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Global Politics in a Multipolar Age: The Choice for Small States

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A message from Martin Luther King, Jr. to small states?: True leadership seeks not consensus, but shapes it. Photo by Unseen Histories on Unsplash.

SYNOPSIS

Over the next 20 years, the international order is likely to be significantly reshaped. With American international primacy being increasingly challenged and China's

rising geopolitical influence having generated considerable anxiety, smaller states would have to carefully consider how best to navigate a multipolar world and the challenges that it brings.

COMMENTARY

In 1835, the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, reflecting on the American and French revolutions in 1776 and 1789 respectively, wrote that “a great democratic revolution is going on among us.” Countries in the West, which until then had been ruled by monarchs, autocrats and imperial states witnessed a shift in their political governance as liberal democracies moved from a position of weakness and vulnerability to global pre-eminence through eras of war and upheaval. Led by Great Britain in the 19th century and the United States in the 20th century, democracies established their leadership and built order by fostering close relationships with other countries, many of which shared similar liberal tendencies.

According to the American political scientist G. John Ikenberry, liberal internationalists — in their pursuit of a liberal world order — have the conviction that the political conditions of peoples and societies can be improved through the pursuit of enlightened self-interest, and that institutions and political orders can be devised to protect and advance the liberal democratic way of life. In this respect, it can be said that at the end of the Cold War the US exemplified such a political worldview, assuming that a liberal world order would serve not only the interests of the US, but also the interests of countries that followed its lead. In other words, *what was good for the United States was also good for the rest of the world, if only they were enlightened enough to follow Washington’s lead and play by its rules.*

The China Challenge

The rise of China from the late 1990s, however, challenged this unipolar view of global order, the view that it was the sole right of the US to claim great power status. Indicators of great power status, such as the size of a country’s population and territory, resource endowment, economic capabilities and military strength, are no longer the sole monopoly of Washington. To complicate matters further, the US — during the Trump administration — was viewed by many to be more inward looking, primarily more interested in what happened within its borders than outside.

China’s economic growth over the years (particularly between 2000 and 2010) further solidified its claim to be the closest challenger to the US. This competitive element between Washington and Beijing is not unexpected; it is characteristic of the kind of competition that arises when a lesser power acquires the wherewithal to gradually challenge the status quo and claim its place as a major power. This is most vividly played out in Asia, where China has considerable advantage simply by virtue of its geographical proximity. A six-hour plane ride from Beijing would allow Chinese policymakers to visit virtually any capital city in Asia; on the other hand, the same amount of time would see American policymakers from Washington barely halfway through to the nearest Asian capital.

The coronavirus pandemic of the past 20 months no doubt has complicated the leadership ambitions of China. The physical absence of President Xi Jinping from international events for over 21 months (as of October 2021) has left China without its

most potent and influential decision-maker at the forefront of the international stage. The extent to which senior Chinese policymakers — in particular Yang Jiechi, who heads the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi — have been able to effectively translate Xi's vision — and ambition — into tangible foreign policy outcomes beyond just grandiose speech remains to be seen.

Global Leadership and the Multipolar World Order

Indeed, if we consider that US global influence has been diminished and China's ability to lead is still far from certain, then it stands to reason that a future global order might be one that is polycentric in character, with multiple poles and spheres of influence. This could be both a bane and a boon, depending on how countries decide to act and engage with one another.

On the one hand, there is a likelihood that a new multipolar world would generate uncertainty concerning the rules of political order. Indeed, if countries are not able to decide on what the rules of engagement might be, such a polycentric arrangement runs the risk of descending into chaos, particularly if the major powers are unable to exert the kind of influence they wielded before, and smaller powers are hesitant to assume the *added* responsibilities that come their way. Such a quagmire would end up paralysing the ability of countries and the global community to come together to respond to global challenges, be they pandemics or climate change issues.

On the other hand, a multipolar world order does proffer opportunities for small states. The idea that only major powers have ultimate agency in charting the future of our world at best oversimplifies the complex reality of global life; at worst, it ends up being a self-fulfilling prophecy in which small states abdicate their own political agency and become vassal states of bigger states. Indeed, the exercise of leadership does not necessarily require states to become hegemonic powers. As the American minister and activist Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his 1967 "Domestic Impact of War" speech, "A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus, but a molder of consensus." Global leadership is built on the basis of a willingness to participate in international collaboration and to lead in encouraging a new spirit of cooperation. Hence, rather than acting as the "hegemonic boss", a world leader gets involved in the process and contributes by guiding others towards the common goal.

Indeed, as evidenced during the coronavirus pandemic, middle powers and even smaller countries have found ways to come together to provide aid and assistance, thus reinforcing their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. For instance, Israel has been at the forefront of the Pfizer vaccine rollout, and the health measures it has taken have been closely scrutinised by many countries as a blueprint for overcoming the pandemic. Singapore has provided vaccines and medical supplies to countries in the region, including India, Indonesia and Brunei. It will also donate \$8 million worth of medical supplies to the ASEAN stockpile for public health emergencies. Hence, it can be said that in a multipolar world, the number of stakeholders would also increase. Those that end up succeeding would be those which take a more expansive and generous view of international reality, adopting policies that are less unilateral, and rejecting isolationist tendencies.

A multipolar world offers a more diverse yet complicated environment, not just for small states but for all states. To rise as the global leader, one needs to have the

capacity to stand up to resolve issues and aid in reconstruction of the world order. That requires developing foresight and staying well attuned to the sensitivities of the rest of the world so that in times of crisis one is prepared to act swiftly, realistically and courageously.

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