

# SHYAM SARAN WRITES: FOR INDIA, DESPITE A RISING CHINA, THIS IS A FAVOURABLE GEOPOLITICAL MOMENT WHICH IT MUST SEIZE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

The year ends with a sigh of relief and anticipated redemption. Scientists the world over have delivered with unprecedented speed a set of vaccines which may deliver us, in time, from the scourge of [COVID-19](#). This news comes appropriately on the eve of Christmas and the turn of the year, traditionally an occasion of renewal, and rekindled hopes for a better year ahead. These sentiments will be more intense, more deeply felt than in recent years with lives having been rudely disrupted, relationships made distant and tinged with yearning and a pall of uncertainty and sense of future dread sweeping across the world.

But while the gloom may be slowly lifting, the world will repair only slowly and there are worrying intimations of other crises looming round the corner. We are at an inflexion point, marking a watershed in human experience. But there are several paths ahead, several choices that beckon, except that there is no path to retrace our steps back to where we were before the [pandemic](#) struck — because that world no longer exists. Geopolitics has been transformed and power equations are being altered. There are a new set of winners and losers in the economic sweepstakes. Technological advancement will magnify these changes and India will need to make difficult judgements about the world that is taking shape and find its place in a more complex and shifting geopolitical landscape.

Some trends were already salient before the pandemic struck. They are being accelerated and intensified thanks to the forces unleashed by this crisis. There are also newer trends at play, which demand attention and efficient management. As the pandemic recedes, the world could draw the right lessons and proceed on a more hopeful trajectory. It may equally lurch into another even more serious and damaging crisis or even multiple crises because the lessons remain unlearnt. The latter has been more often the case in history but the implications are more dire now.

The success of scientists in delivering vaccines in record time has masked an ugly reality. COVID-19 has been a global emergency, recognising no national or regional boundaries but it has been dealt with almost entirely within national confines. International cooperation in either developing an effective vaccine or responding to its health impacts has been minimal. The pre-existing trend towards nationalist urgings, the weakening of international institutions and multilateral processes has been reinforced. Even in the distribution of vaccines, we are witnessing a cornering of supplies by a handful of rich nations. Help for the poorer nations of the world is a low priority.

Most challenges the world faces are global, like the pandemic. They are inherent in globalisation driven by rapid technological change. These include climate change, cyber security, space security, which are newer domains. But even extant challenges such as terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering and ocean and terrestrial pollution have taken on a globalised dimension. They are not amenable to national solutions. They demand collaborative, not competitive solutions. This glaring disconnect between the rising salience of global and cross-cutting issues and the resistance to multilateral and collaborative approaches is likely to intensify in the post-pandemic world, unless there is some display of statesman-like leadership to mobilise action on a global scale. The nation-state will endure but its conduct will need to be tempered by a spirit of internationalism and a sense of common humanity.

How likely is it that there will emerge leadership that is able to orient the world in the right direction? The pre-pandemic shift in the centre of gravity of the global economy and political power and influence, from the trans-Atlantic to the trans-Pacific, has been reinforced under the impact of the crisis. East Asian and South-East Asian countries have managed the crisis more effectively and their economies are the first to register the green shoots of recovery. Ironically, China being the country where the COVID-19 first erupted early this year, has been the first large economy to witness a significant rebound in its growth rate. While trade and investment flows in the rest of the world have declined, they have registered growth in this part of the world. The regional supply chains centred on China have been reinforced rather than disrupted. China will emerge in pole position in the geopolitical sweepstakes commencing in 2021. The power gap with its main rival, the US, will shrink further. The power gap with India, its largest rival in Asia, will expand even more. India is already confronting a more aggressive and arrogant China on its borders. This threat will intensify and demand asymmetrical coping strategies.

Despite China emerging a relative gainer from the disruptions triggered by the pandemic, I believe that the trend towards multi-polarity is here to stay. Neither the US in its relatively diminished state nor China with its enhanced power can singly or as a duopoly manage a much more diffused distribution of economic and military capabilities across the globe. As already noted, most of the challenges we confront demand global and collaborative responses. Even a powerful country cannot coerce other nations to collaborate. This is only possible through multilateral approaches and adherence to the principle of equitable burden-sharing. We may see the emergence of a loosely structured global order with clusters of regional powers, inter-linked and interacting with each other. But such a multipolar order can only be stable and keep the peace with a consensus set of norms, managed through empowered institutions of international governance and multilateral processes. India's instinctive preference has been for a multipolar order as the best assurance of its security and as most conducive to its own social and economic development. It now has the opportunity to make this its foreign policy priority as this aligns with the interests of a large majority of middle and emerging powers. This will be an important component of a strategy to meet the China challenge. The techniques of mobilisation that were deployed successfully in leading the Non-Aligned Movement in an earlier time and in a different geopolitical context are relevant.

Despite a degree of pessimism about India's economic prospects, we may be located at a favourable geopolitical moment. This may appear counterintuitive. Thanks to concerns about China's aggressive posture across the board and its unilateral assertions of power, there is a significant push-back even from smaller countries, for example, in South-East Asia and Africa. China's blatant "weaponisation of economic interdependence" such as we see in its punitive commercial action against Australia, has made its economic partners increasingly wary. India is seen as a potential and credible countervailing power to resist Chinese ambitions. The world wants India to succeed because it is regarded as a benign power wedded to a rule-based order. India can leverage this propitious moment to encourage a significant flow of capital, technology and knowledge to accelerate its own modernisation. But for this to happen, India needs to position itself as the most open and competitive destination for trade and investment offering both scale and political stability.

The choice is clear and the opportunity for leadership beckons.

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