally, yes, we will endure and emerge out of the crisis looming in the world today. Regardless, envisaging a post-pandemic "New Normal" is an overwhelmingly complex task as the world continues to see recurrent waves of tests. Lacking discernment by staring into the dark perhaps offers us some vantage point at what is likely to shape the post-pandemic order. Despite the continual endurance of the pandemic, many questions on the regional security complex, nature of governance, diplomacy and conflicts remain unanswered. The safe prediction in the Asia-Pacific, then and now, is that the region is the locus of global political-economic and military power arrangements- and will continue to remain so in the coming years.

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