The emerging age of ambiguity in the global order

The US and China will remain at the heart of a fluid international order, one in which the complexities of interdependence will make it increasingly difficult to neatly classify relationships as ‘friend’ or ‘foe’.

Bhilari Kausikan

Looking around the world today, I cannot but conclude that we have seen this movie before. The cast of characters and locations may have changed, but whether we look at the wars in Ukraine, or China’s strategic rivalry or aggressive Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and the Himalayas, or the consequences of the pandemic, regional and globalisation and the risks of a world receptive to those不是 just old plots with a new setting.

A few years ago, there was a shift in attitudes and statements, sitting on varying reactions to the theme of “the return of great power competition” and its return, even then it was clear that the US was far from no longer a superpower that theory itself had. In that sense, the US seemed to have limited itself, but it is not that the US government is now more willing or more interested in these values. It is simply that the US has to junk those values if it has to focus on its other interests to the extent that it has to pay attention to them even if you find them otherwise. You will have to shift your attention, much like a US government to politics, or to something else.

A parallel theme was the idea that as China reformed and opened up economically, its political system would – not exactly merge with Western democracies – at least move in a distinctly more politically open direction. We owe President Xi Jinping a vote of thanks for making it clear to all except the terminally naïve that the purpose of reforms in a Leninist system is always and only to strengthen and understand the power of the vanguard party. We are now returning to a more historically normal period wherein competition and rivalry between major powers is the primary dynamic, with rising powers working in complex rivalries and alliances now international, where international agreements are still going to be agreed to, and the possibility of war between major powers again looms over international relations.

The US will remain a superpower. And other forms of state-sponsored violence have been a constant reality for many in the Global South. The war on terror is in many ways the same, however. It is not just the military and economic influence, but also the political influence, that the US has in the region, even if its military presence is reduced. The US continues to play a major role in regional affairs, and its influence is still significant, especially in areas such as the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. The US remains a key player in global affairs, even if its role is not as dominant as it once was. The US will continue to play a role in international relations, and its influence will continue to be felt around the world. However, the US will not be able to completely dominate the global order, and other major powers will continue to play a major role in international affairs. The US will continue to be a major player in the global order, and its influence will continue to be felt around the world. However, the US will not be able to completely dominate the global order, and other major powers will continue to play a major role in international affairs.
Fluid global order demands strategy shift

FROM B1

did not suddenly appear out of thin air and will not suddenly vanish into the other. It represents an established strain of American political culture that periodically surfaces, a characteristic that the American political scientist Richard Hofstadter called The Paranoid Style in American Politics. We should not ignore these admittedly serious shortcomings of the American system. But we also should not forget that despite its politics, America is still here as a major power and that those who were overly focused on its periodically self-destructive and almost always ill-disciplined political process to the extent ofunderestimating the US often did not live to regret it.

There is only one America, and we have to work with it whatever its shortcomings. Otherwise, there can be no balance to China.

XII’S LEADERSHIP

Now, China. The most crucial questions about China centre around what lessons, if any, Mr Xi has taken from his experience of America over the last eight years, which saw a transition in the White House but no change of approach towards China and a major blunder by his most important partner that resulted in the war in Ukraine.

I stress the personal – Mr Xi, rather than the collective, China – because the consequence of the first decade of Mr Xi’s rule – the use of the anti-corruption campaign to crush all organised opposition to concentrate power around himself and abolishing term limits for the top position – has been to reintroduce a single point of failure into the Chinese system. Authoritarian systems are able to set goals and pursue them relentlessly over the long term.

But this is a strength only if the goal was correct in the first place. In this respect, in China, the two ends of the political spectrum were set by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Mao’s ideologically-driven Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution were unmitigated disasters; Deng’s pragmatic decision to reform and open up saved the Chinese Communist Party. In no other system could a leader take a cold hard look at his life’s work, decide it had all gone wrong, and make a 180-degree turn without significant opposition. But it took millions of deaths and the need to avert an existential threat to Party rule to change course.

Where is Mr Xi situated on this spectrum? The optimistic can point to the reversal of zero-Covid, the easing of controls on big tech companies, efforts to revive the property sector and an effort to nuance support for Russia and improve at least the atmosphere of relations with the US as indications of Mr Xi reverting to Deng-style pragmatism. This is not an assessment that can be dismissed. However, my inclination is to be more sceptical.

These may well be tactical adjustments to mitigate mounting internal and external problems rather than strategic changes of direction. The lack of preparation for the shift away from zero-Covid clearly suggests an emergency response rather than a deliberate rethink.

There is no going back to zero-Covid, but the same cannot be said of the other examples. Big Tech had already been cut down to size and the relaxation is occurring within new parameters. I don’t think Mr Xi will hesitate to act again if another Jack Ma-like character with ideas beyond what the Party considers his station in life should be foolish enough to take too high a profile.

DYNAMIC MULTIPOLARITY

Dealing with major powers with whom we cannot avoid working but do not entirely trust requires strategic autonomy. And even the closest of allies are moving in that direction. This does not mean that alliances or less formal arrangements like the Quad will break up, but they will become looser, as countries will want to preserve the widest possible range of options for themselves.

Few, if any, countries will commit to aligning themselves across the entire range of issues with any single major power. This will encourage the natural multipolarity of a diverse world. Multipolarity will not, however, be symmetrical. The US and China will remain at the centre of the international order. It is also unlikely that the international system that will evolve around this central axis will have as clear a definition as the bipolar Cold War structure. The international order will become much more fluid.

Complex interdependence is making it increasingly difficult to neatly classify relationships as “friend” or “foe.” Ambiguity is an intrinsic characteristic of relationships where interdependence creates ties, but the very extent of those ties exposes vulnerabilities. International relationships will become more complicated as countries grapple with political and economic considerations that pull in different directions.

What I believe is emerging is an order of dynamic multipolarity. Shifting combinations of regional middle powers and smaller countries will continually arrange and rearrange themselves in variegated and overlapping patterns along the central axis of US-China relations, sometimes titling one way, sometimes in another, and sometimes going their own way, as their interests in different domains and circumstances dictate.

To successfully navigate this emerging system will require a fundamental shift of mindset and approach that not every country will find comfortable.

I believe India and Singapore may find it relatively easier than most, because what is required is largely already our diplomatic modus operandi. But we will have to ensure that our institutions, and perhaps even more importantly, our politics, remain agile and courageous enough to continually adapt to this fluid emerging order without losing sight of our fundamental interests.

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