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## COVID-19 and World Order

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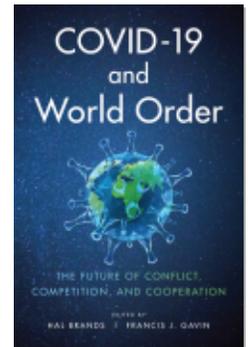
Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Brands, Hal and Francis J. Gavin.

COVID-19 and World Order: The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.

Project MUSE. doi:10.1353/book.77593.



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[ Access provided at 18 Sep 2020 17:01 GMT with no institutional affiliation ]



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## PART VII / Sino-American Rivalry

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# The United States, China, and the Great Values Game

Elizabeth Economy

Global crises inevitably raise questions of global leadership. As the world confronts a dramatically changing climate, a pandemic, a global economic recession, and an ongoing refugee crisis, it seeks competent leaders that both model best behavior and bear a greater share of the burden in responding to these challenges. But in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the world came calling, both superpowers, the United States and China, fell short. The United States flailed helplessly, unable to overcome a lack of presidential leadership, a partisan divide, and a broken health care system.<sup>1</sup> On the global stage, the United States abdicated leadership in spectacular fashion. Its moves to divert personal protective equipment (PPE) away from other countries,<sup>2</sup> as well as its suspension of funding and subsequent move to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO),<sup>3</sup> served as defining and devastating symbols of the Trump administration's "America First" mantra. China, in contrast, sought to grasp the mantle of global leadership. It provided material and technical support for much of the world and pledged significant assistance to meet the challenge of future pandemics. Its response was marred, however, by both a lack of transparency and accountability that enabled the virus to spread within China and abroad and its self-aggrandizing

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and coercive diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, any hope that the two powers would together step up to coordinate a global response was quickly quashed by the efforts of each to offload blame onto the other. The WHO also failed its mandate to array the world's resources to ensure the timely and transparent transmission of best policy options and practices in combating the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> The triumph belonged to the middle and large powers, such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Germany, who boasted competent leaders and resilient systems. They managed to arrest the spread of the virus at home and offer assistance to others in need. Nonetheless, they lacked the heft and reach to lead globally in a sustained manner.

The failure of global leadership in response to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the much larger challenges in global governance that the world confronts today. The institutions, norms, and values of the current international order are not adequate to meet the range of needs and demands of the world's peoples; some need to be bolstered, while others need to be reformed. At the same time, the pandemic also laid bare the scope and scale of China's ambition to reshape the geostrategic landscape and reform international institutions to reflect its preferred norms, values, and policies. For decades, China has maintained a low-profile foreign policy and selectively adapted to the current international order, contributing to a widespread belief that the country was on a path, however long and tortuous, to becoming a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. Yet since coming to power in 2012, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and President Xi Jinping has advanced an alternative vision of the international order and China's place within it. As China's behavior over the course of the pandemic underscores, this vision poses a threat to a number of norms underpinning the current order, including freedom of navigation and overflight, free trade, open societies, and the rule of law, as well as to the international institutions embodying these norms. Xi seeks to create what he has characterized as "a community of shared destiny for mankind"—a rules-based order in which the norms and values of authoritarian countries and those of democratic systems coexist and are protected equally.

The United States, for its part, has signaled that, at least for the duration of the Trump administration, it can no longer be relied upon to serve as the standard-bearer for the current international order. President Donald Trump understands international institutions and multilateral arrangements more as constraints than enablers of US power and influence. He has devalued the role of alliances and withdrawn from some international institutions, while ignoring the norms inherent in others. Yet the United States does not want to cede global leadership to China. It has recognized China as a "strategic competitor" and "revisionist power"

and adopted a strategy to compete with, counter, and contain China—erecting bulwarks against Chinese initiatives to reorder the global order, while aggressively encouraging its allies and partners to join in the effort.

For much of the rest of the world, Chinese behavior and the US posture have created an increasingly complicated and challenging situation. Neither superpower offers an attractive world vision, but countries are being asked—and sometimes coerced—to choose sides in ways suggestive of a cold war. In response, a number of officials and foreign policy experts have offered alternative frameworks, in which China and the United States compete but also seek out areas of cooperation. One such approach, “coopetition”—a concept borrowed from the business world—acknowledges competition as a defining feature of the bilateral relationship but also underscores the advantages to be realized from cooperation in certain well-defined areas to produce a greater good.<sup>6</sup> Others have drawn on an idea from the natural sciences, “coevolution,” to suggest that the United States and China naturally share broad areas of common purpose and should identify opportunities to learn from the other, change, and adapt for mutual benefit.<sup>7</sup> Both cooperation and coevolution offer the two countries the opportunity to reset the relationship and embark on a new diplomatic endeavor that takes cooperation as a core strategic objective—a good in and of itself. And both approaches, if fully realized, would contribute to a world order led by the United States and China that was more stable and better able to respond to global challenges.

Yet the COVID-19 pandemic also raises the question of whether the future of the world should rely so completely on the intentions, capabilities, and actions of China and the United States. China’s wide-ranging attacks on the basic norms and institutions underpinning the current rules-based order and the United States’ determination to reduce its support for many of the international institutions that support this order make China in particular, but also the United States, destabilizing forces within the international system. In this current reality, it is worth exploring the opportunities for other countries, many of which displayed governance capabilities superior to those of China and the United States during the pandemic, to play a larger role in shaping the future international order, its institutions, values, and norms.

### **China Reaches for the Crown**

In a short essay published in *Noema* in June 2020, “China: Threat or Opportunity?” former Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani argues that even as America’s geopolitical influence has receded and China’s has expanded, Beijing

has no interest in providing global leadership. According to Mahbubani, China has “benefited from the rules-based global order” and has “no desire to overturn this order.”<sup>8</sup> More than two hundred US scholars and analysts expressed a similar view in a letter published in the *Washington Post* in July 2019, in which they argued that it was “not clear” whether Beijing saw global leadership as “necessary or feasible,” and in any case, while China might be “seeking to weaken the role of Western democratic norms within the global order,” it was “not seeking to overturn vital economic and other components of that order” because China, itself, had benefited from that order.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their apparent confidence in the staying power of the current rules-based system, Xi’s stated intentions and policies over the past almost decade suggest otherwise. Xi has called for China to “lead in the reform of the global governance system”<sup>10</sup> and to create a “community of shared destiny,” in which universal values and the institutions and multilateral arrangements that support them, such as the US-led alliance system, no longer define the international order.<sup>11</sup> Xi has further advanced China as a model for other countries, claiming that “the China model for a better social governance system offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.”<sup>12</sup> (While there is no one clearly accepted definition of this model, at its heart it is a variant of authoritarian capitalism, characterized, as University of Michigan professor Yuen Yuen Ang has described, by extensive state control over political and social life, including the media, internet, and education, and an economy that reflects a mix of both market-based practices, as well as the strong hand of the state in core sectors of the economy.<sup>13</sup>)

Xi’s objectives in promoting a China model and calling for reform of global governance institutions are both defensive—to protect China from international criticism—and offensive—to ensure that international norms and values align with and serve Chinese values and political and economic priorities. States and international institutions that reflect China’s values on human rights and cyber-governance, for example, are less likely to criticize Beijing’s labor and reeducation camps in Xinjiang and more likely to support China’s negotiating stance in international institutions on the primacy of cyber-sovereignty. And they may also embrace Chinese trade, investment, and security ties in support of these norms and values. To advance these objectives, Xi has moved both strategically and opportunistically, using China’s sovereignty claims, its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its position within international institutions, and its economic prowess to incentivize and coerce actors to align their practices with Chinese preferences.

### **Chinese Ambitions Meet COVID-19**

The story of COVID-19 is still evolving, but its implications for China's position on the global stage are already emerging. While the international community lauded China for its ability to mobilize its vast resources to combat the pandemic, Beijing's approach has also raised doubts about its model, the nature of its international influence, and the desirability of Chinese leadership on the global stage.

As China's leaders moved to control the spread of COVID-19, a high degree of political centralization and the deep penetration of the CCP into Chinese society enabled them to quarantine more than one hundred million people,<sup>14</sup> to deploy significant financial and human capital to construct hospitals and makeshift quarantine centers,<sup>15</sup> and to command enterprises across the country to manufacture the PPE necessary to meet the Chinese and later international demand.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the government's already operational surveillance technology and close ties with Chinese technology companies allowed it to track and contain the spread of the virus in much of the country. Yet this same authoritarian model also enabled the spread of the virus within China and beyond the country's borders. The tight control over information, as well as the lack of transparency, an open media, and the rule of law, delayed the transmission of critical information that could have contained the spread of the virus in its initial stages. Millions of Chinese left the city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the epidemic, to travel during the Lunar New Year, many unknowingly carrying the virus with them. The Chinese government manipulated and destroyed information regarding the true number of cases and deaths, further putting Chinese citizens and the rest of the world at risk.<sup>17</sup> (Still, today, there is no accurate accounting of the number of COVID-19-related cases and deaths in China, with some outside estimates placing the number of cases in China in January 2020 at thirty-seven times the official number.<sup>18</sup>) Chinese citizens rose up to challenge the official narrative, undertaking their own investigations into the number of cases and deaths, creating maps that tracked the virus's path, developing trusted platforms for citizens to access verified information, and even criticizing Xi and the CCP directly for their handling of the virus. The message to the rest of the world: if the Chinese people don't trust their government, why should it? By March 2020, the government had arrested over eight hundred Chinese citizens for pursuing independent inquiries and publicly questioning the government's actions.

At the same time, Xi took advantage of the pandemic to extend China's reach into the politically contested regions that it claims as its sovereign territory, including

much of the South China Sea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. In the South China Sea, China has consistently ignored the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration that deemed its claims unlawful and has continued to take destabilizing actions to realize its claims. Beijing used the distraction of the pandemic to establish two districts to oversee the Paracels Islands and Macclesfield Bank, which are also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan, and name eighty different features in the South China Sea, fifty-five of which were underwater. At the same time, Chinese vessels rammed and sunk a Vietnamese shipping boat and threatened Malaysian and Indonesian ships.<sup>19</sup> Beijing also took advantage of the pandemic to enforce its political norms within Hong Kong. China's National People's Congress passed a draft national security law that dramatically curtails Hong Kong citizens' political and civil rights.<sup>20</sup> According to many international experts, the law breaches the "one country, two system" principle and the city's *de facto* constitution, the Basic Law.<sup>21</sup> Finally, China used the pandemic to enforce its sovereignty claims over Taiwan. Unification with Taiwan is a top priority for Xi,<sup>22</sup> and as the pandemic spread, Beijing insisted on treating Taiwan as a province of China. The Chinese leadership initially refused to allow Taiwan the right it granted countries to charter planes to bring their citizens home from Wuhan, claiming that the Taiwanese had been "well cared for."<sup>23</sup> It also rejected entreaties by Taiwanese officials to grant them direct access to World Health Organization briefings on COVID-19 or to permit Taiwan to participate as an observer member of the World Health Assembly gathering, the annual meeting of the WHO's plenary body.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond its immediate neighborhood, China has also sought to extend its values and normative preferences to other countries through the BRI, its grand-scale global infrastructure plan. While many countries have courted BRI investment, the Chinese-led projects have also resulted in widespread popular protests in host countries around Chinese lending, environmental, and labor standards.<sup>25</sup> And some countries, which have incurred significant debt due to BRI projects, have sought to cancel or renegotiate additional Chinese investment.<sup>26</sup> Over time, the Chinese leadership has also opportunistically expanded the BRI to advance its security and political ambitions. For example, China established its first military base in Djibouti and has helped develop and manage more than seventy ports and terminals in thirty-four countries, several of which now provide People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy ships with convenient docking and refueling opportunities.<sup>27</sup> Equally significant, Beijing has used the BRI to export its values and norms around human rights and internet governance. As cyber legal experts Kadri Kaska

and Maria Tolppa note, China treats the internet not as a technological environment but rather as an information space that needs to be “protected from subverting state power, undermining national unity [or] infringing upon national honour and interests.”<sup>28</sup> To this end, Beijing hosts two- to three-week seminars for BRI countries on how to conduct online censorship and surveillance, providing both the policy framework and the surveillance technology.<sup>29</sup> Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Vietnam have all modeled their cybersecurity laws after that of China.<sup>30</sup>

China’s bold moves to transform the geostrategic landscape are further reinforced by a quieter but highly effective effort to transform values and norms within international institutions. China now holds the top position in four of the fifteen United Nations specialized agencies—more than any other country—and it uses its leadership to enforce its own normative preferences. For example, as head of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), it has blocked people who support Taiwan’s membership in the ICAO from the organization’s Twitter feed.<sup>31</sup> And, even as it has used the BRI to gain adherents for its norms around human rights and internet governance, it has pushed to have these same norms codified in UN agreements. In 2019, for example, China successfully advanced an anti-cybercrime pact that supports its preference for cyber-sovereignty and grants authoritarian governments much greater leeway to censor online political dissent.<sup>32</sup>

While human rights activists and scholars have long expressed alarm about China’s norm and standard setting within the UN, the extent of China’s influence became a matter of global concern during the pandemic. In particular, the WHO’s calls for the international community to avoid imposing travel bans or otherwise isolating China, its reluctance to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and its praise for the Chinese government’s handling of the crisis raised serious questions in the minds of many observers about undue Chinese influence.<sup>33</sup> This was not the first time that the relationship had come under scrutiny. Scientific experts had also criticized the WHO for its 2019 decision to include traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in its International Classification of Diseases (a document that validates certain treatments and medicines for doctors to diagnose patients) without subjecting TCM practices to the same rigorous testing demanded of Western medicine and treatments included in the document.<sup>34</sup>

Underlying much of China’s success in shaping global norms is its ability to deploy its economic power either to incentivize or to coerce other actors into accepting its preferences. In October 2019, the United States was rocked by the case of Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey, who tweeted, “Fight for

Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong.” In response to the tweet, Chinese companies cancelled all licensing deals for Rockets merchandise, and the Chinese government banned all CCTV broadcasts of NBA games and reportedly called on the NBA to fire Morey. State-owned CCTV went even further to state that “any remarks that challenge national sovereignty and social stability are not within the scope of freedom of speech,”<sup>35</sup> suggesting that the Chinese government had the right to apply the same standards of free speech it practices at home to actors abroad. Chinese diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic displayed this same coercive element. While Chinese diplomats provided PPE and medical support to tens of countries, they also demanded that the countries express public gratitude for the PPE and for China’s “great effort and sacrifice” on behalf of the rest of the world.<sup>36</sup> If countries did not publicly thank China, Beijing threatened to withhold its medical supplies.<sup>37</sup> Australia’s call for an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus triggered an even more dramatic response. China’s ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye suggested that the Chinese people would stop sending their children to study in Australia, drinking Australian wine, and eating Australian beef. Within two weeks of the ambassador’s remarks, Beijing banned more than one-third of Australia’s beef exports and levied an 80% tariff on Australian barley.<sup>38</sup>

China is advancing an alternative world vision in which freedom of navigation, free trade, open societies, and the rule of law are no longer the normative backbone of the international system. Instead, the norms and values of authoritarian states would equally shape or perhaps even dominate the world’s governance structures. While the Trump administration has displayed little interest in donning the mantle of global leadership traditionally worn by the United States, it has also refused to cede the mantle to China.

### **The United States Abdicates . . . but Not Entirely**

China’s effort to assume the mantle of leadership in global governance reflects one tectonic shift in the global order; the United States’ abdication of leadership on the global stage is another. Waving a banner of “America First,” President Trump has argued that the United States has sacrificed its own interests in support of other countries—that it has borne an unfair share of the burden of global security and fallen victim to unequal trade deals that have disadvantaged the American people. He devalues allies and multilateralism, viewing them as constraints on American interests and power, and he has reduced the United States’ global commitments by withdrawing from some multilateral institutions and

ignoring others. On just his third day in office, President Trump ended US participation in the final stage of negotiations around the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the twelve-nation trade deal that would have been the largest regional trade accord in history.<sup>39</sup> In short order, he also announced the withdrawal of the United States from the United Nations Human Rights Council, the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.<sup>40</sup> In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump also pledged to stop funding and then to withdraw entirely from the WHO. In addition, the president's transactional approach to diplomatic engagement—suggesting that history and historical obligation are fungible and everything is open to negotiation—has cost the United States credibility with its allies and partners.

US domestic politics have also harmed US standing on the global stage. In particular, according to a Pew Research Center poll, President Trump's inflammatory rhetoric around Muslims, efforts to restrict immigration from Muslim-majority countries, construction of the border wall, and perceived lack of care for ordinary people all contributed to a 50% drop in confidence in the president among the citizens of the United States' top allies within just his first six months in office.<sup>41</sup> The chaotic response of the Trump administration to the pandemic, failures of the US health care system, and evidence of pervasive racial injustice also have tarnished the United States' image and contributed to a sense of relative US decline.

The result of the United States' retreat from leadership, both intentional and not, is an international order that is headless and increasingly vulnerable to Chinese ambitions and influence. Yet despite its failure to project an affirmative policy in support of the current international order, the Trump administration has moved aggressively to prevent a Chinese-led order from emerging. The Trump administration has labeled China a "strategic competitor" and "revisionist power" that seeks to replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia and to refashion the international system to serve its own self-interest.<sup>42</sup>

This new assessment of Chinese intent has led the Trump administration to conclude that the traditional policy of "engage but hedge" is no longer adequate to the task of managing the bilateral relationship and to adopt a policy best understood as "compete, counter, and contain." The administration devotes significant effort to denying China its ambitions of realizing its sovereignty claims, spreading its influence through the BRI, and setting norms and standards in the United Nations and other international organizations. The United States has also hardened

its defenses against efforts by China's state-led technology sector to enhance its competencies through the acquisition of US intellectual property and financial capital.<sup>43</sup> Far from going it alone, the Trump administration has alternately cajoled and bullied allies and partners to join in this effort.

With regard to the BRI, for example, the United States has loudly and publicly accused China of practicing predatory loan policies and weak governance standards.<sup>44</sup> The administration and Congress established a new institution, the US International Development Finance Corporation, and passed new legislation, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, to enable the United States and its partners to better compete with the BRI. The United States also joined with Australia and Japan to create the Blue Dot Network, a certification process for companies and countries seeking to ensure high-quality infrastructure projects.<sup>45</sup> As a result of US efforts, many countries have revisited the terms of their BRI deals, slowed down or cancelled projects, and reconsidered new Chinese investment.

The Trump administration has adopted a similar approach to addressing China's normative challenge to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The administration has publicized Chinese illegal activities in the region and has ramped up its freedom of navigation operations from three in 2016 to nine in 2019.<sup>46</sup> It also has persuaded Australia, Japan, Vietnam, the United Kingdom, France, and India, among others, to increase their multilateral maritime patrols.<sup>47</sup> And unlike previous US administrations, the Trump White House did not hesitate to cancel cooperative activities when China flouted international law. For example, when China continued to militarize contested features in the South China Sea's Spratly Islands, the United States Navy disinvited Beijing from its 2018 Rim of the Pacific Exercise.<sup>48</sup>

In the trade and investment realm, the United States has long criticized China's unfair practices, such as barriers to market access, intellectual property theft, and state subsidies, among others, and the Trump administration has also targeted the bilateral trade deficit as an issue of central concern, using tariffs to force a trade deal in which China has agreed to purchase an additional \$200 billion in US products. At the same time, in ways that give credence to Cold War analogies, where trade and investment intersect with national security and human rights, the administration has embarked on an effort to decouple the US economy from that of China. In these areas, the Trump administration seeks to prevent China's economy from benefiting from US technological know-how or financial capital and to prevent Chinese and US companies from participating in activities that contribute to Chinese human rights abuses. While the Trump administration has con-

ducted most of its trade policy through bilateral negotiations with China, it has encouraged other countries to adopt similar trade and investment policies around national security and human rights. Most notably, the United States has launched a global campaign to persuade countries to bar the deployment of Huawei's 5G technology in their telecommunications infrastructure on the grounds that the company poses a national security threat.<sup>49</sup>

Even in areas President Trump considers low priority, such as the United Nations, the administration has developed a robust effort to push back against Chinese initiatives. President Trump has long denigrated the United Nations, calling it an "underperformer" and "not a friend of democracy," and he has complained about the large share of the United Nations' budget paid by the United States.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, his foreign policy team has targeted the United Nations as an important arena in which to counter Chinese influence. In March 2019, and then again in September 2019, the Trump administration successfully prevented the inclusion of the BRI in the reauthorization resolution for the UN mission in Afghanistan, despite the fact that the reference had been included for the three years prior. Jonathan Cohen, acting US permanent representative to the United Nations, argued that China was "using Security Council resolutions as a platform for inappropriately promoting self-serving initiatives," further criticizing the BRI for its "known problems with corruption, debt distress, environmental damage, and lack of transparency."<sup>51</sup> And in March 2020, the Trump administration also helped prevent China from assuming leadership of the World Intellectual Property Organization by working with allies and lobbying other countries.

### **Cold War 2.0**

In the face of this hardening competition, many officials and analysts believe the United States and China are edging toward, or are already in the midst of, a cold war.<sup>52</sup> Chinese State Councillor Wang Yi, for one, has asserted that the relationship is at risk of arriving at a "new Cold War,"<sup>53</sup> while Oxford historian Timothy Garten Ash has urged everyone to "call a spade a spade" and acknowledge that the two countries have already arrived at such a state.<sup>54</sup> Others, however, view US-China economic interdependence as a mitigating factor and argue that the two countries are far from "locked in an implacable ideological struggle that seeks to end in the demise of the other."<sup>55</sup>

Certainly, parallels can be drawn between the Cold War that characterized much of the US relationship with the former Soviet Union and the current conflict between the United States and China. Although China is not engaged in an

effort to export communist ideology, it is exporting elements of authoritarianism. It has also established alliances (albeit not treaty alliances), such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with like-minded actors to support its controversial positions on anti-terrorism, internet governance, and human rights. The ideological divide between the United States and China is also reinforced by both countries' efforts to develop separate innovation and manufacturing supply chains for advanced technologies. And while military conflict between the United States and China remains hypothetical, the South China Sea, Taiwan, and the competing claims of China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands all have the potential to draw the United States and China into a larger conflict. Any Chinese moves to develop additional military bases could also help create the conditions for the establishment of hardened military alliances or security blocs.

Even if the dimensions of the US-China conflict do not align precisely with those of the United States and former Soviet Union, there are few signs that either country is prepared to find a way out of the relationship's downward spiral. But there is also little appetite globally for the United States and China to allow tensions in the relationship to solidify into a new cold war. Few, if any, countries would welcome the demand to align with one or the other great power and sacrifice the economic and security benefits of a less polarized world. Moreover, the prospects for addressing global challenges—climate change, pandemics, refugees, and financial crises—are all diminished in a world characterized by sharp divides and a zero-sum mentality.

### **Coopetition and Coevolution**

Concern over the prospect of a US-China cold war has contributed to growing support for a number of alternative conceptions for the US-China relationship, such as coopetition and coevolution, that recognize the inevitability of competition between the two countries but attempt to stabilize it by introducing a renewed focus on cooperation. In coopetition, for example, the overall relationship between the United States and China is defined by competition, but the two countries would work to identify particular policy challenges that could be better addressed through cooperation. For example, China and the United States might compete in a wide variety of areas in the biotech space but could establish a partnership to develop a vaccine for COVID-19 that they would deliver at no cost to the rest of the world.

Coevolution is even more ambitious in its belief that the United States and China can find a path forward together. As outlined by former Acting Assistant

Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Susan Thornton, there is virtually no area in which China and the United States cannot coevolve. In East Asian regional security, for example, China should “evolve to see the value of the constraining effects of the U.S. security presence in the region,” and the US is “going to have to evolve in respecting legitimate Chinese security concerns.” Even in the value-laden arena of global governance and international institutions, Thornton suggests that the United States should acknowledge China’s complaints that it didn’t have a say in establishing in the international system and that the United States should “work with China on reforming these institutions, since they need changing anyway.”<sup>56</sup>

Both cooperation and coevolution are attractive in their confidence that areas of cooperation can be expanded and areas of competition can be bounded if both countries simply commit to the effort. Yet to be operationalized effectively, both frameworks, and in particular coevolution, must at least acknowledge, if not address, some of the underlying realities of Chinese behavior that complicate their chances of success. For example, cooperation assumes that both players will act in good faith, but Xi Jinping has left behind him a string of broken promises and agreements, including, for example, a promise not to militarize the seven artificial features in the South China Sea and the 2015 US-China Cyber Agreement on cyber economic espionage. Coevolution, for its part, assumes a greater commonality of values and interests between China and the United States than China’s behavior around human rights and internet governance might suggest. Thornton, for one, does not believe China intends to “overturn the international system” because it has “served China well.” In this context, her argument that the United States and China should reform international institutions together becomes a more realistic project. Finally, as more than three decades of US “engagement” with China demonstrate, there is a risk in establishing cooperation as an objective or a good in and of itself. It encourages the actor more committed to cooperation to excuse or even ignore the other’s missteps or malign actions out of fear that cooperation otherwise will not ultimately be realized.

### **The Third Way**

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a number of important and unfortunate truths about the current international rules-based system. First, it lacks a worthy leader that is willing and able to place its narrow self-interests second to the greater global good. Second, its institutions cannot be relied on to organize an effective response to a significant global challenge. Third, and most important, in the near

term, its norms and institutions face a serious and persistent threat from China. Taken together, these conclusions suggest a set of three priorities for ensuring that the current rules-based order is reinvigorated and reformed in ways that better enable it to meet ongoing global challenges and emergent crises.

First, the world's market democracies should take as their greatest strategic priority a recommitment to the norms and values, as well as the institutions, that underpin the current international order. In practical terms, this means pushing back consistently against Chinese efforts to undermine the rules-based system. Notwithstanding the claims of some observers and analysts to the contrary, China poses a direct and sustained threat to international norms and values, including freedom of navigation, free trade, and good governance and human rights. Moreover, as the pandemic underscored, if left untended, international institutions, such as the WHO, risk being captured by China in ways that are harmful to the interests of the larger international community.

Importantly, this effort to bolster the current rules-based order is most accurately and powerfully framed as a value and norm-based contest, not as a US-China competition. The ongoing conflicts in the South China Sea, for example, should be understood not as a battleground for regional security primacy between the United States and China but as what it is: a normative challenge by China to freedom of navigation that should engage not only the United States but also all parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. A bilateral US-China framework elevates every issue into a signal of relative power and influence and naturally advantages China. As the rising power, any relative Chinese gain becomes a win, even if the United States retains the dominant position. The US-China competition frame also enables Beijing to claim that US actions are motivated solely by its desire to avoid losing its primacy to China.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, as the pandemic demonstrated, the world cannot consistently rely on the United States to bolster international norms and institutions. All market democracies must be prepared to step up to assume a degree of leadership in defending the current international system.

The world's advanced market democracies should also reach out to a broader array of countries in their efforts to ensure a more robust and resilient international rules-based system. They should use pre-existing democratic alliance structures and organizations, such as NATO, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the G7, to develop partnerships with still-developing economies to reinforce the value of the international system's norms and institutions. For example, as the advanced market economies consider the cre-

ation of trusted supply chains for national security-related goods, they could structure opportunities for developing economies to participate.

Second, advancing the norms of the current international order and restraining the advance of the China model is only one element in ensuring the long-term resilience of the rules-based order. As Hans Kundnani has suggested, the international order must be not only defended but also reformed.<sup>58</sup> Already, for example, there have been calls for the WHO to be more transparent in its reporting on member state compliance with international health regulations.<sup>59</sup> In addition, there are important insights to be gained from the values, norms, and policies of the countries that most successfully combated the pandemic. What do they suggest, for example, for global governance debates around issues such as individual privacy and collective security or the importance of adhering to norms of transparency?

Finally, the United States should continue to call out China on its efforts to subvert the values and norms of the rules-based order and not shy away from a relationship characterized overwhelmingly by competition. Still, there is room for consideration of cooperation, if not coevolution, to help stabilize the bilateral relationship in ways that can also contribute to spur positive outcomes on the global stage. Even at the height of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union cooperated on a series of arms control treaties that significantly advanced global security. The United States and China could similarly partner to address a current global challenge, such as climate change. Given that the two countries contribute 42% of the world's total emissions of the greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide,<sup>60</sup> there is perhaps no other issue on which the two countries could make as immediate and significant a contribution to global security and, in the process, perhaps stave off further deterioration in the bilateral relationship.

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