An international order with Chinese traits?

The fluidity of the geopolitical landscape has amplified anxieties in Asia and placed India in an unenviable situation.

In a world of nation states, any international order that seeks to regulate interstate relations reflects the balance of power among them. International order is comprised of the rules and norms and international institutions of governance, which are expected to ensure their observance. But it is the coercive power of those who set the rules that determines the extent of enforcement.

However, while power is the ultimate sanction behind any international order, legitimacy is its other indispensable feature. An order is “international” because states participating in it accept its legitimacy and see some benefits accruing from their acquiescence to it. This is particularly so in terms of “global public goods”, which are made available to them by more powerful states. For example, maintaining efficient trading and financial systems, providing support for their economic development, assistance during natural disasters and security against military threats, and mediating in and managing conflict situations.

The United States, which emerged as the most powerful country after the second world war, with over 50 percent of world gross domestic product, the most powerful military and as the sole nuclear weapon state, built a new international order that has by and large remained in place over the past 75 years. This has been possible because the United States has remained the most powerful country in the world despite its relative decline in the economic and military metrics of power. The international order that it has dominated so far has been shaken by two significant developments. One, the United States itself has been responsible for undermining key components of the international order by opting out of commitments or walking out of institutions. Joe Biden’s return to its defence and its repair is still in an incipient stage with uncertain outcomes. Two, for the first time in seven decades, there is now a rival power that threatens to overtake the United States in virtually all metrics of power—economic, military and technological. The balance of power has changed and the international order must change to reflect that.

What is China’s view regarding its place in the international order? Does it see its interest in overturning the existing order entirely and putting a different order in its place reflecting its own value system? Even if this is its intent, does it have a credible possibility of achieving this?

We should note that in recent months there has been a change in China’s narrative about its place in the international order. In 2018, in an address to the Council on Foreign Relations, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had said, “China has come in where it is within this existing international system. Why would we want to challenge a system that serves our interests or start all over again?”

In the same speech Wang Yi had also said, “I do not think China will become the United States and China will not challenge the US. Still less will China take the place of the US.”

More lately, the latter part of the formulation, that is, about not replacing the United States has been dropped. Instead, in the context of the “two centenary goals”—the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party this year and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 2049, “the mid-century goal is for China to be a global leader in terms of comprehensive national strength and international influence.” It is also stated that China “will lead in the reform of the global governance system.”

China has also begun to differentiate between “international rules-based order” as advocated by the United States and western countries and a “global governance system underpinned by the UN Charter.” It rejects the former and declares its adherence to the latter. About the “rules-based order”, the question is posed, “what rules and who makes them?”

China may not wish to overturn the existing order but will certainly seek to adjust some of its rules or reject those which do not align with its interests. It has projected itself as the champion of the existing global free trade regime, which suits its interests. On climate change it has asserted a leadership role. In seeking to integrate its financial markets with the world, it has been open to adopting the norms and regulatory principles that have evolved under western stewardship. In the newer domains of cyber, space and artificial intelligence it will assert its entitlement to actively participate in rule-making. Its stance in negotiations relating to these domains will be functional and driven by the desire to preserve China’s equities. It is in areas which impinge on its identity as a Leninist one party state where it will actively seek to overturn “liberal values” and install “sovereignty” as an overriding principle. This is apparent in its rejection of criticism of its repressive policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. There is an ideological component in the geopolitical contestation with the United States.

Despite China’s emergence as a front-ranking power, the international landscape is not like that in the aftermath of the second world war. In the past 80 years, shifts in the balance of power have taken place within the western system, from the Spanish and the Portuguese to the Dutch and the British and then to the United States. A shift to a non-western entity will be more wrenching, more complex and probably incomplete. There is also a much greater diffusion of power today with no single power having the ability to write rules and to coerce others into compliance. Asia itself is a congested geopolitical space. Yet China has a hierarchical view of power. It looks a veto over decisions by countries in its orbit and has been quick to dish out penalties on those it considers having transgressed its interests. But this is already raising anxieties about what a China-dominated order may look like.

India finds itself in an unenviable situation today with its prospects diminished by acutely polarised domestic politics and the setbacks suffered during the pandemic. But the geopolitical landscape is still in flux and in this fluidity India may still have opportunities for redemption and revival.

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