

# India at Crossroads

Part I



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As a Director of Net Assessment at HQIDS, he has coordinated numerous strategic projects and has authored strategy reports on many critical issues. He is an author of three books and has a number of articles to his credit in national and international journals on diverse subjects such as disaster response, peacekeeping, airpower in counter-insurgency, irregular conflicts etc. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies on leadership challenges in disaster response.

# India at Crossroads - Part I

## Abstract

*Covid-19 was a predictable and avoidable event, if the world had been more transparent and accountable, and less greedy and ambitious. It is important to analyse fast-evolving international developments, thoughts and trends to grasp the choices and imperatives ahead. What India needs to do, both internally and externally, may be assisted by examining extreme scenarios of a post-Covid world and a net-assessment covering variables such as geopolitical compulsions, examining 'Pax-Sinica' and its economic and security implications, and trends affecting globalisation and multilateralism.*

## Introduction

The aim of this two-part paper is to highlight the macro and geopolitical choices before the world, and specifically India. The first part is a scan of international developments, thoughts and trends to set the background for examining the choices ahead. The

second part will be about exploring two extreme scenarios of a post-Covid world, and go into specifics of what India needs to do, both internally and externally. It will be a sort of net-assessment of how to prepare for the worst-case scenario and hopefully turn crisis into opportunity.

## **Geopolitical Compulsions**

**Covid-19: a Black Swan?:** The author Nassim Nicholas Taleb described a Black Swan event as one outside expectations and with extreme impact in his iconic book. But the plain truth is that a pandemic had been repeatedly predicted, modelled and deliberated in the scientific community as inevitability in a hyper-connected world without adequate safeguards. Taleb has himself acknowledged this recently, claiming that this is described in his iconic book as a White Swan - something that would eventually take place with great certainty. Understanding how major players in economies including countries, governments, investors, corporations and society prepared for a predictable event is important, or the world will be found wanting again in the next White Swan.

**Western Debates :** It is instructive to note some of the views of well-respected analysts in the west. According to former US Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger, the pandemic is stoking domestic calls to withdraw from the liberal order prompting an anachronism, a revival of the walled city in an age when prosperity depends on global trade and movement of people. He is countered by Bradley A. Thayer in the centrist *The Hill*, calling to account those in the West who caused the current situation, especially those who proclaimed themselves to be 'strategists' and advanced and supported China's ambitions. The

ending of Covid-19 on earth is unpredictable in timelines or scope of devastation. It is mainly dependent on three issues: society's observance of recommended health measures; the availability of quick affordable tests, drugs and vaccine; and, economic mitigation by countries. Richard Haas believes that the world that emerges from the crisis will be still recognizable, implying that waning American leadership, faltering global cooperation, great-power discord, were existent before and will remain.<sup>1</sup>

Salvatore Babones, associate professor at the University of Sydney, asserted in a piece for *Foreign Policy* that because the real theatre of interest for changes in the world order is the Indo-Pacific, there is little cause for concern as East Asian allies most consistently support American global leadership. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., argued in a commentary in *Foreign Policy*, that this would ultimately not produce 'seismic shifts' in the world order given that the US will maintain its preponderance of financial capital, energy sources, and military forces over China. The best propaganda is no propaganda. Barry R. Posen, in an article for *Foreign Affairs* "Pax Epidemica," pointed out that the pandemic has been affecting great and middle powers "more or less equally" in terms of economic damage and weakening of military forces: "For the duration of the pandemic, at least, and probably for years afterward, the odds of a war between major powers will go down, not up."

**The Importance of Accountability:** The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence has declared it would continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak first began through contact with infected animals – or whether it could have been the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan. China does not have a large enough repository

of trust among most nations and non-reporting of human-to-human transmission and subsequent cover-up has further eroded its credibility.<sup>2</sup> On a similar vein, US President Trump in end-April downplayed the trade deal with China as of secondary importance and blamed China and WHO collusion squarely for the pandemic. New tariffs retaliatory measures are being calibrated to hit China decisively.

China's delaying moves included a announcement on CGTN television about a collaboration between the China Centre for Disease Control, Sun-Yat-Sen University of Guangzhou and Prevention and Centre for Infection and Immunity at Columbia University, to conduct a probe whether the virus emerged elsewhere in China before Wuhan in December last year.<sup>3</sup> In the same breadth, authorities reiterated that this effort takes dozen years or decades, and mostly remains inconclusive.

According to Vijay Gokhale (ex-Foreign Secretary), two extraordinary write-ups by Ren Zhiqiang, a bonafide Red Capitalist and Xu Zhangrun, an ex-Professor of Qinghua University in Beijing have directly questioned and held President Xi Jinping responsible. And as a result both writers are missing. It is claimed that in the days after 7th Jan, Xi Jinping had chaired a Politburo meeting to give directions on handling the 'epidemic. And yet, millions of Chinese travelled during the Spring Festival holidays, which was the main reason for it becoming a pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Micah Zenko in an article in the *Foreign Policy* magazine termed the Covid-19 crisis as the worst intelligence failure in US history, even worse than Pearl Harbour or the 9/11 attacks.<sup>5</sup> In another article on the subject, it was brought out that intelligence gathering

and analysis by authoritarian regimes or their agencies cannot be trusted. The 1979 Iran crisis was a prime example of a letdown by the Iranian secret service.<sup>6</sup> The author clearly brings out the importance of human intelligence or HUMINT. A Canadian company BlueDot used big data and AI to predict the Covid-19 outbreak nine days before the WHO. It modelled variables such as commercial flight travel details, animal and insect population data, and online news portals spanning sixty five languages. But even before this, Taiwan raised an alarm based on networking between doctors and other HUMINT. In order to command legitimacy, autocratic regimes rely largely on perceived power and control. Xi Jinping, staking all in re-establishing the Chinese Middle Kingdom, was fearful of COVID-19 information derailing the economic agenda.

Most countries are convinced WHO lacked the powers to challenge early reassurances from China and was reluctant to publicly criticize a powerful member. A new draft resolution supported by 116 of the 194 countries in the WHO calls for collaboration with World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agricultural Organisation for an impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation into the international response to the corona pandemic. The US clearly maintained that this was a costly “failure” by the WHO, and at least one member state made a mockery of their transparency obligations, with tremendous costs for the entire world.<sup>7</sup>

Many lawsuits have been filed against China in U.S. federal courts as elsewhere too. In the US, this can only happen if new legislation in Congress to strip China of its immunity from suit in U.S. courts is passed.<sup>8</sup> While this is still a far cry, such pressures do shape perceptions and public moods across the world, as well as leave a



window for emergent scenarios of the future. For example, there is a torrent of legislation aimed directly at China and its companies that give little visibility to US processes. In a latest move on 21st May, the US Senate passed a bill by unanimous consent that delists all Chinese companies (850) including Alibaba and Baidu.<sup>9</sup> American Govt has for long been worried about American money and funding supporting the growth of Chinese monoliths, especially money from US pension funds etc.

Chinese insecurities are evident in an op-ed in *Indian Express* by its Counsel General in Mumbai invoking a shared 5,000-year-old civilisation link (Sino-Indian) being undermined by a 300-year-old culture (USA).<sup>10</sup> He highlights China's important role as the "global anti-pandemic factory", and states that Western countries could not accept that China did not collapse and are full of anxieties that China will be the "winner" after the epidemic. Perhaps, some people are even secretly betting on a "China collapse theory". In a world dominated by Western business, with the US dollar accounting for around 40 per cent of the international reserve currency, and the Euro about 30 per cent, China and India need to get their voices heard.

**Taiwan Resurgence:** Many countries are expanding cooperation with Taiwan in light of its excellent response to Covid-19 with many calls to reinstate its observer status at the World Health Assembly (WHA). This is perceived as a direct challenge to China's one-China policy.<sup>11</sup> Nations are expanding bilateral ties with to bolster their own COVID-19 responses. A consensus is also emerging in the international community that Taiwan should be given access to the WHO and other multilateral agencies, even as China's opposition grows louder. In March 2020, the Trump

administration enacted the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act (TAIPEI Act), aimed at supporting Taiwan's international presence. India stands to benefit in sectors like health, electronics, semi conductor and 5G by cooperating and collaborating with Taiwan.

In response to US' TAIPEI Act, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry called the law a crude interference in its internal affairs, and that the United States would encounter a "resolute strike back by China" if it did not correct its mistakes.<sup>12</sup> The US has moved fast to effect legislation that would block underhand transfer of critical dual-use technology. This includes elimination of the earlier 'civilian exemption' clause, blocking China's military from buying certain technologies such as airplane engines and some types of computers, and mandating foreign companies to seek US' approval before shipping certain US-made technologies to China. This would directly address the subterfuge behind China's civil-military fusion program.

### **Understanding & Dismantling Pax-Sinica**

**A Geopolitical Scan:** The coronavirus outbreak has exposed faultlines in the bilateral Sino-Russian relationship too. For example open discriminatory orders to avoid Chinese passengers in Moscow's public transit, which was vehemently protested by China. Similarly, the regional government in Khabarovsk had announced the closure of all border crossings with China. This was later extended across all checkpoints of the border with China. It is clear that strategic cooperation between Russia and China is highly contingent on overlapping interests, with the not-so-long ago historical enmity and hostility as a backdrop.

Just as the Arab-Israeli War of 1972 set off the historic oil shock, Covid-19 lit a similar fuse. The price war mainly between Saudi Arabia and Russia resulted in a global glut starting a crash in crude prices. Global lockdowns have stalled all kinds of mobility including transport sector and aviation industry.<sup>13</sup> While consuming countries have moved to fill strategic reserves, fluctuating and uncertain demand has gravely affected producers whose GDP essentially revolves around the energy industry, especially Russia. An economically weakened Russia, hit by this, poses a dilemma. The fallouts of a cascading crisis by Covid-19 might cripple Russia resulting in increased dependency on China against an energised Europe.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, many countries who have been fence-sitters enjoying the American security as well as economic opportunities offered by China, would have to make stark choices especially in East and Southeast Asia. Economic and political decoupling will be a complex and long-drawn process not an overnight event.

After an initial shock and laggard response, Europe has truly rallied around the EU. The European Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen apologised to Italy on behalf of Europe for its failure to do more at the start of the pandemic. A Marshall Plan style recovery is planned for the most devastated economies. Britain's acting PM Raab stated that it could no longer be "business as usual" with China. France's Macron claimed grey areas in China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak. The EU's trade commissioner flagged the vulnerability of European strategic assets to opportunistic foreign (Chinese) buyers. And similarly, attitudes and public opinion are hardening against a non-transparent and deceitful China.

France and Germany have now proposed a \$545 Billion E.U. Coronavirus Relief Fund for the hardest hit members. The European

Commission has acted quickly to cushion the blow to businesses and families from coronavirus and relaxed its fiscal rules to provide member states with maximum flexibility. The European Central Bank has taken significant action with its announcement of the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme.<sup>15</sup> This temporary asset purchase programme of €750 billion will help to ensure all Member States can benefit from supportive financing conditions that will enable them to absorb this shock.

Southeast Asia represents a peculiar environment. China has made such deep inroads economically and politically that it no longer needs to exert any overt pressure to ensure behavioural compliance. The deterrence is in the form of threats of a comprehensive retaliation. While the first case was in Thailand on 13th January, almost all countries followed in the same month. Yet, except for Vietnam and Singapore, none dared to antagonise China by placing mobility restrictions during the Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations. According to analyst Sophie du Rocher, China treats it as its backyard and exerts control by protocols, diplomatic messaging, and shaping a perception of readiness to fight it out.<sup>16</sup>

Observers of Japanese reactions feel the economic fallout will allow voices in Japan to call for trade protection and isolation in an unpredictable global economy. But it is also true that middle powers and powerful economies like Japan are critical in reenergizing international cooperation.<sup>17</sup> Japan has been instrumental in resuscitating the Trans-Pacific Partnership after the US abandoned it. In partnership with the EU, Japan can frame a new more predictable economic order. In a Japanese survey when asked in which areas Japan and the United States should strengthen ties, 78.8 percent of respondents named security, followed by exchanges of

people and culture at 76.8 percent, and economy, trade and finance at 74.7 percent.

A post-pandemic order of a zero-sum superpower contest for global leadership will lead efforts to wean and enlist Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The US' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy deploys governance and economic programs focused on incentivising private investment in infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific as a counter to BRI. It essentially deemphasizes the regional centrality of China.<sup>18</sup>

The security component of US strategy is the 'Quadrilateral' or Quad. Its membership of major maritime powers such as India, Japan and Australia, will ensure partnership naval capabilities to play an effective role in the region. For ASEAN, the main problem is geography of a neighbouring giant with an autocratic leadership. But it is also aware that without the US security umbrella, China may be less benign and constrained. However, China's revisionist tendency in its maritime claims and the current propensity to be in a hurry under Xi Jinping has raised alarms and concerns all around. ASEAN countries have realised the inherent risks of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects carried out mainly by Chinese state-owned banks and companies.

Australia has been quite vocal and strong in its assertions. It called for an international enquiry into the Coronavirus to examine if the Wuhan Virology Lab was involved and Chinese guilty of deliberate delay and suppression of vital information.<sup>19</sup> This is despite heavy linking to Chinese ownership of core economic assets e.g. Tasmanian dairy industry, Sydney ground water infrastructure, huge farms land, a seaport and inroads into the lucrative beef industry. The Chinese

responded by slapping tariffs on barley imports and halted beef imports. It signifies a distinct breakaway from Chinese dependency and economic stranglehold.

In the midst of the pandemic response, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Israel to distance itself from China. The US is pressuring and marshalling support from nations critical of the Chinese involvement and those over which it has leverages such as Japan and Israel. Similar efforts will happen across the world, especially in East Asia, Africa and Europe. China is Israel's third largest trading partner with active collaboration in solar energy, manufacturing robotics, irrigation, construction, agricultural and water management and desalination technologies, not to forget cutting edge technology in defence production.

China has inundated its all-weather friend - a hapless Pakistan, with massive medical equipment and temporary hospitals through land and air. The crisis will only add to the economic dire straits Pakistan was in. With a \$62 billion worth CPEC flagship project at stake, China cannot allow it to go down. Pakistan has been made to voice appreciative noises for China's excellence, including former Pakistan Ambassador to the United Nations, Abdullah Hussain Haroon supporting the view of an American hand behind the origin, and scientist Ata-ur Rahman, head of Pakistan's COVID-19 Task Force, that Wuhan was not the epicentre of the virus.<sup>20</sup> Examples like the Lal Masjid siege in 2007 and silence over excesses against the Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang show the depth of indebtedness and surrender of certain sovereign functions by Pakistan.

Erdogan in Turkey faces multiple pressures to his popularity including political divisions and economic challenges. The country

was already facing a 3-year economic slowdown, and a currency and debt crisis. It is estimated that it will take the worst body-blow among the G-20.<sup>21</sup> Popular perception attributes the pandemic's fast spread to his delay in closing links from China and Iran. Iran too faces limited resources, a stumbling economy and a volatile politics in combating the crisis. It is the worst affected in West Asia primarily due to an initial gung-ho approach, losing even some prominent leaders and politicians to Covid-19.<sup>22</sup> Its woes are set to rise with the US actions such as imposing additional sanctions and blocking IMF aid. Russia and China, themselves mired in multiple problems, can do little to help.

According to Sinha and Saran, the irony of hyper-globalisation is that taxpayers from the West underwrote China's entry into the WTO, and built up its industrial and technological might.<sup>23</sup> In their assessment, a gated-globalisation may become the norm where nations may opt to trade with geographies and nations where political trust exists by gate-keeping flows of goods, services, finance and labour when national strategic interests are at stake.

## **Why & How Did China Rise?**

**Flawed Assumption: 1970s:** According to most American analysts, the American approach starting late 1970s assumed that once within the international political and economic order, China would play by the rules, open its markets, and privatise its economy. A logical follow up would be people's rights and freedom, and in general a liberal approach in dealing with a rules-based world order.<sup>24</sup> But the Chinese regime (CCP) bid its time, exemplified by Deng Xiao Ping's style, and posted the fastest growth witnessed to become the second-largest economy in the world. Subsequent leaders built on a

closed, authoritarian model that stifles human freedom and breaks every rule in the world order to ascend to the top. The system allowed it to have levels of integration between civil, military and economic strategies that democracies could never achieve or aspire for. It was not a level-playing field by any stretch of imagination and CCP never intended to play by rules made by 'others' for long. Its external strategy of cultivating economic dependence also termed by some as neo-colonialism, co-option of other authoritarian regimes, coercion, and concealment are historical Chinese skill-sets.

Especially under Xi Jinping, authoritarian interventions, purges to consolidate power and intolerance to dissent are at an all time high buttressed with doles of patriotism and nationalism. Courtesy 5G and other focussed technological advances, the Chinese surveillance of its people is unmatched. A similar focus is towards orienting and conditioning people with a multi-media onslaught of propaganda and a unique reward and punishment system of Social Credit Scores. Yet, CCP's power and hold is premised on economic growth and prosperity of the masses, especially of a large middle-class.

**Neo-Colonialism?:** This in turn required a long-term model that exploited cheap raw materials across the world especially in poorer countries, skilled manufacture ability in China, and a dependant market all around the world. The greed for profit of western multinationals and governments helped bring in cutting-edge technology, skills and quality. Thereafter, indulging in actions ranging from arm-twisting to stealing intellectual property by hook or crook, it ensured a catch-up as a manufacturing and technology lead in the world. Programs such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Made in China 2025, and Military-Civil Fusion are part of this integrated model to sustain economic growth and the regime's



survival. Espionage, cyber-theft and embedded Chinese researchers and students being discovered by all leading countries contributes to what the US National Security Agency described as the greatest transfer of wealth in history. The Chinese have aimed for reaching a tipping point to accelerate on their own before the rest of the developed nations really wake up - 5G and drone technology being prime examples. It is indeed a vision and design with singular focus driven by ruthless intent of the CCP.

The exploitative nature of BRI based on debt default imposed on gullible and vulnerable nations is an example of China's desperation to work the model. Almost twenty plus countries have traded their debt for equity in large infrastructures allowing China to gain control of vital ports, communications networks, airports and power plants. Corruption and other politico-social vulnerabilities are fully exploited among leaders of poorer nations. Similarly, Military-Civil Fusion is a brazen legislated attempt to transfer research, technology and intellectual property through an integrated and mostly unethical attempt that is only feasible under an authoritarian diktat. The nexus of academia, industry, military and CCP is complete and unassailable by normal democracies. Welcome to neo-colonialism with Chinese characteristics.

**Stopping the Juggernaut:** Is there a need for nations who value a level-playing field and a liberal rules-based world order to do something? China will not change, at least not substantially, for reasons outlined earlier. Except for a few countries heavily indebted to the Chinese long-term game-plan, most are arriving at a consensus that this must be countered - e.g. talks on revamp of WTO and WHO to prevent countries from taking unfair advantage. It may be time to revive the move to democratise nations in light of the

inevitable social and popular uprisings across in a post-Covid world. It is opportune since China stands at the heart of this pandemic. Some urgent issues that need to be looked into by a democratic caucus could be the following.

Firstly, every collaborative research and scientific development with Chinese must be viewed, filtered and dissuaded in the free world. Proof of misdemeanours and misuse must be shared with the rest of the world. Secondly, U.S., Europe, and Japanese governments are already arriving at a consensus that capital and investment flows that are susceptible and unwittingly complicit to this Chinese design need to be curtailed. Third, Chinese use of infrastructure across vulnerable countries must be exposed in detail for what they really are - deadly dependency traps. Post-Covid there may be a spurt in Chinese digital infrastructure development efforts across BRI nations because of cost constraints and stalling of the physical infrastructure component.<sup>25</sup> This must be carefully monitored and countered. A high-level inquiry in Pakistan ordered by its PM has discovered malpractices amounting to \$625 million mainly due to inflated set-up costs of CPEC projects.<sup>26</sup> This is just an example of how bribery, corruption, coercion and malpractice are interwoven into the whole BRI concept. Exposing corruption among leaders who support China's encirclement to arouse popular sentiment is one way of a counter.

Finally, the vulnerability of BRI must be studied in detail for its overreach. For example, Pakistan's request to China for ease in payment obligations (\$615 million annually) related to a \$30 billion debt for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects to minimise its financial and economic difficulties. More importantly, it has sought an extension in debt repayment period in the tariff to

20 years from the existing repayment period of 10 years, which has opened a floodgate of such requests from many countries under the BRI ambit.<sup>27</sup>

Financial crunches, loss of mobility of labour and resources, supply-chain disruptions and such like issues have stalled BRI projects. For example, Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor SEZs, Cambodia's Sihanoukville SEZ, and projects in Indonesia, Myanmar and Malaysia are on hold, and China is fearful on many counts. First, inordinate delays may mean the end of such projects with unpredictable political changes in the offing; second, increasing costs that would have to be offset by China; and finally, poor or no returns in the light of economic slowdown and debt-deferments. This would add to the questions surrounding the economic viability of the BRI.

In an emergent geopolitical climate, a clear trend of making China accountable is discernible. Examples are many and adding up each day. Japanese government allocated at least \$2 billion to encourage its companies to shift production supply chains out of China. Taiwan and Vietnam have undercut Beijing's coronavirus diplomacy, dispatching their own shipments of medical aid to beleaguered countries in the West. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's son tweeted that the blame for the global coronavirus pandemic has a name and surname: the Chinese Communist Party. Brazil's education minister Abraham Weintraub, warned of Beijing manipulating the crisis to its advantage.

The other view is that the Covid Crisis could boost China's global influence, and diminish the United States'. In other words, Can China Use the Pandemic to Displace the US?<sup>28</sup> The seeming

mismanagement of the pandemic in the US with upwards of two million cases, more than a hundred thousand deaths, 1 in 5 jobless and a full blown recession in the face have generated doubts on future American leadership. China has spared no effort in advertising this especially in nations within the BRI construct. And yet it does not want to usurp US power so suddenly - it's neither feasible nor desirable by China for many reasons.

According to Indian geopolitical observer Pratap Bhanu Mehta, great power competition is riskier when both political systems of the great powers are at the mercy of their weaknesses rather than their strengths. The US is plagued by hyper-partisanship and dilution of checks and balances, and undoubtedly China will be a central theme in US election campaign. The CCP has greater internal and external legitimacy concerns, and does not look so sure-footed. More often than not, it has demonstrated aggressiveness and threat-based diplomacy.<sup>29</sup> Even if it tries to accommodate the world's concerns, it would be critically constrained by its domestic agenda of nil transparency and accountability of the CCP.

**China's Economy & Debt:** More than 460,000 Chinese firms closed permanently in the first quarter as the Coronavirus pandemic hit first in China. With fiscal revenues down by 9.9 per cent in Jan-Feb, tax revenue fall by 11.2 per cent, and 19 per cent slump in VAT, any stimulus will increase its debt, which was 310 per cent of GDP in end-2019, according to the Institute of International Finance. Such conditions are a recipe for an economic crisis. China has amassed a large amount of US treasury bonds, but selling is not an option since other instruments such as futures and gold cannot absorb these large assets. With calls from the US public and many in Congress for China to pay for causing the Covid-19 crisis, the jury is still out as to how this pans out.

There are influential voices in China who see the writing on the wall. Long Yongtu, a former chief trade negotiator responsible for China's entry into WTO, claimed publically that China could face isolation from the global economic order post-coronavirus.<sup>30</sup> Many others too have flagged geopolitical isolation that could stem from fallout of COVID-19, as it causes significant changes in international trade, investment and industrial chains. Concerns of China and its Yuan being boycotted, international clamour for independent investigation and reparations, and ramifications on China's future are being discussed widely within.

15 million graduates make up about 60 percent of China's total new labour population every year. Young graduates are among the most vibrant group in social and economic development and a crucial factor of social stability, as witnessed in Hong Kong. According to China analysts, this group in mainland China was content compromising on political freedom for better jobs and upward mobility. The Chinese economy recorded its slowest rate of growth for a long time. A big liability is its state-owned monoliths, which while providing leverages to the CCP are inefficient. The ballooning national debt cannot be addressed by pure credit infusion as in the 2008 economic crisis. A demographic downturn as a result of its erstwhile one-child policy, a lowest birth-rate ever, and a forecast of declining working age people by 73 million between 2018 and 2030, only adds to the dilemma. Its biggest financial gamble on BRI might now be opposed actively by US and other like-minded countries. This may prove to be Xi Jinping's biggest direct threat hastened undoubtedly by events triggered by Covid-19.

Some American analysts believe that the key strategic disaster for the US of the early 2000s was not al-Qaeda, but the Sino-Russian

reconciliation.<sup>31</sup> This has turned the chessboard upside-down with major gains for China. Depending on unfolding geopolitical and economic re-alignments, China could increase its clout or lose majorly in the medium- and long-term. A post-Covid alignment of US, Quad nations and Europe would depend on the imperatives and costs of decoupling with China with each party heavily invested in it. However, popular distaste for China and calls for payback will engulf narrower corporate considerations. No leader will be able to overlook this sentiment especially in democracies that have suffered heavily. There are signs of such sentiments e.g. rising nationalism with serious market fallout in these trying times. A Deutsche Bank survey showed 41% of US citizens would not buy a China made products, and conversely 35% of Chinese would avoid buying products made in US. A majority in US are willing to pay more if the company moved manufacturing out of China.<sup>32</sup>

Historically, the US had to experience some deep geopolitical shock to spur it into decisive action. For example, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in late 1941 despite clear indications since 1931 when the Japanese attacked China. Similarly, not gauzing Soviet geopolitical ambitions across Eurasia post-WWII right till the Korean Crisis for a coherent anti-communist campaign. In a similar way, China containment and curtailment policies predate President Trump's disruptive and decisive actions before the Covid-19 crisis. This pandemic with its horror and humiliation on Europe and US has triggered acceleration of this process. According to C Raja Mohan, Xi Jinping's impatience and unwillingness to bide time as Deng did has reinforced western narratives of China as an opportunist benefiting from a flawed globalisation template. There is now a distinct drift to the left — de-globalisation, big government, the focus on redressing inequality and new political weight of the working class among nations.<sup>33</sup>

If economy, military capabilities and reach, and aligned partner countries are key determinants of international power, the US will stay ahead for a long time to come. The US Dollar remains the world's reserve currency, backing over 90 percent of all global transactions. China's soft-power blitz or 'mask diplomacy' is being praised from leaders of Spain, Italy, Serbia, Pakistan or Iran and such like which were part of BRI. Joining up reasons included economic desperation, grievances against democratic neighbours, or plain bribery.<sup>34</sup> In a scenario-building exercise at Center for Strategic and International Studies, USA, three potential scenarios were explored: Intensified Sino-U.S. strategic competition but no major reorientation of major powers; Resurgent American leadership and multilateral institution-building; and, Pax-Sinica? The last scenario is one in which regional revisionist powers consolidate their positions i.e. China in Asia, Russia in Central and Eastern Europe, and Iran in the Gulf. This can only happen if revisionists are allowed a free run in a disorganised world.

Journalist Lauren Spinney in her book *Pale Rider* makes a narrative of how the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic contributed to the instability of the interwar years and finally WW II. While it cannot be solely attributed to the pandemic, events and structural changes were accelerated that led to an inevitable consequence.<sup>35</sup> It is a telling tale very relevant in current times.

## **Security Implications**

**East Asia Tangle:** On 19 April, China renamed 80 islands, reefs and undersea geographical features in the South China Sea signalling sovereignty (9-dash line claim) over disputed parts of the South China Sea. It continues to aggressively pursue its longer-term

strategic goals even as nations are preoccupied with responding to a pandemic started by China and its negligence. Chinese ships sank a Vietnamese ship on 4th April three days after Vietnam filed a complaint in the UN against China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. The Philippines, breaking off from its recent pro-China stance, lodged two protests against China over violations of international law and Philippine sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea. It strongly protested the Chinese State Council's approval of two new municipal districts - Nansha District, which is based at Fiery Cross Reef and Xisha District, based on Woody Island, which will oversee the Paracel Islands.<sup>36</sup> Japan too lodged a protest against Chinese ships in Japanese territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Chinese coastguard ships patrolled these islands every day for a month between March and April.

A Chinese government survey vessel along with a Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessel has been operating close to a drill-ship of the Malaysian state oil company Petronas since 16th April. The Spanish energy firm Repsol had similarly stopped work on two Vietnamese drilling projects in 2017 and 2018 following pressure tactics from China. This is despite a strong economic relationship between the Malaysia and China and ordering of four Littoral Mission Ships (LMS) from China.<sup>37</sup> On 16<sup>th</sup> March, Chinese Coast Guard ships fired a shot, and rammed a Taiwanese coastguard vessel near Little Kinmen. It has also deployed twelve underwater Sea Wing drones in the Indian Ocean recently.

On 20th Feb, four Chinese Navy warships travelled to within 300 km from Hawaii, location of US Indo-Pacific Command headquarters, demonstrating strike capabilities with its 500 km range YJ-18 cruise missiles. As part of its Freedom of Navigation



Operations (FONOPs), the US has countered it with nine missions. Back-to-back missions are a new strategy of 'strategic predictability, operational unpredictability'. On these lines, US Air Force ended its Continuous Bomber Presence on the island of Guam, and has started inducting B-1s, B-2s and B-52s whenever deemed fit. It conducted live-fire missile drills near the South China Sea in February besides other exercises with latest platforms like F-35 fighters. This was followed by a port visit by an aircraft carrier to a port in Vietnam. This was a prelude to President Trump signing the TAIPEI Act, strengthening the US's relationship with Taiwan. With Tsai Ing-wen's victory, reunification has been put off for the time being.

**The Indian Ocean: Not India's Ocean?:** China has consistently challenged international norms and sovereignty claims in its neighbourhood, and has used this revisionist agenda to leverage fear, uncertainty and indecisiveness among adjoining nations. To many such nations and the US, India represents a natural counterbalance to this assertive and aggressive stance.<sup>38</sup> All of them have been repeatedly caught off guard by Chinese unpredictability and sudden first-move advantage actions, e.g. building runways and bases on disputed islands and shoals. For example, Philippines which earlier compromised on the issue of Scarborough Shoal, has now realised the sinister component of China's larger plan.

The Chinese 'Two-Ocean Strategy' since 2005 is essentially an Indo-Pacific framework protecting its influence, markets, access to resources and trade routes to Africa, Asia and South America. This maritime component of the Silk Road (BRI) includes control of vital ports, limited basing arrangements to handle contingencies and other localised geographic influences, such as Hambantota, Gwadar, Ethiopia and Djibouti.

For India, the IOR is critical to its future. India's development, growth and political structures are dependent on Indian Ocean being free and its shores protected.<sup>39</sup> 13 major ports and some 187 minor ports are responsible for about 97 percent of Indian trade. Almost 2.03 million sq. km of Indian EEZ is rich in living and non-living resources. About 25 percent of its requirement of oil and natural gas comes from its offshore oil fields; while the rest is being imported from Africa and the Middle East through sea lanes and choke points in the Indian Ocean. More than 1200 islands spread over sizeable seascape are economic and maritime assets.<sup>40</sup>

**India's Strength as an Alternate:** Because the Indian Ocean is central to BRI and the larger Chinese plan, India's literal geographic thrust into it is an enormous advantage. Major sea ports and airfields dotted in the peninsula, confer latent military potential to dominate this wide expanse. India's economy and demographic dividend is the only credible threat to a hegemonistic China. Militarily too, it is the only viable partner for the US in countering China in the Indian Ocean at least. But this partnership can only be premised on respect for India's core concerns i.e. Pakistan and its agenda of anti-India terrorism adequately propped by China in material terms and support in the UN; a good degree of strategic autonomy which countries around the IOR respect; a need for urgent technology infusion in general, and more specifically to modernise its defence manufacture.

An unbiased and whole-hearted support to Prime Minister Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy encompassing among others Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Initiative, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation

(MGC) by the US would only help the larger cause of China-containment. Just as Japan is extending a \$350 million in soft loans for highways in India's Northeast, US economic aid can directly help build an Indo-friendly regional framework. India's fence-sitting has been quite disturbed by issues like Doklam, current pressures on the LAC, riparian issues i.e. damming of Brahmaputra, and in general China's encirclement of India through exploiting underlying vulnerabilities of countries in the IOR. The Wuhan Virus and its aftermath has accelerated issues and provided a window for a decisive move.

**Logic: National Interest:** A manufacturing ecosystem with infusion of investments and technology to employ its massive demographic dividend should be the only bottom-line of India. It should be willing to partner the West or East without many reservations. We should leverage this opportunity showcasing our continental size, large market, young and skilled labour, and shared values when restructuring of global supply chains happens.<sup>41</sup> Economics links with China are important but so is to look at the lopsided trade imbalance. China is the second-largest trading partner of India after the US. In 2019, bilateral trade reached USD 87.07 billion with a trade deficit of USD 53.57 billion. India needs to calibrate its trade with China by raising import duties on products responding to Chinese non-allowance of Indian products such as pharmaceuticals ; keeping mobile phones and e-commerce out of the ambit; and, favouring only greenfield projects.<sup>42</sup>

China has made no pretences of its rivalry with India in the medium- and long-term. For example, attempts to limit India to the subcontinent with its proxy - Pakistan, its role in UNSC and others to block all pro-India moves related to NSG membership

and anti-terrorist moves, and poking issues like Doklam, and even the latest in Galwan. It does not want India's rise. Beijing wants to keep India boxed into South Asia, and tries to keep it off balance using Pakistan which it arms and supports. It has made inroads into the region using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It continues to block India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and continues to needle New Delhi in the UNSC over Kashmir. It occupies parts of Indian territory and also claims the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. China poses the biggest military threat for India, the two month long Doklam standoff in 2017 followed by the two somewhat failed informal summits after that are a reminder.

Foreign policy is essentially a trade-off between values and making choices and compromises. The best results come by combining hard power of inducements and threats with the soft power of values, culture, diplomacy, and policies that attract people.<sup>43</sup> While prudence in avoiding reckless assessments is the norm, these are exceptional and 'interesting' times. Contextual intelligence in a fast changing environment will allow adopting change at an accelerated pace.

### **Africa: A Victim Always**

The Chinese economic plan in Africa is modelled around setting lucrative debt traps for corrupt leaders and authorities encompassing the whole gamut of investments, infrastructure projects and bank loans. But as the prices of oil, copper and minerals found in Africa have plunged in the Covid-crisis, there is pressure to write-off billions of dollars of loans.<sup>44</sup> As per Johns Hopkins University, China loaned \$152 billion to 49 African countries between 2000 and 2018. Estimates of the World Bank in 2017 put \$64 billion as

loans to sub-Saharan African countries. Between 2008 and 2018, Chinese FDI in Africa rose from \$7.8 billion to \$46 billion, raising a larger question of the risks taken in a most unpredictable continent.

Racial overtones and discriminations in China after the Covid outbreak have only brought in negative publicity and perceptions. Treating an entire continent as source of raw materials and market for Chinese goods is a bubble that will get pricked as the force of Covid-19 hits extremely vulnerable countries. Therein lies an opportunity to drive home a credible message of “It is China’s fault.” A G-20 agreement to freeze bilateral loan repayments covering all official bilateral creditors for low-income countries until the end of 2020 is a precursor. If the China-blame narrative takes root in Africa, there would be serious risks since it does not possess the military presence to enforce anything of consequence.

**Humanitarian/Peace Missions:** Grave implications for vulnerable populations will include inadequate health-care, overwhelmed public services, and paralytic economic disruption. There may be serious consequences to the entire structure of international humanitarian and conflict management systems encompassing the entire gamut of peace-related missions to assistance to refugees and displaced persons. Some leaders may exploit the crisis to target minorities, crackdown on dissent, entrench their positions or even escalate conflicts abroad for political gain.<sup>45</sup> Some non-state actors may likewise seek to profit from the situation, convinced the world will be distracted by the pandemic.

In the midst of two competing narratives of nations coming together to better defeat COVID-19, and the need to isolate to survive, consequences to public health and economies will strain relations

between governments and citizens, especially when overwhelmed. Law and order with security forces overstretched will find it challenging to manage frustrated and restive people.<sup>46</sup> A global recession ahead and severe mobility restrictions will disrupt trade and food supplies. Small and large businesses in tens of thousands will shut down and unemployment will shoot up. Economic disruptions and severing of livelihood means will lead to prolonged labour disturbances and social instability.

COVID-19 could prove back-breaking in existing conflict zones with predictable vicious cycle of instability. In Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere, combatants and extremists will see opportunities to exploit, and may result in multiple state failures. Across large swathes of sub-Saharan Africa in particular, millions depend on their daily income to feed their families. An extended lockdown could rapidly create widespread desperation and disorder.

### **Is Multilateralism Dead?**

Many observers are predicting various futures of multilateral institutions. These range from being severely tested to existential crisis. The truth may lie somewhere in between with sweeping reforms following intense debates, protests and realignment of nations. Nothing could demonstrate the futility of such institutions where P-5 are involved as the complete ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council in drafting a resolution on Covid-19, a greatest challenge facing humanity, over mentioning the origin of the COVID-19. Multilateral organizations can be spaces to unite minds and resources to overcome such periods of uncertainty and fear.<sup>47</sup>

World Trade Organization head Roberto Azevedo stepping down a year earlier than planned is an indication of tumultuous changes and reforms ahead. The US, Japan and the EU are pushing for more fundamental reforms that reflect new realities of a far stronger China, and address problems such as state-led subsidies and forced technology transfers. At the same time, the Chinese representative to the Geneva-based trade body insisted on May 12 that the East Asian superpower would not give up its status as a “developing country.”<sup>48</sup> Some 14 Chinese medical teams were working in 12 countries, which now include Iran, Iraq, Italy, Spain, Serbia, Cambodia, Pakistan, Venezuela, Cuba, Russia, Philippines, Nigeria and Algeria. As the US cut its funding to the WHO, it donated an extra \$30 million.<sup>49</sup> All of them are in the BRI trade ambit. Geopolitical observer Sujan Chinoy feels that given the inexorable centrality of the Chinese economy in global supply chains, it is a moot question if USA, EU or Japan can achieve a major decoupling from china. Besides holding China accountable for its acts of commission or omission, its cooperation will be vital.<sup>50</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to highlight the macro and geopolitical choices evolving fast before the world, and specifically India. This first part scanned some international developments, thoughts and trends that will form a background for examining the choices ahead. An event of epochal consequences and after-effects, it is necessary to examine the importance of accountability that serves the purposes, both of avoiding a repeat, and countering the Chinese unethical economic juggernaut which is detrimental to India’s cause in many ways. Some threads have been explored of how this Pax-Sinica could be checked. There are serious security ramifications of

an unchecked Chinese rise, and this has been explored in the paper. Asia and Africa have been and will be key areas for this drama to unfold.

The concluding Part-II will be about exploring two extreme scenarios of a post-Covid world, and go into specifics of what India needs to do, both internally and externally. It will be a sort of net-assessment of how to prepare for the worst-case scenario and hopefully turn crisis into opportunity in a best-case scenario. Essentially it is a long window of opportunity for India provided it can recover from the effects of Covid-19. Just as China exercised a historical choice in the 1970s in the midst of US-Soviet rivalry, India too faces a decisive moment.

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