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Global Changing of the Guard: Which Drum Beat to Follow?

By Victor R. Savage and Christopher H Lim

SYNOPSIS

As ring-side spectators, the global community is witness to the unravelling of Allison's Thucydides Trap. This time, the struggle for global hegemony is not confined to military power, but involves many other areas. Most of all the US-China competition will be a vindication of which political system will thrive.

COMMENTARY

WE ARE accustomed to viewing the ceremonious national changing of the guard as colourful events, filled with pomp and pageantry. In the office, a change of executive leadership with a new CEO often means the exit of old corporate leaders and the entry of a new, fresher team. But we are unaccustomed to the global changing of the guard, which signals a change of hegemon.

The world awaits with tense anticipation to see how the two current protagonists, the United States and China, pursue their global hegemonic contest. This global power transition, however, is likely to be unpredictable, protracted, multi-faceted, and affecting many states.

Thucydides Trap: A Multi-faceted Issue

The Thucydides Trap concept as posited by Graham Allison is becoming a reality albeit in a more complex manner. East-West relations take on once again diabolical interpretations. To put it brazenly, it's a war between a prevailing hegemonic bully and an ambitious upstart.

As the world becomes more globalised, the US-China contestation has become more complex and multi-faceted, covering many areas: political influences, military might,

economic dominance, strategic impacts, technological prowess, space conquest, intellectual power, and the dominance of artificial intelligence.

Given global relations, no state can have monopoly of all the areas. The US perception, from the likes of Trump, Bannon, and right-wing Republicans, is the fear that China will usurp its global hegemonic role, write a new global code of power relationships and change the global dynamics of East-West relationships in its favour.

Power Tussle: China's Three-fold Edge

Three areas are tilting the global power contestation in China's favour.

First, technological developments are levelling the international playing field in many areas. We have seen how the alleged Iranian drones crippled the Saudi oil fields recently. It's a reminder that you do not need superpower nuclear arms to wage a crippling impact on your enemy. Drones will become the new effective guerillas in state wars.

The commercialisation of 5G technological capability of Huawei has sent America's leaders in a tailspin showing up its technical deficiency and the worry this will impact its military prowess. The digital revolution is making it difficult for pre-crisis economies to cope. Artificial intelligence will become a new frontier in state competition. China is leap frogging technological and creative developments in many areas: it has a large reservoir of intellectual capability.

Secondly, the capitalisation of the global economy has both pluses and minuses. Ever since the Berlin Wall fell and Russia and China were brought into the capitalist economy the world is finally speaking with one economic voice. The plus side of this is that states can cooperate better economically, engage in trading pacts and develop common monetary policies.

The minus side is that more economically powerful countries will always have financial and economic muscle to bully poorer countries. The effectiveness of America's tariffs and trade embargoes on China, Russia, Iran, Cuba and North Korea are cases in point. The democratisation of the global economy promises to undermine the current US economic hegemony.

Domestically, the US has a soft economic underbelly that does not augur well for its future. Economically, America comes across as a drowning state with a short shelf life as a superpower. In domestic infrastructure, the US is losing out to China's amazing infrastructure developments. This has an impact on its education system: in the 1950s the US were leaders in civil engineering, today China is the front-runner.

Thirdly, based on the state of innovations of China and America, Xi Jinping's global proposals have been outstanding compared to Trump's insular policies which reflect an isolationist state. Trump retreats America into a national cocoon, severing multilateral ties and pursuing White racist nationalism.

Democratic versus Authoritarian

China's international programmes is nothing short of bold and refreshing. Its Belt and Road initiative (BRI), is a much-needed shot in the arm for the global community; bringing together state cooperation, providing vital infrastructure and transportation links, reviving depressed areas by transcending cultural and political differences.

China's establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to underwrite infrastructure development cost in the developing world is a much-needed financial support. This bank would hopefully complement the World Bank and Asian Development Bank in investments.

Francis Fukuyama spoke too soon after the collapse of the Berlin Wall that the West had won the competition over Russia and China's communist system, their planned economies and authoritarian political systems. What the developing world sees is the unravelling of a corrupt, vicious, broken democratic system in the West.

Donald Trump is an embarrassment to America's values of human rights, democratic liberalism and political honesty. The question of checks and balances on the political excesses of President Trump has not worked in the US Congress.

In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's undemocratic bull-dosing of Brexit shows the weaknesses of its democratic system. While masquerading as the ideal democracy, Britain was the archetype imperialistic power for 400 years. Similarly, the haste in which Russia adopted democracy, did not augur well for its political development.

The current civil disturbance in Hong Kong for more democratic rights ala America is a pathetic joke. In a world of plural societies, is the democratic system the best option?

Alternatively, China has a cautious approach to political change. With its morphed authoritarian-capitalist system, it has developed an edge in national development. It is too early to tell whether the Chinese authoritarian political system is superior to the Western democratic system, but the early signs show it has a distinct advantage over the West.

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