

CHINA'S POST-COVID AGGRESSION IS RESHAPING ASIA

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

India's deadly encounter with China in the Galwan Valley is not an outlier in Beijing's recent behaviour in Asia. [China's coronavirus "mask diplomacy"](#) has given way to tense geopolitical confrontations with a growing array of its neighbours, from stand-offs with Vietnam and Malaysia in the South China Sea to threatening Australia with boycotts of wine, beef, barley, and Chinese students.

Beijing's blatant aggressiveness is accelerating long-standing debates about the underlying costs of reliance on China and spurring support for closer coordination between other Indo-Pacific partners. The Indian, Japanese, Malaysian, and Australian governments have all taken concrete steps to reduce their economic exposure to Beijing, spanning investment, manufacturing, and technology. India and Australia recently inked a new military logistics agreement in the "virtual summit" between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Scott Morrison, and a similar agreement between Delhi and Tokyo may follow. The Quadrilateral Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States is growing stronger and even expanding. And recently as well, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers issued one of their strongest statements to date on the South China Sea, insisting that maritime disputes must be resolved in accordance with the UN Law of the Sea treaty.

Comment | [China, better prepared for the post-COVID world](#)

Other responses are bottom-up. Chinese cyberbullying of a Thai film star spawned a new "Milk Tea Alliance", thus named after the popular beverage, to forge solidarity between Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, and Southeast Asians online. Overtly rejecting China's attempts to play up support for the "One China" principle, online supporters quickly propelled a hashtag that translates as "Milk Tea Is Thicker than Blood" to nearly one million tweets in a matter of days. It also garnered the praise of Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong, who called for "pan-Asian solidarity that opposes all forms of authoritarianism".

Asian multilateralism has often been born out of crises. The Chiang Mai Initiative — a financial swap mechanism between China, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia — emerged in the aftermath of the late 1990s financial crisis. The grandfather of all Asian regional organisations, ASEAN, was created in 1967 but did not convene its first heads of state meeting until Southeast Asian leaders were shocked into action by the fall of Saigon in 1976. As Lee Kuan Yew later argued, "The seriousness of purpose came only with the shock of the terrible alternatives."

If crises and wars tend to be the crucibles in which new orders and institutions are forged, the COVID-19 crisis is likely to be no exception — it may be remaking the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. The ongoing crisis seems to have imbued countries in the region with a new seriousness of purpose about the risks of a slow slide toward Chinese hegemony. This is handing the Trump administration openings it has long sought: more credible multilateral coordination among allies, pushback against online disinformation, and the desire to better integrate like-minded economies and supply chains. At the same time, the crisis is also raising renewed questions about the durability of American leadership. Writing as two Americans, the question now facing the U.S. administration is whether it can harness this new regional momentum — or whether President Trump's anarchic instincts will squander the opening.

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Thus far, Mr. Trump continues to make unforced errors that create distance with U.S. allies and partners — more often than not, at exactly the wrong moment. For example, the President's focus on cutting support for the World Health Organization (WHO) and asserting that COVID-19 originated in a Wuhan lab alienated Canberra, right at the moment when Australia was stepping up more forcefully to assert regional leadership, launch an impartial international investigation of the pandemic's origins, and push back on Beijing. Similarly, the administration's suspension of various worker visas is a move that will almost certainly have serious repercussions in India.

To improve, the U.S. needs to make two major shifts. First, U.S. policy needs to start supporting, rather than attempting to commandeer, regional efforts to build a less China-centric future for the Indo-Pacific. U.S. leaders need to remember that while Chinese aggression provides a powerful motivation for coordination, U.S. partners are seeking an agenda that is framed in broader terms than simply rallying to counter Beijing. Asian countries have strong, historically-rooted ideas about their own security and the future of the region — American leaders should recall the long-standing resonance of the Non-Aligned Movement in a region that resists a “new Cold War” framing. Australia's efforts to call for a COVID-19 investigation through WHO, as well as Japan's desire to take the lead on a G-7 statement on Hong Kong, reflect not just an effort to push back on Beijing. They also reflect concern that the current U.S. administration may box them into an untenable corner.

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If the U.S. wants to better harness the growing desire to reduce reliance on Beijing and “re-couple” investments and supply chains among allied nations, it is going to have to make compromises — an approach this administration has been loath to embrace. U.S. leadership would be far more effective if it worked with Indo-Pacific partners on the issues that they prioritise and provided them significant space for independent action. Second, while China certainly has the power to coerce, it also has a tremendous ability to be its own worst enemy by pushing too hard on its neighbours. It is often China's own overreach (rather than Washington's entreaties) that stiffens the spines of other Asian nations. Washington should avoid repeating Beijing's mistakes and offer a clear alternative in word and deed to China's “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy. Moves such as demanding that a G-7 communiqué refer to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus” and blocking mask shipments to close allies are the kind of counterproductive bullying that the U.S. should leave to China.

For their part, regional partners should see that Beijing's recent aggression is not an aberration but part of a growing pattern. Asian nations will not be able to avoid making difficult policy choices and investments to preserve their sovereignty and strategic space. As Beijing's confidence in its growing material and military power solidifies, its neighbours will need to think carefully about the long-term decisions necessary to preserve an open regional order.

Across the Indo-Pacific, the desire for U.S. leadership remains strong, with the U.S. still viewed more favourably than China, according to Pew. Similarly, the U.S. public continues to express widespread support for America's alliances and partnerships. Facing the unprecedented health and economic crises spawned by COVID-19, the U.S. and Asian partners will need to coordinate more closely than ever. They have a unique chance to build more equal and capable regional partnerships and institutions in the long recovery ahead.

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Asian countries, too, have an opportunity to continue strengthening their own regional networks, which will challenge and complicate the views of those in both Washington and Beijing who would see the region only as a sparring ground in a bipolar U.S.-China competition.

For American and Asian leaders, the choice is stark: encourage and foster this trend, recognising that stronger regional coordination will require more compromises as well as tougher choices, or resist it and risk being left behind.

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