

China on the rise.

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One year ago, in Think. Order. Form. *Forwards*, I argued that “rising Asian countries are unlikely to overturn or dominate the established global order... China seeks to avoid the growth trap and promote regional prosperity by providing international public goods, yet the competition between major powers will create barriers to this solution”. This year, the seismic shock of the pandemic has revealed the fragility of the global system. The trend of competition between major powers has not diminished in the face of a global crisis that requires international cooperation - arguably, it has intensified. So I still maintain that this growing rivalry will remain a barrier to global governance, but that the international order will not be overturned in the near future.

CHINA DOES NOT WANT TO “CAPSIZE” THE GLOBAL ORDER, BUT TO TAKE IT OVER

As the deficiencies of the West have been exposed and the US retreats from its global responsibilities, China seems to be regaining the confidence of the international community. Many suggest that the world-shattering effects of the pandemic will result in a permanent shift in political and economic power, with China best placed to take advantage. Against this backdrop, Vijay Gokhale, former Indian ambassador to China, claims that China does not want to “capsize” the global order, but to take it over.

THE WORLD OF THE FUTURE WILL BE MULTIPOLAR

China does indeed seem to be taking over from the US in terms of providing international public goods during the pandemic. While America has announced plans to defund the WHO and is about to have a divisive presidential election against a backdrop of domestic disorder, China has been working closely with the EU to ensure international institutions are able to operate effectively. Nevertheless, the fact that the US is unwilling or unable to maintain global leadership does not mean China will be able to take its place. The

US will remain dominant in many areas, such as the economy and technology, and could foreseeably still get back on track in others. Even if the pandemic is pushing the world away from being US-centric, that does not mean it is becoming more China-centric. Rather, it is becoming more multipolar.

When it comes to the current situation, it is necessary for major powers to keep calm and refrain from zero-sum confrontations in their international relations. In the past few decades, China has endeavoured to reform and rejuvenate the existing global order. Due to differences in ideology and political systems, the West is wary of the rise of China, and there is a lack of mutual understanding. And in the current crisis, states may find it even harder to resist the temptation to blame others for their failures.

THE GAP IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE WILL LEAD TO AN ERA OF GLOBAL COOPERATION

But over the longer term, the huge gap in global governance will usher in a new era of global cooperation. Democracies will have to find new ways to effectively engage with China and adapt to a more multipolar world. Meanwhile, as the biggest beneficiary of globalisation, China is motivated to promote a more open and diverse global order, and to prevent the escalation of rivalries between major powers. This means that the new situation created by the pandemic will only cause instability, rather than fundamental changes to the global order.

International trust is in short supply at the moment. As a historical democratic ally of the US and a partner that now shares broad-ranging interests with China, we can expect the EU to play a pivotal role in consolidating countries on both sides of the divide during the period of restructuring. Only then will the international cooperation that is needed be possible.



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