



RIVALRY IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC: COVID-19 IMPACT ON THE BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

La rivalidad en los tiempos de pandemia: impacto del COVID-19 en el equilibrio de poder entre Estados Unidos y China

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In 2020, humanity witnessed with perplexity the expansion of the largest pandemic outbreak in the last century. The coronavirus crisis would have tragic effects on society and healthcare throughout the world, but its consequences go far beyond these two areas. In the field of international relations, the pandemic has impacted the balance of power between the United States and China, whose relationship was already facing rising tensions. While the former was unable to control the spread of the virus in its territory, the second managed to curb it after the initial bewilderment. In order to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on the balance of power between both countries, this paper will focus on three areas: economic power, ideological power, and international maneuverability. The results indicate that China has been relatively favored, but also that the United States still has opportunities to preserve its international leadership.



Abstract

A lo largo del año 2020, la humanidad presenció atónita la expansión del mayor brote pandémico en el último siglo. La crisis del coronavirus tendría trágicos resultados a nivel social y sanitario a lo largo del mundo, pero sus consecuencias van mucho más allá de estos dos ámbitos. En el campo de las relaciones internacionales, la pandemia ha afectado al equilibrio de poder entre Estados Unidos y China, cuya relación ya partía de una situación de creciente tensión. Mientras que el primero se vio incapaz de controlar la expansión del virus en su territorio, el segundo consiguió frenarla tras el desconcierto inicial. Con el objetivo de evaluar el impacto del COVID-19 en el equilibrio de poder entre ambas potencias, el artículo se centrará en tres áreas: poder económico, poder ideológico, y maniobrabilidad internacional. Los resultados muestran que China sale relativamente favorecida, pero también que Estados Unidos aún cuenta con oportunidades para preservar su liderazgo internacional.



Resumen

United States; China; COVID-19; balance of power; power transition.

Estados Unidos; China; COVID-19; equilibrio de poder; transición de poder.



Key words

Recibido: 02/11/2020. Aceptado: 22/11/2021



Fechas

1. Introduction

December 31, 2019. A disease outbreak in the Chinese city of Wuhan, in Hubei province, is reported by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission to the World Health Organization. On January 23, 2020, the Chinese government decided to lockdown Wuhan along with other cities in the province in order to prevent the transmission of the virus to the rest of the territory. As a consequence of the limitations to normal life across the Chinese territory during the first months of the pandemic, Chinese GDP shrank 6,8% in the first quarter of 2020 (Cheng, 2020), in stark contrast to previous decades of high economic growth. More than 4600 people would die during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, according to official figures (McDonell, 2020), under a challenging situation in China that might have brought not only economic implications, but also political ones.

In fact, during the first three months after the outbreak of COVID-19, the situation seemed favorable for the United States in the middle of its increasing rivalry with China. Beijing seemed unable to control the outbreak of a pandemic that, at that time, had not yet aggressively hit the West. Thus, the analyses made at that moment were not very optimistic about the domestic and international implications of COVID-19 for the Chinese government. A domestic crisis of political legitimacy seemed plausible (Economy, 2020; Lam, 2020; Li, 2020b), criticism on the early management of the virus outbreak in China mounted abroad (Garrett, 2020; Li, 2020a; Rogin, 2020), and even within China itself, it was increasingly clear that COVID-19 would pose a danger to economic stability (Reuters, 2020).

However, the evolution of the situation after March 2020 was unexpected and unforeseen by international analysts. China progressively managed to control the spread of COVID-19, while the West (especially the United States and Europe) became the deadliest hit part of the world by the virus. As a consequence, already in the second half of 2020, China was expected to be the only major economy to grow in that year, whereas it was estimated that the US economy would fall by 3,6% (Payne, 2020). The European Union's economy took an even bigger hit, with an estimated 7,8% economic contraction in the same period of time (European Commission, 2020).

Even though the pandemic is not over yet, it is clear by now that COVID-19 will have a remarkable impact on the global distribution of power in the middle of the growing rivalry between the United States and China. It could be easily assumed that the current situation favors the latter and undermines the international position of the former, but this paper offers a more nuanced view. Obviously, given its rapid control of COVID-19, China seems to be in a favorable position to the detriment of the United States. However, the 2020 US presidential election results, affected by the serious pandemic situation in the country, might offer new international opportunities for Washington.

In order to shed light on how the outbreak of COVID-19 might impact the existing balance of power between the United States and China, this paper, after the presentation of the current situation of strategic competition between both countries, will focus on three areas. The first one, *economic power*, discusses the extent to which a shift in the existing favorable position of the United States is possible. The second one, *ideological power*, explores the ideological challenge that the US-led liberal international order is facing by the rise of China, and how it might be impacted by the unequal handling of the epidemic by China and the West. The third one, *international maneuverability*, analyses how the relationship of

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both the United States and China with third countries might be affected after COVID-19, with an eye on their close partners. The joint analysis of these three elements will provide a new perspective on the international implications of COVID-19 for the two most powerful countries in the world.

2. A new stage on US-China strategic competition

Since the second half of the 2010s, the bilateral relationship between the United States and China has deteriorated markedly. The times of the “quasi-alliance”, a term used by Henri Kissinger (2015, p. 300) to describe the character of the ties between both countries since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1979, are long gone, as well as their cooperative coexistence during the past few decades. Contrary to the expectations of the liberal school of International Relations, economic interdependence has not brought Washington and Beijing closer. In fact, their bilateral relationship, with the exception of some points in common, such as the fight against climate change, increasingly resembles a zero-sum game.

In this context, a new thinking of mutual distrust is emerging in both countries. The United States increasingly perceives China as a challenge to its international position in terms of power and values, while the Asian country is increasingly convinced that Washington is trying to curtail its rise and peaceful development. The deterioration of their bilateral relationship became evident in a speech of the Secretary of State under the Donald Trump administration, Michael Pompeo (2020). According to him, the last half-century of engagement with China had failed and, therefore, the United States should take a tougher stance on Beijing, whose policy-makers harbor a “decades-long desire for global hegemony of Chinese communism”. This situation of mutual distrust has not improved with the arrival of Joe Biden to power in January 2021.

Behind the worsening US-China relationship, there are obviously structural factors. Both countries are immersed in a power transition competition consisting of a power struggle between a rising power and a declining power -at least in relative terms. But ideological differences are also aggravating this situation, in stark contrast to Japan’s rise during the second half of the last century. During the 1970s and 1980s, it was believed that Japan could become the world’s leading power, but this possibility did not trigger a political crisis with the United States on the scale of the current one between Washington and Beijing. In this regard, drawing on Alexander Wendt’s constructivist insights, Wu Chengqiu (2020, p. 66) argues that the strategic competition between the United States, a promoter of “liberal hegemony”, and China, an implementer of “statist nationalism”, has worsened as a result of their different ideas, perceptions, and strategies. For this reason, this paper will also consider, along with the elements of economic power and international maneuverability, the ideological aspect of the rivalry between the two powers.

In light of the increasing competition between the United States and China, the balance of power between both countries has been analyzed by the academic literature. Christopher Layne (2018, p. 90) has argued that the rise of China, combined with the internal problems of the United States, will undermine Washington’s international position. This idea is shared by Graham Allison (2018), who argues that the fall of the US share of global GDP to just one-seventh of the world’s output today, along with China’s rise and Russia’s assertiveness, poses a challenge to the survival of the liberal international order. Joseph S. Nye (2017, pp. 10-16), by

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contrast, is more optimistic about the maintenance of the international position of the United States. He argues that Beijing will not manage to overtake Washington and become the world's dominant power due to the slowdown of China's economic growth and the United States' advantages in the areas of demography, energy, education, technology, and the military. This point of view is supported by John Mearsheimer (2020), who remains optimistic about the US prospects of success in its competition with China because Washington has been historically able to overcome past systemic challenges from Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union.

In this sense, this paper aims to contribute to the academic debate on the balance of power between the United States and China by introducing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as a backbone. Of course, not all areas of power have been affected by the outbreak of COVID-19. For example, this paper does not assume that the pandemic will have an impact on the balance of power between Washington and Beijing in the military or technological realm. But it does assume that the pandemic has the potential to have a significant impact on US-China rivalry on the economy, ideology, and international maneuverability, all of which are regularly taken into account by the academic literature on great power competition. The next three sections will assess the extent to which the balance of power between both countries in these three areas has changed as a result of the pandemic.

3. Economic power: the gap narrows even more

The rise of China and the eventual overtaking of the United States as the world's largest economy are often taken for granted in forecasts made worldwide. According to this deterministic vision of the future, it is assumed that China's economic growth is unstoppable, and that it is just a matter of time that the current rising power outpowers the leader of the existing international order. A recent report by the Development Research Centre of the State Council in China predicted that China's GDP would surpass the one of the United States in 2032, regardless of the United States' efforts to contain China's rise (Tang, 2020). And it is easy to assume that, once the United States is overtaken by China as the world's largest economy, it would be just a matter of time for China to become the world leader in the technological and military fields.

From a different point of view, considering that high levels of economic power are not easily translated into other fields, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2015) offer a more cautious approach to the balance of power between the United States and China. In their view, even though China's economic rise is a major change in the international system, to the point that it is no longer suitable to talk about unipolarity, China is not going to surpass the United States anytime soon as the world's superpower. This argument is grounded in the premise that, even if China's economy continues to grow, it will be unable to catch up with the United States in the economic, military, and technological fields. They argue that the United States has a qualitative advantage in the economic field because its productive system is more knowledge-based than the Chinese one, it dominates the global economy through the shares of foreign corporations held by US citizens, and its economic growth is more sustainable. In addition, the Chinese army is well behind the one of the United States, since cumulative investments made during the previous decades are more important than the specific military expending figures of a given year when it comes to determining the military power. In the same way, according to their ar-

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gument, China will find it difficult to surpass the technological power of the United States in the near future due to the leadership of the latter in cumulative investment, human capital and innovative technologies.

However, in the same way that China's recent achievements in Artificial Intelligence and 5G networks point out to the possibility that its capability to close the technological gap with the United States might have been underestimated, the multi-faceted implications of China's control of COVID-19 also offer positive prospects for Beijing when it comes to closing its economic gap with the United States. In fact, the United States' GDP did not return to pre-pandemic levels until July 2021 (Partington, 2021), whereas China's economy already started to bounce back in the second quarter of 2020 and achieved net growth before the end of the year. Forecasts by the OECD were even gloomier for the United States, estimating that at the end of 2021, its economy would be roughly the same size as before the outbreak of COVID-19, whereas China's economy would be 10% larger (Leaders, 2020). And no matter how difficult it is to translate economic might into technological and military power, if China surpasses the United States as the world's largest economy, it would be on the right track to become the world leader also in the military and technological realms.

At this stage of the epidemic, it is already clear that COVID-19 will bring one crucial implication for the world economy: the strengthening of China's international economic presence. Up to October 2020, China's exports rose 11,4% on a yearly basis, a growth that reached its highest levels in 19 months (Hale, 2020). On the contrary, the exports of the United States during the first half of 2020 decreased by 16% compared to the previous year (Dollar & Newby, 2020). Moreover, in spite of the US-China trade war, China's exports to the United States have bounced back, favored by the latter's demands of health supplies, electronic items and car parts, whereas US exports to China have not experienced considerable economic growth, deepening the trade imbalance between both countries (Schacht, 2020). Besides, China managed from the very beginning to maintain inward FDI flows stable in spite of the situation of global pandemic, receiving \$76 billion during the first half of 2020 due to the rapid control of COVID-19 and the consequential resumption of its production system. This offers positive prospects for the evolution of the Chinese economy during the following months, since FDI is a critical source of external funding for developing countries (United Nations, 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative could also be favored in the long term by the global impact of COVID-19 in a world thirsty for new economic growth opportunities, according to Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi (Yang & Liu, 2020).

Undoubtedly, China will still face economic uncertainties due to an economic model that is still highly reliant on exports and international markets. In the words of Oshimasa Maruyama, chief market economist at SMBC Nikko Securities in Tokyo, "domestic demand will drive China's recovery ahead, but external demand could be a risk to the growth outlook given the possibility of large second round of coronavirus infections overseas" (World Economic Forum, 2020). The situation is not much better for the United States. In fact, the negative domestic consequences of COVID-19 that Washington might have to face in the near future go well beyond the economic field. The social divide in the United States became increasingly evident after the 2008 global financial crisis, and it has expanded even more during the last years. A further increase in unemployment, poverty and social inequality might aggravate the already existing political polarization, casting shadows on the political future of the most powerful country on Earth.

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In the end, China is the country that, in relative terms, has been clearly benefited in the economic field when it comes to its balance of power with the United States. However, it should be examined closely whether its “zero-Covid” policy is maintained over the following months -or even years. Triumphant after having managed to control the spread of the virus and having made this a source of domestic ideological reaffirmation of the superiority of the Chinese model, Chinese leaders may have a difficult time explaining to citizens the adoption of a policy of living with the virus as is already being followed by almost the entire rest of the world. This aspect is of great relevance considering that, as COVID-19 will almost inevitably become an endemic virus, it does not seem sustainable to maintain the “zero-Covid” policy (which entails the closure of borders and the almost total disruption of human relations with the rest of the world) in the long term. In fact, this strategy, which is associated with partial lockdowns in cities where the virus has been detected, could already be undermining China’s economic recovery (Kawate, 2021).

4. Ideological power: the liberal international order, under pressure

The liberal international order has been experiencing a situation of crisis since the last decade. The increasing international assertiveness of China and Russia has contributed to the discredit of some of its basic principles. However, the behavior of the liberal West after the end of the Cold War is also one of the reasons behind this situation of decay. A recent report by the Lowy Institute has pointed out a series of Western failures that have undermined liberal principles, norms and institutions, such as arbitrary behavior to the detriment of rules-based principles, “calamitous policy-making” and transatlantic disunity (Lo, 2020, p. 19). Under this situation of crisis, the fact that the rising power, a non-liberal democratic country, has managed to control the virus much more satisfactorily than the leader of the liberal international order, a democratic country, brings clear implications for the future of that order. Especially with regard to its ideological principles. But before explaining the challenges that the US-led liberal international order is facing after the outbreak of COVID-19, it is necessary to define, first, its main features, and discuss China’s actual willingness and capacity to undermine it.

John Ikenberry (2018, p. 7) defines the liberal international order as an order “organized around economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity”. Hans Kundnani (2017, p. 2) has rightly pointed out that those pillars of the liberal international order do not always fit together satisfactorily, and that in some cases there might be some tensions between them, as it happens when economic openness under the shape of “hyperglobalization” undermines democracy. Specifically, this paper will focus on the challenge that China’s successful control of COVID-19 might pose to the last feature of the liberal international order mentioned by John Ikenberry, which is deeply rooted in the US identity: democratic values. The rationale behind this approach is based on the assumption that China is not pursuing a strategy to undermine the other components of the liberal international order, since that would go against its own interests. Indeed, China has been largely benefited from international economic openness and its participation in multilateral institutions. Therefore, it was not surprising when Xi Jinping stood up for free trade and multilateralism once Trump’s protectionist drives became increasingly real (Leng, Zhen, Zheng, & Wu, 2018).

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Is China really determined to undermine the ideological principles behind the current international order, the ones that privileged the adoption of liberal values under the shape of democratic regimes? And in that case, would China have the capacity to push in favor of these changes? There is an intense academic debate on whether China is a revisionist country or not. Even though China's increasingly assertive behavior in the South China Sea makes some scholars consider the country a revisionist power, not all analysts agree. For example, the American professor Alastair Iain Johnson (2019, p. 57) argues that China shows medium or high-level compliance in most of the domains of the liberal international order (i.e. the constitutive, the military, trade, finance and environment), and that therefore China cannot be considered as an opposing power to the status quo. In any case, regardless of China's previous behavior, this paper supports the idea that a successful rise of China, the one that displaces the United States as the most powerful country in the world, would inevitably undermine the structural power of the current hegemon in both the economic and diplomatic fields, and that this would bring implications for the US-led liberal international order. In addition, considering Steve Tsang's argument that "the putting of the CPC's interest at the core of national interest is a constant, not a variable, factor that underpins Beijing's foreign policy making" (Tsang, 2020, p. 305), it seems logical to assume that undermining the idea of liberalism and democracy as universally acceptable values, two of the most important normative hallmarks of the liberal international order, is in line with the domestic political interests of Chinese policy-makers.

Certainly, it would be challenging for China to create a new international order that replaces the existing one. As Bentley Allan, Srdjan Vucetic and Ted Hopf (2018) have pointed out, "the future of the international order is shaped not only by material power but also by the distribution of identity across the great powers". As a consequence, even if China displaces the United States and becomes the most powerful country in the world in material terms, it does not seem feasible to envision an international ideological hegemony of China, given that the liberal and democratic identity is shared by most of the main powers apart from the United States (Japan, India, Germany, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and France). And more importantly, China's international image after the outbreak of COVID-19 has not remained unscathed. According to a survey of 14 countries conducted by Pew Research Center between June 10 and August 3, 2020, the majority of respondents had an unfavorable opinion of China, and in 9 of those countries (Australia, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the US, South Korea, Spain and Canada) negative views were at their highest point in more than a decade (Al Jazeera, 2020b). But still, the lack of an ideological alternative to the existing liberal international order does not imply that it is not possible to undermine the basic principles of that order. Indeed, as the international trends after the outbreak of COVID-19 certify, it is possible to undermine the liberal international order's ideological principle of the uncontested superiority of the democratic form of government without the need to provide an ideological or normative alternative.

Chinese leaders have repeatedly stated that they have no intention of exporting China's political model to other countries (Reuters, 2017). In fact, their domestic interests are best served not through the exportation of the Chinese model, but through the discrediting of the "membership principles" of the liberal international order that delegitimize non-liberal democratic political regimes. As Kyle Lascurttes (2020, pp. 238-241) argues, the promotion of liberal and democratic principles by the United States at the international level during the Cold War had the final purpose of ostracizing the Soviet Union, and Chinese policy-makers have the opinion that those principles are being used now to the detriment of China. Therefore, they are not in-

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terested in promoting an “authoritarian” international order -whose implementation would not be possible-, but in the promotion of an “agnostic” one. An order in which ideological principles do not justify foreign interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

In this regard, the discrediting of the ideological principles of the liberal international order becomes a logical strategy to protect the political system at home. China’s successful control of COVID-19, as well as the US -and most Western democratic countries- inability to do so, has undermined the international image of the democratic form of government and has opened a new window of opportunities for China. The Chinese newspaper Global Times, owned by the People’s Daily, published an article in April 2020 stating that COVID-19 “is exposing all the structural flaws and weaknesses accumulated by the West in recent decades. The exhaustion of the driving force of Western globalization is increasingly evident. Conversely, a clear constructive force of globalization with Chinese characteristics is emerging” (Parenti, 2020). That same month, once Donald Trump announced that Washington would suspend funding to the World Health Organization, Global Times published an editorial arguing that “the US has no ability to reconstruct an international system. What it is doing now is pure destruction. The acts of the US are throwing the world into chaos and crippling the global system. The US political and legal framework cannot restrain its government from acting at its own will. This is the misfortune of the US and the entire world.” (Global Times Editorial, 2020) Both articles can be framed within the discursive war between the United States and China over the management of COVID-19, and they plainly reflect China’s growing international self-confidence after its control of the virus. A self-confidence used to undermine the values and the global position of the United States, the main supporter of the liberal international order.

Donald Trump’s global response to the pandemic has, in fact, damaged the international image of the United States as the leader of the liberal international order. While China embraced a soft power campaign of *mask diplomacy* to portray itself as a global leader capable of helping countries cope with the virus (Wong, 2020), the United States showed a very different picture. Turning away from Barack Obama’s active leadership during the 2014-15 Ebola crisis, when the United States established an international coalition to cope with the spread of the illness, the Trump administration did not smoothly coordinate with its allies. The US dependence on medical equipment from China offered a gloomier image of the most powerful country in the world: the US Strategic National Stockpile only had 1% of the masks and respirators needed to cope with COVID-19, as well as only 10% of ventilators (Campbell & Doshi, 2020). The initial impotence of the United States sharply contrasts with the energetic international response of China after the control of COVID-19 at home, decided to seize the opportunity and fill the gap left empty by the United States.

The implications of China’s triumph over the United States when it comes to the control of the pandemic can be well understood through the German concept of *Zeitgeist*, which refers to the “spirit of the times”. According to Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996, p. 74), “when a country is part of an international ideological community where democracy is only one of many strongly contested ideologies, the chances of transiting to and consolidating democracy are substantially less than if the spirit of the times is one where democratic ideologies have no powerful contenders”. The poor performance of the United States and Europe when it comes to the control of COVID-19 has tarnished the international image of liberal democracy, and this might affect the global cause for its international expansion. However, despite its poor control of the pandemic compared to China, there are still two pieces of good news for the United States. First, as

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proven by the fact that some liberal democracies such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan managed to control the spread of the virus, there is no structural element in the democratic model of governance that prevents an effective pandemic management. And second, two US companies, Pfizer and Moderna, have succeeded in developing and producing mRNA COVID-19 vaccines with worldwide prestige for their high effectiveness compared to vaccines offered by rival companies. These vaccines allowed the West to lead the world in vaccination rates during the early stages of global vaccine deployment at the beginning of 2021.

5. International maneuverability: new opportunities for the US

The United States is not in a favorable position when it comes to the effects of COVID-19 in the economic and ideological areas of its balance of power with China. But paradoxically, the domestic social and political ravages caused by the virus might open a window of opportunity for the international position of the United States. Even to the point that the setbacks discussed in the two previous sections of the paper could be partially offset.

In an increasingly multipolar world, there is no country powerful enough to act as the global leader by itself: it needs to rely on allies and like-minded partners. After World War II, the United States established the norms, institutions, and practices of the liberal international order with the support of a network of allies and partners that, for decades, would side with Washington in the contention of the Soviet Union and the international spread of socialism. Therefore, in a moment of increasing systemic rivalry with China, it is striking that the administration of Donald Trump has attempted to get the support of the traditional allies of Washington while simultaneously reproving them and raising tariffs on some of their products. Donald Trump has claimed that the European Union was “formed in order to take advantage of the United States”, and that it “treats us worse than China” (Alden, 2020). The announcement in October 2019 that the United States would impose \$7.5 billion tariffs on European goods such as cheese, wine and olives (Deutsche Welle, 2019), responded one year later with the European plan to impose 4\$ billion on US products (Amaro, 2020), is just one of the several clashes between two of the most important maintainers of the liberal international order that happened under the presidency of Donald Trump. His administration also threatened to punish Japan (Al Jazeera, 2020a) and South Korea (Song & White, 2019) in 2019 with the raising of tariffs on cars, one of their biggest export to the United States.

As a consequence, it has become increasingly difficult for the United States to get the support of its traditional allies when dealing with China. This trend was already observable during the last years of Barack Obama’s presidency. In spite of US pressures, most of its European and Asian allies enthusiastically joined the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as founding members, and around half of them have officially taken part in the Belt and Road Initiative. In the same way, Donald Trump had great difficulty in convincing its European partners to impose a ban on the deployment of 5G networks using Huawei technology (Pagán, 2020). Beijing’s growing economic influence is already making increasingly difficult for US allies to have a common position with Washington on Chinese initiatives. This also reflects to what extent it is important for the United States to be led by a president who does not create animosity among its traditional allies.

The United States is not in a favorable position when it comes to the effects of COVID-19 in the economic and ideological areas of its balance of power with China

The victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 US Presidential Elections, which can be partly explained by Trump's erratic reaction to COVID-19, might reinforce the international position of the United States as long as he manages to improve Washington's relationship with its traditional allies. In fact, according to a survey experiment on public opinion conducted in Japan by Alexander Agadjanian and Yusaku Horiuchi, Trump presidency has not "irreparably damaged" the international image of the United States abroad, since respondents focus more on the content and attributes of a given political statement (cooperative or hostile) than in its source (Agadjanian & Horiuchi, 2020, p. 585). Therefore, a president with a more conciliatory international discourse would be favorable for a rapprochement between the United States and its traditional allies, in spite of their disagreements on trade and defense spending. In fact, Antony Blinken's appointment as Secretary of State, a defender of multilateralism and diplomacy, will probably improve the relationship of the United States with them.

On the other hand, China is already facing new international challenges. As already mentioned, Joe Biden's presidency might reinforce the relationship of the United States with its traditional allies in order to achieve a common position on China, an area in which Donald Trump failed. For example, in spite of Trump's demands to investigate China for the outbreak of COVID-19 during the annual assembly of the World Health Organization in May 2020, Europe decided to adopt a conciliatory approach (Robertson, 2020). It remains to be seen whether Joe Biden will manage to close the gap with US allies and partners. But in any case, his victory in the 2020 US Presidential Elections undoubtedly increases the pressure on Chinese diplomacy, at the same time that the end of Trump's "America First" decreases China's opportunities to increase its international presence. In fact, some high-level political figures in China expressed their wish for Trump's victory in the presidential election (Schuman, 2020).

In addition, COVID-19 has shown the internal vulnerabilities of the West after decades of globalization, being reliant on China to acquire the medical equipment needed to combat the virus. A partial decoupling with China in critical areas such as pharmaceuticals, technology and reserve manufacturing would affect Beijing's international economic position. This decoupling proposal goes well beyond the assertive rhetoric of Donald Trump. For example, in February 2020, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire urged French companies to review their supply chains in order to become less dependent on China (Irwin, 2020). According to Louis Kuijs, chief Asia economist at Oxford Economics, if the United States decoupled "significantly from China", the Asian country's growth would be half a percentage point lower per year during the next two decades. In case other developed countries joined the United States, the impact on the Chinese economy would be one percentage point (He, 2020). Moreover, the very outbreak of COVID-19 might impact China's relationship with some countries, as it is already happening with Australia. The calls of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 have caused a sharp deterioration in the bilateral relationship between both countries. According to Tony Walker (2020), professor at La Trobe University, Australia's relationship with China is at the worst moment since the normalization of ties in 1972.

Nevertheless, Chinese policy-makers are already acting to prevent the negative international impact of COVID-19 on the country. Since future prospects of globalization are not very bright, at least in some respects, the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party announced in May 2020 the new *Dual Circulation* strategy. Considering that the decoupling of global supply chains will continue during the foreseeable future, the strategy emphasizes domestic reliance, making China less dependent on global integration and reducing its vulnerability to interna-

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tional turbulences (Blanchette & Polk, 2020). In addition, China has managed to expand its regional leadership with the signature of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement between 15 countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania, which represents 30% of global GDP, 28% of world trade and 2.200 million people. The agreement contrasts with Donald Trump's aggressive rhetoric, and was driven by the need of regional economies to promote economic growth after the negative impact of COVID-19. According to Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, "the agreement will help develop the value chains destroyed by COVID-19 and sustain economic recovery" (Sandri, 2020).

6. Conclusion

At the time of concluding this paper, more than 250 million people have been infected by COVID-19, and more than five million have died. The virus has also deeply damaged national economies around the world, causing falls in GDP and destroying jobs, while domestic political tensions increase as a consequence of social instability. This should be the main problem to deal with in an ideal world in which international tensions are left in the background, and in which the main focus lies on addressing pressing social problems brought by the pandemic. But we do not live in that world. This fact does not imply that a more peaceful and cooperative world is unachievable. As the acclaimed constructivist scholar of International Relations Alexander Wendt has claimed, international change is possible because "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 2003, p. 42). Or in other words, the anarchical structure of the international order does not deterministically condemn us to live in a world of distrust and conflict. The European Union, after centuries of fratricidal wars on European soil, is a prime example. But in spite of this possibility, the truth is that the relationship between the United States and China has deteriorated sharply in recent years. The bilateral relationship is no longer seen in both sides as a cooperative one, but rather as a zero-sum game, and their rivalry grows with each passing day. As a consequence, it is essential to carry out an analysis of how the outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted the balance of power between them.

In this regard, even though the United States' economy has performed better than initially expected by the forecasts made during the early stages of the pandemic, it will not be enough to counteract China's economic growth. In fact, China's international economic presence has increased after the outbreak of COVID-19. China is the only major economy with positive growth in 2020, and it is expected that at the end of 2021, China's economy will be 10% larger compared to the figures before the outbreak of COVID-19. In addition, China's foreign trade managed to recover throughout 2020. This economic strength might also reinforce Beijing's position in the technological and military fields. However, the situation is not completely positive for China. International economic uncertainties due to the global impact of COVID-19 might eventually become a challenge for an economic model that is highly reliant on exports and international markets, and Beijing's adherence to the "zero-Covid" strategy is already hampering its economic recovery and people-to-people exchanges between China and the rest of the world.

The ideological pillars of the liberal international order that privileged the adoption of liberal values and democracy have been partially discredited by the inability of most -but not all- liberal democracies to control the expansion of COVID-19. The pandemic outbreak has also tarnished China's international image, but China is not interested in exporting its domestic model

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anyway. Their domestic interests are best served through the discrediting of the “membership principles” of the liberal international order that delegitimize non-liberal democratic regimes. That discrediting has been possible due to the inability of the West to control the virus. Donald Trump’s response to the pandemic worsened the situation, failing to exercise international leadership. China seized the opportunity and filled the gap left empty by the United States. Even so, since the end of 2020, the United States has managed to regain some of its lost prominence thanks to the development of highly prestigious vaccines to combat COVID-19.

However, the negative effects of COVID-19 for the United States in the economic and ideological aspects might be partially offset by the victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 US Presidential Election. The international position of the United States will be reinforced if the new president manages to favor a rapprochement with its traditional allies. A common position on China would not be precisely favorable for Beijing’s interests in a moment of growing rivalry between the rising power and the leader of the existing liberal international order. In addition, globalization has been impacted by the pandemic, and calls for the review of global supply chains are no longer limited to protectionists policy-makers. Chinese leaders know that this trend might eventually impact the country, which explains the announcement of the *Dual Circulation* strategy, aimed at increasing the emphasis on domestic reliance and reducing China’s vulnerability to international turbulences.

Overall, China emerges stronger after the successful control of COVID-19 when it comes to the balance of power with the United States. But it would be a mistake to take for granted that the international position of the United States has been irreparably undermined. Certainly, structural constraints are important at the international level, but state actors have agency, and they are able to shape outcomes. China is in an advantageous position, but not all is lost for the United States. The future of its international leadership, as well as the very future of the liberal international order, will depend on Washington’s ability to overcome the relative disadvantageous position in which it has found itself after COVID-19.

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