The COVID-19 crisis has sharpened the debate between China and the United States over future leadership of the global order that has been dominated by the US since the end of the Second World War. Global Asia looks at China’s vision for a world order that could displace that of the US.

**ESSAYS BY**

- Introduction: Chu Yun-han & Yang Guangbin 8
- Qin Yaqing 12
- Rosemary Foot 18
- Chu Yun-han 24
- Yves Tiberghien 32
- Zhao Suisheng 38
- Shiu Sin Por 44
- Evelyn Goh 52
- Di Dongsheng 58
- Eberhard Sandschneider 66
Introduction

Will China’s rise, enabled by US retreat and spurred by Covid-19, lead to a new international order?

By Chu Yun-han & Yang Guangbin

The cover package in this issue is designed to sharpen the debate over what China’s rise and the relative decline of the United States might mean for the transformation of the global order. With China pursuing a much more ambitious global agenda under President Xi Jinping, there has been growing apprehension among Western political leaders about its potential threat to the post-Second World War liberal international order and, in particular, the values and norms that undergird it. Many Western observers have raised concerns about a corresponding disorder as the strategic competition between China and the US has escalated in recent years. This has heightened ideological competition and fueled an increasing resort to power politics.

With the US-China trade war looking more and more like a nascent Cold War, many economic analysts warn that it might trigger a process of de-globalization and the decoupling of the global economy. The realist-minded strategists also worried that China might take advantage of a retreating US to fill the strategic vacuum of a departing hegemon. Some Western political leaders also raise the concern that China not only increasingly defies the game rules set by the erstwhile hegemon but also has begun to outline an alternative set of rules. They have been annoyed by the fact that China is initiate ever more visionary policy initiatives to reconfigure economic integration and globalization, advocating an ambitious agenda through such platforms as BRICS and the G20 for reforming the mechanisms of global governance, and building up new multilateral institutions that complement, supplement and could eventually replace today’s international institutions and rules of economic exchange and co-operation.

Furthermore, the Western elite worries that the Chinese model of development will become more attractive to political leaders and elites in many parts of the developing world just as Western liberal democracies are facing the gathering storm of populism and nationalism, of which Donald Trump and his European counterparts are not the cause, but a symptom. Long gone is the sense of triumphalism emanating from the US-centric globalization.

The Covid-19 pandemic sharpens these anxieties and fears. Gideon Rachman, a Financial Times columnist, warned his readers: “Combine the relative stabilization of China, with the threat of a new Great Depression and a deep political crisis in America, and it is clearly possible that Covid-19 will trigger a big shift in power from the US to China. It could even mark the end of American primacy.” The pandemic will likely create new fault lines of confrontation in a relationship that is hugely consequential for global order and governance. The US-China great-power dynamics might become more confrontational just when urgent calls for global co-operation and co-ordination in mitigating this menacing health threat and the ensuing global economic crisis are being heard louder than ever before. Many observers also point out that this pandemic will accelerate a dynamic that had already begun: a move away from US-centric globalization to a more China-centric globalization.

Is this growing apprehension toward China’s emerging global influence justified? To what extent does it reflect a Western-centric way of making sense of the complex and multi-faceted implications of China’s growing influence over the global agenda? In contrast, many non-Western observers are open to the constructive and transformative role that China is likely to play in shaping the post-hegemonic world order. After all, across an increasingly wider range of policy domains — trade, development assistance, regional infrastructure, multilateral lending, financial stability, environment, green energy, public health and even UN peacekeeping operations — China has already taken up an international leadership role commensurate with its national priorities and current status as the largest middle-income developing country. These observers are inclined to endorse the Chinese view that today’s system of global governance is imperfect and inadequate. They may agree with most of its liberal characteristics but not always with its implicit or explicit frozen hierarchy — much less the frequent transgressions by its creator. They welcome China’s move to forge common ground among major developing countries for a reform agenda under the central theme of “multi-polarization and the democratization of international relations.” They endorse the push for a more representative governance structure that gives more responsibility to emerging economies and strengthens the principle of equality not just in norms and rules but also in their implementation.

We invited leading political scientists from Asia, the US and Europe to identify the contours of China’s emerging global agenda, explicate its world view and assess whether China is a viable candidate to eventually succeed the US to sustain the momentum of globalization, protect multilateral arrangements from rising parochialism and shoulder the major responsibility of coalescing contentious national and collective interests toward long-term goals. This cover package includes the following contributors: Qin Yanqing offers a Chinese perspective on the failure of global governance and calls for new multilateralism as the remedy. He argues that the simultaneous existence of the interstate society and the global society has become a characteristic feature of our times, and the inherent tension between these two is the major obstacle to successful global governance. To relax the tension between the two societies and make global governance more effective, it is necessary to reform the existing multilateralism which is too hegemony-centric, state-centric and ego-centric. A new multilateralism, which underscores pluralism, participation and partnership, provides meaningful hope for more effective and legitimate governance in our world.

Rosemary Foot addresses the concerns
among international-relations scholars and policymakers about whether China should be looked upon as either a revisionist or status quo state by analyzing the depth of China’s challenge to the liberal order via a focus on the UN’s agenda and its own beliefs. 

Chu Yun-han puts forward the thesis that China’s emerging global role should be understood as reformist rather than revisionist. Western opinion leaders who feel threatened by China’s rise usually trap themselves in one of the two Western-centric conceptions about the post-Second World War liberal world order. First, they tend to conflate three liberal elements together: political liberalism, economic liberalism and liberalism in international relations. Second, they tend to conflate the existing hierarchy with its liberal norms and rules. If we move beyond these two Western-centric conceptualizations, one can convincingly argue that China’s emerging global role might help strengthen and refurbish many important principles that undergird the post-Second World War liberal international order. Unpacking these forces and misperceptions leads us to possible solutions to the current crisis. Zhao Shuisheng asks whether China is ready to step into the breach left by the Trump administration and become a global leader. He argues that while the failure of US leadership has indeed created a global leadership vacuum, China’s rhetoric has not matched its actions in comprehensively providing for the global public good, such as co-ordinating multilaterial responses to the pandemic, pursuing global economic and financial leadership and helping to enhance independence of the World Health Organization. 

Sino-US infighting in pursuit of immediate interests has paralyzed multilateral responses to the pandemic and left a void of global leadership. Shiu Sin Por reminds us that the ancient concept of tianxia, “everything under heaven,” constitutes the basis of China’s approach to the world. It gives coherence to the five building blocks of China’s model for international relations. It starts and ends with humanity as a whole, not just one nation, while respecting the integrity of the nation state. It is a fundamental departure from Western theories of its kind. Existing variations of geopolitics, real politics or power politics not only fail to reflect the basic substance of tianxia, but also grossly distort it.

Evelyn Goh outlines the rights and responsibilities China would have to shoulder or take over the great-power management role of the US in East Asia, focusing on the strategic and security realms. She also highlights the complex challenges China will have to overcome to gain the regional support to let it create a new order. To date, China has, justifiably, used the claim of being both a developing country and a great power to be selective about its obligations as a responsible great power. As a rising power, Beijing had the luxury of aiming to “reshape its periphery” using instruments of its choice. But to pick up the pieces of a changing world order, it would have no choice but to tackle head-on the challenges of leadership. In facing this, China’s long historical experience will provide little direct guidance because of the current era of globalization and the crowding of Asian great-power spheres. 

Di Dongsheng explains the motivation behind Chinese policymakers’ resolve to internationalize the Chinese currency, the renminbi (RMB), and the strategies they have implemented incrementally so far and the road map that they are likely to follow in the future. The internationalization of the RMB was prompted by the perceived unfairness, irresponsibility and asymmetric distribution of costs among the nations showcased in policy responses to the 2008 financial crisis. The Chinese government has since implemented an internationalization strategy on multiple fronts. It introduced a series of reforms to loosen the artificial restrictions on the cross-border use of the RMB. It successfully persuaded the International Monetary Fund to include the RMB in its basket of Special Drawing Rights. The rise of Chinese tourist spending, the expansion of outward investment and the global reach of China’s electronic payment systems have also facilitated the internationalization of the RMB. However, to become one of the mainstream currencies of the world, the RMB still faces a series of difficulties. 

Eberhard Sandecker explores the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the geopolitical landscape in coming years. He offers a five-part prediction: 1) It will accelerate and intensify the crisis of multilateralism; 2) it will have a detrimental effect on great-power relations; 3) it will intensify the conflict between China and the US; 4) China’s rise will nevertheless continue; and 5) it will accelerate processes of economic decoupling and deglobalization. Speaking overall, most of the global trends visible before the outbreak of the coronavirus will continue to unfold, but the pandemic will accelerate and intensify developments that otherwise would have taken much longer to materialize. Policymakers and business representatives should be ready for an all-embracing conflict between the US and China over ultimate global predominance. They will be forced to position themselves in a conflict constellation that will easily dominate the next two to three decades.

Chu Yun-han is Distinguished Research Fellow of the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica and Yang Guangbin is Professor and Dean of the School of International Studies, Renmin University of China. 

This collection of articles originated from the 2nd International Forum on China and World Order held on Oct. 26-28, 2019 in Beijing. The symposium was organized by the School of International Studies of Renmin University of China and co-sponsored by the Chung-Liu Education Foundation based in Taipei. Additional analysis has been added due to the Covid-19 pandemic.