

China at the Cross Roads: Covid-19 Pandemic, the Russian-Ukraine War and a Genuine Inclusive, Open and Fair World Order

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Abstract

Three choices confront China. First, China could continue the path of challenging the dominant position of the United States and its allies, risking war by doing so. Secondly, it could settle for a multipolar international order, trying to hold to its leading position in Asia, competing with the U.S. and its allies for the support of Asian countries, in particular Southeast Asia, and courting the countries on the One Belt One Road by promising them development aids. And thirdly it could aim at negotiating a genuinely inclusive, open and fair world order in which China would cooperate with the West in maintaining it.

Keywords

Covid-19 Pandemic, Russo-Ukrainian War, International Liberal Order, World Order

It is a time of pains and suffering, of destruction and death: the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war caught the world community by surprise and turned it upside down. China was seriously affected. Yet it is potentially a time of opportunity, of seizing the fortune and courageously moving towards a better and more promising future. The choice is in the hands of men and women, of citizens and political elites wherever they live. This is so especially for China.

China was confronted with the challenge of how to handle the Covid-19 epidemic when it first broke out in late December 2019. After a few weeks of blunder, not knowing what had happened or how to deal with it, the draconic measures adopted by the Chinese Communist Party and government, the lockdown and zero-Covid strategy seemed to have been working, and in the assessment of some scholars, has proved the superiority of stringent social control, setting a model for the world to imitate. Unfortunately for China, the measures turned out to backfire, and the lockdown in Shanghai early this year brought about much suffering and open opposition to the authorities,¹ exposing the incompetence of the political elite and transforming the crisis into pressure for policy change, for more freedom in daily living. Barely six months later, Covid-19 again spread to many parts of China, including Shenzhen and Sichuan, among others, compelling the authorities to declare a lockdown of the city of Chengdu,² affecting more than twenty million residents. The upcoming Twentieth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, scheduled to be convened on October 16 in Beijing, it would seem, made it into a sensitive issue of national pride with no open discussion possible and no solution thinkable.

But this is not all, the pressure from without, especially from the United States did not help. The Trump administration began to quarrel with China, after a few months of a cordial relationship. With the Democratic Party returned to power under Biden in the year 2020, a re-thinking about American foreign policy towards China was initiated, aimed at the thwarting of China's rise and the rebuilding of the liberal international order with the United States at its head. To quote: China, in particular, has rapidly become

1 Yong Xiong, Simone McCarthy and Hafsa Khalil. 2022. "Shanghai to lock down each half of city for mass Covid-19 testing." *CNN* 27 March 2022. in <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/27/china/shanghai-covid-lockdown-intl/index.html>. Latest update 21 September 2022.

2 Alexandra Stevenson and Zixu Wang. 2022. "China Locks Down Major Southern City of Chengdu," *The New York Times* 1 September 2022. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/01/world/asia/china-covid-lockdown-chengdu.html>. Latest update 9 October 2022.

more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”³ Biden managed to have the support to various degrees of the European Union, NATO, Japan, and Australia. This ambitious scheme was, however, disrupted by the Russo-Ukrainian war, the result of which is at this time of writing not yet clear, but it seems that Putin has miscalculated, dreaming of easy conquest. The war has dragged on, and its end is nowhere in sight. Yet it could not but put China in a very awkward position, given Beijing’s close relationship with Russia and its desire not to break with the United States and its European allies publicly. But can a choice be delayed for long?

Turning to the near future, three choices confront China. First, China could continue the path of challenging the dominant position of the United States and its allies, risking war by doing so. Secondly, it could settle for a multipolar international order, trying to hold to its leading position in Asia, competing with the U.S. and its allies for the support of Asian countries, in particular Southeast Asia, and courting the countries on the One Belt One Road by promising them development aids. And thirdly it could aim at negotiating a genuinely inclusive, open and fair world order in which China would cooperate with the West in maintaining it. This task obviously is very difficult; it would take long years of negotiation and bargaining, agreeing on the rules and building up the institutions as well getting used to the practice. Both China and the United States need to give up their long-cherished image of themselves and the core values they have championed. Changes in domestic political process also would follow. Yet it is a most worthy enterprise which would benefit mankind for decades to come.

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The Covid-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. And it turned out to be a disaster the scale and proportion of which had rarely been experienced in our time. How can this be explained? To begin with, there were hardly any vaccines available that could deal with the virus effectively. Fortunately, many countries, especially those with more advanced medical science and technology raced to develop new vaccines and quickly put them on the

3 Joseph R. Biden, Jr. 2021. *The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. in <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

market. Yet the price was high. Rich countries ferociously competed for them, leaving poor countries in the cold compelling the World Health Organization to openly urge a more equal distribution of the commodity.⁴ As the confirmed cases soared, there simply were no sufficient vaccines, medical personnel, or hospital beds to handle the situation. Medical establishments in many countries either completely collapsed or were threatened with falling to pieces. In Western countries, such as the United States and Europe, the great cultural tradition of individual rights and freedoms was used against the public interest. Take the United States, for example. The courts were divided, with some judges going for traditional ideas.⁵ What was more unfortunate, many Republican politicians and right-wing media figures violently opposed the vaccine mandates and spread doubt on the science and medical expertise behind them, simply exploiting the ignorance of the people for their political purposes. As a result, the vaccination effort was slowed down just in time when the onslaught of the Delta variant set in around June 2021.⁶

Through all this, China was at the heart of the matter. Many indications pointed to the origins of the pandemic in the animal and seafood market in Wuhan, China, and the habit of the local government to cover up any bad news, going so far as to silence and punish Dr Li Wenliang, a courageous whistle blower. When the truth was known, it made Dr. Li a national martyr, which could only be detrimental to the trust of the people in the party and the government. President Trump of the United States was quick to accuse China of covering up. Beijing denied it⁷, and the Director General of the World Health Organization gave his support,⁸ thus contributing to a trilateral accusation and counteraccusation.

4 Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. 2021. "Call to action: Vaccine Equity." World Health Organization. in <https://www.who.int/campaigns/vaccine-equity/vaccine-equity-declaration>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

5 Daniel Trotta and Brad Brooks. 2022. "New York judge strikes down state mask mandate." *Reuters* 25 January 2022. in <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/new-york-state-mask-mandate-struck-down-by-judge-congressman-2022-01-25/>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

6 Paul Krugman. 2022. "Covid's Economic Mutation." *The New York Review of Books* 10 March 2022 issue. in <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/03/10/covids-economic-mutations-krugman/>.

7 Lily Kuo. 2020. "China denies cover-up as Wuhan coronavirus deaths revised up 50%." *The Guardian* 17 April 2020. in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/china-denies-cover-up-as-wuhan-coronavirus-deaths-revised-up-50>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

8 Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. 2020. "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 29 April 2020." World Health Organization. in <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---29-april-2020>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

While a tug of war was going on, China quickly turned to a hardline, tough policy in controlling the situation. Wuhan was locked down during the Chinese New Year break of 2019-2020. A locked down diary presented a vivid sketch of daily life in that unfortunate city: A bustling and prosperous city was suddenly, without warning, shut down: the streets were empty, the supply of food and vegetables became scare and chancy, and the population was nervous and not certain what to expect come tomorrow. The author, a female social worker and a feminist activist, made it clear that her diary was not a diary in the usual sense; she used her diary to discuss public affairs, a diary of what was happening to the city. What impresses her readers, it would seem, is her determination to survive the crisis, to live as well as she could, to keep contact with her friends and to do something to help which she did. She had supporters and followers from many cities in the country.⁹

Following Wuhan, lockdown and other draconic measures became a routine practice in China. Indeed, these measures were quite successful. Many observers abroad were quick to praise Beijing for its determination to do what was necessary to ensure social control, Adam Tooze and Bruno Macaes among them.¹⁰ But they were describing a rapidly changing scene, and were in the end proved wrong in judgement. Shanghai was exposed as the Achilles' heel of that well-touted policy and was locked down in early 2022, and the complaints from the citizens were loud and clear, coming close to an open challenge to the authorities. The Shanghai government admitted their mistakes. Barely six months later, a large part of China was again engulfed in a Covid-19 crisis.

What accounts for the failure of Beijing's policy? As the Economists put it bitingly, "It is one of a trio of problems faced by China this year, alongside a misfiring economy and the war in Ukraine. You may think they are unconnected, but China's response to each has a common root: swagger and hubris in public, an obsession with control in private, and dubious results."¹¹ To put it differently, the root cause was deeply embedded in Chinese history,

9 Guo Jing. 2020. *Wuhan fengcheng riji* [武漢封城日記] (Diary of the Wuhan Lockdown). *New Taipei City*: Linking Publishing. Also Dwight Garner. "'Wuhan Diary' Offers an Angry and Eerie View from Inside Quarantine." *The New York Times* 15 May 2020. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/books/review-wuhan-diary-fang-fang.html>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

10 Krugman, *supra* note 5.

11 The Economist. 2022. "What China Gets Wrong: The pandemic, the economy and the war in Ukraine." 16 April 2022. in <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/04/16/what-china-gets-wrong>.

culture and political process. Briefly, first, the Chinese authorities under Xi were highly nationalistic and high-handed, insisting that only Chinese vaccines be used, never giving any thought that China should import vaccines from Western manufacturers. Yet it turned out that Chinese-produced vaccines were not as effective as the counterparts from the West. How, then, can a mistaken policy be turned around? It is more easily said than done. It is not known if any Chinese expert had warned Xi of the unpleasant truth. Paul Krugman, the well-known economist and columnist is definitely right: would you like to be the expert to do so?¹²

The remedy is clear: China needs a more open and decentralized political process; more people should have access to making decisions, especially the experts and the professional classes, and the rule of law should be upheld, so that the policy could be implemented fairly and effectively. At present, it does not seem that change towards more open and democratic rule is likely to come by. If anything, Xi Jinping is seeking to control, even more tightly, the political process and the entire society in advance of the 20th Party Congress scheduled for mid October this year in which he will be reappointed to his position as the supreme leader of China. Yet it cannot be that all was lost. In the amendment to the Constitution in 2004, it was declared that human rights shall be protected. China also signed both the Civil and Political Rights Covenant and the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Covenant in the 1980s and ratified the latter as well. Granted it could be argued that Beijing need not intend to implement the Covenants, yet it certainly was a promising beginning. Governments tend to ratify international treaties, conventions, and covenants for different motivations, as Professor Simmons has argued,¹³ and it is known that with the passage of time, government could learn that abiding by international agreements serves their national interest as well, beyond taking a moral high ground. What is more critical in the case of China, through the decades of Communist rule, there has never been lack of forceful and vigorous campaigns by the citizens for democracy and human rights, as this writer has described elsewhere.¹⁴ The resistance to dictatorship

12 Paul Krugman. 2022. "Another Dictator Is Having a Bad Year." *The New York Times* 17 March 2022. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/17/opinion/china-russia-xi-jin-ping.html>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

13 Beth A. 2009. Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics*. U.S: Harvard University Press.

14 Mab Huang. 2022. *Intellectuals, Utopian Dreams, and the Question of Human Rights in China*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

and tyranny continues to this day. The 08 Charter campaign of 2010¹⁵ and the crackdown on the rights-defending lawyers en masse in 2015 testify to the tenacity of the men and women fighting for freedom and the rule of law.

II

The Covid-19 pandemic was a burden for China, bringing about severe loss in life, health, and property, and exposing the incompetence of the ruling elite and the local governments. Equally disastrous for Beijing, it could not but help slow down the economy in which the Chinese Communist Party had taken such great pride and on the expansion of which the legitimacy of governance by the Party was to some extent dependent. Now apparently without warning came the wholesale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in late February this year. There is speculation in the foreign press as to what extent China knew of the coming of the war: after all, Putin visited Beijing only two weeks prior to the invasion, and he met Xi Jinping, and they pledged great friendship between their two countries. In the words of the Communique: “Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries...” and in a vague sense, the two sides also declared to “seek multipolarity with the United Nations and its Security Council playing a central and coordinating role...”¹⁶ Similarly, there has been plenty of guessing about Putin’s motivation and calculation in moving against Ukraine, as the two countries had had such close relations, belonging to the same ethnic group, many of their people speaking both languages, and not very long- ago Ukraine was a Republic in the Soviet Federation. Indeed, it is not easy for outside observers to understand what happened. Putin’s own explanations did not help much, for he was not consistent in his thinking. When he first spoke of the war, he asserted that the military move was for the purpose of protecting the Russian-speaking minority in East Ukraine, a defensive move.¹⁷ Yet the next time he talked about

15 Li Xiaorong and Zhang Zuhua eds. 2009. *Lingba xianzhang* 《零八憲章》 (Charter 08). Hong Kong: Open Books.

16 President of Russia. 2022. “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.” 4 February 2022. in <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>. Latest update 27 September 2022.

17 Bloomberg News. 2022. “Transcript: Vladimir Putin’s Televised Address on Ukraine.” *Bloomberg* 24 February 2022. in <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

the war, he went so far as to deny the statehood of Ukraine, arguing that it has always been part of Russia. To quote: “Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, communist Russia... As a result of Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose, which even today can with good reason be called ‘Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s Ukraine. He is its author and architect...’ Again, “Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood.”¹⁸ His assertions, nevertheless, were not credible. What is certain, if anything, was Putin’s hubris, his belief that he could conquer Ukraine in a few weeks, because the Ukrainian people did not support their government and would not fight in face of the superior armed forces under his command. To his dismay, the Ukrainian people fought bravely; his military was ill-trained and ill-equipped and did not know what they were fighting for. The campaign was a disaster of the first proportion for the self-inflated, over-confident dictator. Foreign aid poured in for Ukraine, and the war has dragged on into its sixth month. Putin was forced to order a partial mobilization of the armed forces, provoking demonstrations in some thirty cities in Russia and leading to the arrest of more than one thousand protesters by the government.¹⁹ In the process, Putin also moved to annex the four regions occupied by Russian army part of Russian territory. He signed a decree in October to that effect. Speculations in the West pointed to his tightening control of the economy in anticipation of need of more resources for the war effort.²⁰ Putin’s position was severely weakened..

Against this background, China was put in an awkward position, in the words of Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore: I think it presents them with awkward questions. Because on Ukraine, it violates the principles which the Chinese hold very dearly-territorial integrity, and sovereignty and non-interference.²¹ Yan Xuetong, an influential scholar in China also testified to

18 Bloomberg News. 2022. “Vladimir Putin’s Victory Day Speech.” *Bloomberg* 20 May 2022. in <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-09/full-transcript-here-s-russian-president-vladimir-putin-s-victory-day-speech>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

19 Valerie Hopkins. 2022. “At least 745 people are detained in protests across Russia.” *The New York Times* 24 September 2022. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/24/world/europe/protests-putin-russia-war.html>. Latest update 9 October 2022.

20 Andrew E. Kramer and Neil MacFarquhar. 2022. “Putin Declares Martial Law in 4 Illegally Annexed Ukrainian Regions.” 19 October 2022. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/19/world/europe/russia-putin-ukraine-martial-law.html>. Latest update 26 November 2022.

21 Philip Heijmans. 2022. “Singapore PM Says Ukraine War Poses ‘Awkward Questions’ for China,” *Bloomberg* 31 March 2022. in <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-31/singapore-says-ukraine-war-poses-awkward-questions-for-china>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

the dilemma confronting China.²² Briefly stated Xi Jinping was pressured from many sides. The United States pressed him to side with the West, and failing that, to keep neutral in the war. Ukraine urged him to help guarantee the security and integrity of their country. Yet Xi would not, or could not, abandon his Russian ally, nor did he want to give the United States and the Western countries any pretext to take more concrete measures against him. Thus, the world was treated to the spectacle of a series of balancing acts. When the General Assembly of the United Nations voted to condemn Russia for the invasion of Ukraine, Beijing chose abstention,²³ and it was not until the war began to drag on and turn against Russia, that Beijing gingerly shifted its position. In an interview of the Foreign Minister of Ukraine by the Chinese official news agency on April 30, Beijing did not censor the claims that Ukraine was exercising the “right to self-defense” in the face of an invasion. In fact, the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine went further, urging China to act together with other permanent members of the Security Council in safeguarding its security. But as the war turned against Russia, Beijing seems to move closer to Moscow, pledging great solidarity and joint efforts in economic development and trade between the two countries, especially in the territory of the Russian Far East.²⁴ In a speech at the plenary session of the seventh Eastern Economic Forum held in Vladivostok, Li Zhanshu, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, did precisely that. This was quickly followed by Xi’s presence at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Forum in which he pledged to work with an expanded Forum including Iran, Saudi Arabia and India, apparently against the United States and the Western alliance.²⁵ Was Beijing taking advantage of the vulnerability of Russia? And would the friendship endure? Judging by the history of the Sino-Russia relationship in the 20th century, both under

22 Yan Xuetong. 2022. “China’s Ukraine Conundrum Why the War Necessitates a Balancing Act.” *Foreign Affairs* 2 May 2022. in <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-02/chinas-ukraine-conundrum>. Latest update 18 May 2022.

23 Farnaz Fassihi. 2022. “The U.N. General Assembly passes a resolution strongly condemning Russia’s invasion.” United Nations. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/world/europe/russia-un-invasion-condemn.html>. Latest update 9 October 2022.

24 Cao Desheng. 2022. “China to boost Far East growth, top legislator says.” *China Daily* 9 September 2022. in <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202209/09/WS631a7c00a310fd2b29e76bfa.html>.

25 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 2022. “President Xi Jinping Attends the 22nd Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of State and Delivers Important Remarks.” in https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220916_10767162.html. Latest update 9 October 2022.

the Chinese Nationalist Party in the forties or the Chinese Communist Party during the sixties, it is far from being friendly and cordial.

As for the United States, so far it has done well indeed. Biden decided early on not to fight Russia, nor ask the NATO allies to do so, so that the West would not risk a nuclear confrontation. Instead, he managed to rally Europe in supporting Ukraine both militarily and by economic assistance. By doing so, NATO apparently was revived, after long years of losing its mission, with Finland and Sweden giving up more than one hundred years of neutrality to join the NATO alliance.

Turning to Asia, Biden apparently secured the promise of Japan to take the Chinese threat seriously. For the first time post-World War II, Japan was committed to a closer military relationship with the United States in case China attacked Taiwan. Australia also lined up with the United States and United Kingdom in developing and building nuclear submarines, to the irritation of France because Australia had to break an earlier agreement with France to build non-nuclear submarines. The U.S. did not succeed with India, Iran and Saudis Arabs, as they had made very different calculations of their needs and interest. Biden had to relax somehow in his efforts to contain China, if only due to the need to concentrate on the crisis in Ukraine. Yet he did not entirely give up his intention. Biden chose to keep some of the measures adopted by the Trump administration relating to trade against China, preferring to do a comprehensive review of its trade policy vis-à-vis China and was keen in competition with China in the manufacture of computer chips and in other high technology fields. And in countering military moves by Beijing in the Taiwan Strait, the United States was firm yet not provocative. The crisis created by the visit of Pelosi to Taipei was followed by the passage in the Senate of the Taiwan Policy Act, which proposed to be a comprehensive reformulation of the Taiwan Relations Act of the Nixon era.²⁶ Despite much speculation, a military assault on Taiwan does not seem imminent. The Biden administration, however, had proposed a well thought out policy towards China. It urged to mix competition with cooperation.²⁷

26 Bob Menendez. 2022. "This Is How the U.S. Will Stand with Taiwan." *The New York Times*. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/03/opinion/taiwan-us-defense-china.html>. Latest update 9 October 2022.

27 Antony Blinken. 2022. "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China." U.S. Department of State. in <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>. Latest update 25 September 2022.

Briefly, the United States aims at adopting a three plank strategy vis-à-vis China: “We will invest in the foundations of our strength here at home—our competitiveness, our innovation, our democracy,” “We will align our efforts with our network of allies and partners, acting with common purposes and in common cause,” and “harnessing these two key assets, we will compete with China to defend our interests and build our vision for the future.” Referring to cooperation, Secretary Blinken emphasized climate change and Covid-19, among others, as two areas that the United States and China must cooperate to solve the problems. “Climate is not about ideology. It is about math. There is simply no way to solve climate change without China’s leadership, the country that produces 28 percent of global emissions.” Likewise, “on the Covid-19 pandemic, our fates are linked.”

Obviously, the first two planks are aimed at rectifying the dismal mistakes of the Trump administration. Biden knew well that without investing in the infrastructure, the highways, the ports and the airports, as well as in education and worker training, in science and technology, the United States would be left behind China in many fields. As will be discussed in some detail in the following pages, it is equally clear that the challenge to the Biden administration and to the nation, lies in internal affairs, in making the United States a genuinely inclusive, open and fair society, treating equally diverse ethnic groups, women and immigrants, and bidding farewell to the deeply embedded “white man first” ideology.

III

Against this increasingly entangled relationship of the great powers as briefly sketched above, what choices does China enjoy? It is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge if Xi Jinping’s leadership is facing a serious challenge from within, from colleagues in the political bureau, the military establishment and/or the government bureaucracy and the professional classes. Assuming that he is re-elected to his supreme leadership position come October, and that he is still committed to restoring China to its glorious historic status and prestige having vaguely persuaded himself that the East is in the ascendent while the West is in decline, then China will go on challenging the United States for the dominant position from which to dictate international order. Indeed, in the words of John Ikenberry, a well-known scholar in the field of international relations, “For seven decades, the world

has been dominated by a western liberal order” led by the United States; and it was “organized around economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity... Looking at the world at the end of the twentieth century, one could be excused for thinking that history was moving in a progressive and liberal international direction”²⁸

If China persists in challenging the United States, Beijing will almost certainly refuse to negotiate and compromise with the United States and its allies on all fronts, including trade, finance, manufacture, and climate change. No effort will be made to monitor and rein in military exercises in the South China Sea or across the Taiwan Strait. This would precisely look like the Thucydides trap, made popular by Professor Allison, which he defines as the danger of war “when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power,” and China and the United States are precisely finding each other in such a death trap.²⁹

If war broke out, it would be difficult to predict how would it go or the degree of destruction visited on the belligerents and many other countries, including Taiwan. But it can be certain that there will be no winners. It only serves to prove the seventeenth century Sweden diplomat and statesman Count Axel Oxenstierna right when he wrote to his son lamenting that “With what little wisdom is the world governed.”

IV

If Beijing chose to pull back from risking war in challenging the United States, then it could settle for a multipolar international order. It should not be difficult for China to do so, for with the end of the cold war, the international community would seem to be heading in that direction. As early as 1992, John Mearsheimer predicted that “bipolarity will disappear with the passing of the Cold War, and multipolarity will emerge in the new international order.”³⁰ Professor Kenneth Waltz followed a year later with his speculation on the reemergence of a new array of great powers: Japan, China,

28 John Ikenberry. 2018. “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* 94, 1: 7-23.

29 Graham Allison. 2015. “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U. S. and China headed for War?” *The Atlantic* 24 September 2015; also Graham Allison. 2017. *Destinated for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

30 John Mearsheimer. 1992. “Disorder Restored,” in Graham Allison and Gregory Treverton eds. *Rethinking America’s Security*: 227. New York: Norton.

the European Union, Germany, and a revived Russia.³¹ Thirty years later, the array of powers need not be what Waltz anticipated, yet his meaning is clear. And as referred to above, China has vaguely spoken about a quest for a multipolar international system. What China serious?

But would the United States acquiesce? Or would it be forced to accept multipolar order as a lesser evil to a devastating war? To begin with, the United States has never spoken about the possibility of accepting a multipolar order. As soon as Biden was inaugurated, he announced that he was committed to bringing back the values of the nation, and to go for a rules-based international liberal order. But that was before the intervention of Covid-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian War. Indeed, there is no doubt that the United States and its European allies have been weakened. In the United States, since the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Socialist camp, the George W. Bush administration erred in thinking that the United States could single-handedly dominate the whole world and do what it so desired. “The architects of American’s national security strategy ... articulated a vision of American primacy. As provider of global security, the United States would operate more or less above other states, making choices and deploying forces outside agreed-upon alliances and cooperative security frameworks.”³²

Against this background, the G. W. Bush administration proceeded to reject many international treaties and agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, as well as withdrawing from the 1970s ABM treaty. This ambitious strategy, as could be expected, was met with skepticism and mistrust from American allies and many other governments. It was not sustainable.

Donald Trump’s grab for power in 2016 testified to the rise of populist sentiment and the loss of nerve of the political elite. It could only further wreck the United States. It is beyond doubt that Donald Trump must be reckoned as the most ignorant, arrogant and bigoted man to have occupied the White House. In domestic affairs, he went against the values and principles

31 Kenneth Waltz. 1993. “The Emerging Structure of International Politics.” *International Security* 18, 2 (Fall): 45-73.

32 John Ikenberry. 2011. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*: 323. Princeton University Press.

on which the United States were founded, albeit honoring them in the breach time and again. Trump publicly railed against women, minorities, especially the black and Muslim minorities and Mexicans, encouraging police brutality. As for the role of the United States on the world stage, he to a large degree followed the G. W. Bush administration, if doing it in a more irrational and unpredictable manner. This was blatantly manifested in his relations with Beijing and North Korea. Yet his war cry “Make America Great Again,” managed to attract many millions of poor and downtrodden citizens to his side and still does. His instigation of the assault on Congress on January 6 was nothing less than a national shame, an open rebellion against the constitutional order for which he has not yet been duly punished, a sign of a deep division in American politics.

It must be very difficult for the liberal elites in the United States to face up the realities, the decline of a great power and their domination of the political process. Yet they are to blame, for they had for long years neglected the well-being of the working class, not only about their loss of job but look down on the dignity and worth of labor. By conceding to the errors they had made, could they hope to renew their faith in their core values and return to chart the course of their country in the future. The pandemic exacted a high cost in life and economic performance as well as social stability. Before Biden declared that the pandemic was coming to an end,³³ it was estimated that more than one million American had died, and the loss in jobs and resources and opportunity for creativity and innovation in science and technology would be difficult to calculate, not to speak of the social dislocation and psychological anguish suffered by millions.³⁴

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine was also costly for the United States and its allies as well, not only in terms of economic aids, but in the higher prices of food and energy, for both Russia and Ukraine had been the sources of grains and oil and gas. Europe is facing a hard time come this winter.

33 Sheryl Gay Stolberg. 2022. “Biden Says the Pandemic Is Over. But at Least 400 People Are Dying Daily.” *The New York Times* 19 September 2022. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/19/us/politics/biden-covid-pandemic-over.html>. Latest update 9 October 2022.

34 Danielle Ivory, Robert Gebeloff, Brandon Dupré, Cierra S. Queen, Chloe Reynolds, Yves De Jesus, Laney Pope, Lauryn Higgins, Jess Ruderman, Bonnie G. Wong, Kristine White and Matt Craig. 2022. “A Closer Look at the Impact of 1 Million U.S. Covid Deaths.” *The New York Times* 20 May 2022. in <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/us/us-covid-deaths-impact.html>. Latest update: 9 October 2022.

For China, a choice for a multipolar international order would indicate that the political elite would move in the direction of “collective leadership”, and civil society would be given more space to pursue its goals, even if this space were constrained. This has happened in China before, during the periods when Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were in command during the 1980s and the 1990s. Briefly for about two decades, in pursuit of the four modernizations inherited from Deng Xiaoping, China adopted a more friendly and accommodating policy towards the West and as a correlation allowed intellectuals and professional classes slightly more freedom in their work and daily life. This could happen again.

Furthermore, the choice of a multipolar international order would be conducive for China to negotiate and compromise with the West and its European allies. Blinken’s approach to China would not be completely ignored. There would be give and take. There would still be much instability in the international system. War could not be absolutely ruled out. And millions of men and women and children, especially those living in Asia, Latin America and Africa would still live in poverty and suffer from grave injustice and be without a sense of dignity. Could humanity do better?

V

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, to opt and negotiate for a genuine inclusive and more open and fair world order is a most difficult task, but it is the right policy for China to pursue, not only for the benefit of China, but for peace and security world-wide for decades to come.

What precisely is this world order? How does it differ from a multipolar order? What is there for China? And what does it need to give up? Briefly, such a world order would better maintain peace and security which is preferable to the threat of war and/or the possibility of war. Secondly, it would assure a higher standard of living for all the inhabitants of this earth, with a fair distribution of world resources and a life of justice and dignity. In principle, this ambitious vision this side of Utopia dovetails with Kofi Annan’s report in 2005 “In Larger Freedoms” in which he asserted that “a historic opportunity” was on hand and humanity must act boldly to achieve the goals. To quote:

“Five years into the new millennium, we have it in our power to pass on to our children a brighter inheritance than that bequeathed to any previous

generation...” Again, “The notion of larger freedom also encapsulates the idea that development, security and human rights go hand in hand. Even if he can vote to choose his rulers, a young man with AIDS who cannot read or write and lives on the brink of starvation is not truly free. Equally, even if she earns enough to live, a woman who lives in the shadow of daily violence and has no say in how her country is run is not truly free.”³⁵ Development, security and human rights are all imperative; and they reinforce each other.

Kofi Annan, indeed, deserves to be commended for his commitment to reform the world organization to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, but are the mechanisms at the disposal of the United Nations up to the task?

Take war and the war crimes, for example. With the creation of the United Nations, the Security Council and much later the International Criminal Court were assigned the responsibility of preventing war and punishing war crimes, yet their record can only say to be mixed, with some success and many failures. Article 2 (4) was resorted to only twice: during the Korean War and the first Gulf War. As for the war in Vietnam which was such a long war, the United Nations was completely sidelined by the United States. The handling of the brutal civil war in the Congo was nothing less than a shameful disaster. It is difficult to argue that the Security Council can perform adequately without radical restructuring. At the minimum, it would appear that Security Council must be enlarged, with more members representing small and weak countries, meanwhile abolishing the veto power of the permanent members as well. Of course, the decision must await negotiation and bargaining in the years to come.

As referred to above, Kofi Annan spoke hopefully of the Millennium Summit. No doubt, progress has been made in the past thirty years in reducing absolute poverty, improving education worldwide and empowering women, among others.³⁶ But more needed to be done. Granted when the

35 United Nations General Assembly. 2005. “In Larger Freedom: towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All.” Report of the Secretary-General 21 March 2005. in <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/CPR%20A%2059%202005.pdf>. Latest update: 9 October 2022.

36 International Institute for Sustainable Development. 2018. “Kofi Annan and the Transition to Sustainable Development Goals.” in <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/kofi-annan-and-the-transition-to-sustainable-development-goals/>. Latest update: 9 October 2022.

project came to an end in the year 2015, a continuing plan entitled Sustainable Development Goals was announced to be completed by 2030.³⁷ Again a serious and thorough review of these two projects must be undertaken. To begin with, it can be anticipated that the problems facing the poor and the developing countries would prove very difficult to tackle. Of course, more aid and loans must be provided for them, without exploiting them or treating them as colonies. Yet, the corruption in the developing countries must be ended so that the new agenda could be implemented fairly and effectively.

If every human being is to be assured of a life with dignity, the Human Rights Council must be re-shaped. At a minimum, any state with a record of continuing gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms should not be seated. Likewise, the Universal Periodic Review and the Special Rapporteur System should be made meaningful, and not a charade.

In the brief discussion above concerning war and war crimes, a better life with dignity and rights is deliberately left vague so that it would encourage debate and discussion. It must be emphasized that they are doable, not beyond the reach of humankind.

What then does China have to give up? And by implication, the United States? This writer would first argue that for the project to work, China must first give up the obsession of being wronged and humiliated and its dream of historic glory and greatness. China has witnessed a great civilization. Its arts, science and technology, ethics, and governance have at one time far surpassed the achievements of the West, yet time has changed, and no nation can live in the past. To manipulate blind nationalism is a short-sighted and untenable policy; and when it is an authoritarian government using every new technology of social control to maintain itself in power which does the manipulation, it is a deadly disease. For many decades in China, not only have the people suffered from violations of rights and freedoms, equally detrimental to the nation, creativity and imagination was being punished. As a result, no great art, poetry, painting, architect, theatre, both in the traditional or contemporary mold, nor any world-class achievement in ethics, political philosophy, or practical ideas in government have emerged. In the face of a bloated state, culture withers away.

37 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2015. "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." in <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>. Latest update: 9 October 2022.

In mirror image, the United States must no longer cherish the hope that it enjoys the supremacy it has taken for granted since World War II. To achieve a genuine inclusive, open and fair world order, the United States must first of all give up the deeply ingrained idea of “white man first.” It is dismaying to realize that the idea of racial inequality is so embedded in the psyché of the average white person and can so easily be brought to the surface. The four years of Trump’s administration clearly demonstrated this sickness. Now Trump and his supporters threaten to return to power, and the Supreme Court in a series of decisions, especially the decision to overthrow the Roe vs Wade verdict does not portend well for the rights of the poor, female minorities and immigrants. A long and hard struggle plainly lies ahead.

The agenda for negotiation and bargaining is difficult to predict. Nevertheless, it can be anticipated that it would go beyond Blinken’s proposed list. Yet he was not mistaken that among the items to be included, climate change and Covid-19 and related viruses which present such a serious threat to the survival of humankind must be taken seriously.

No process of negotiation would be neat or tidy. To begin with, who is entitled to take part? Who would hold what power and bear what responsibility? Would states still be the predominant actors in the new order? Directly and indirectly, states, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, the academic community, religious groups and prominent individuals would all play a part. And clarity of goals to be achieved would be critical for any success. To always keep in mind the goals, to patiently argue and thrash them out, duties should be part of the equation. In this connection, the experience of reaching a consensus on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights could provide some lessons,³⁸ so perhaps the debate and discussion on the Millennium Goals with its targets and indicators could also be of help.

It is also assumed that the commitment to negotiation and bargaining itself would bring about, and help set in motion, the revival of civil society in China and the push for more democratic rule and a more open society; while in the United States, Trump supporters and conservative members of the Republican Party would suffer a setback. The poor and non-white peoples, women and immigrants would be free and equal.

38 Mary Ann Glendon. 2001. *A World Made New, Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. US: New York.

VI

The Covid 19 epidemic, without any warning, erupted and quickly engulfed the whole globe. No region and no country were spared. In a period of three years, assuming that the epidemic will be coming to an end by late 2022, as Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization announced on September 14, “We have never been in a better position to end the pandemic... We are in a winning position. But now is the worst time to stop running.”³⁹ it will have devastated a great part of the earth, bringing unprecedented suffering, loss of life and sicknesses, including the death of public health care personnel and loved ones. It goes without saying that its impact on the economy was dismal. From the beginning the dilemma between saving lives, going for a zero Covid strategy conflicted with economic recovery and put governments under severe pressure. In its wake, many governments fell.

As if humankind had not suffered enough, Putin of Russia unleashed a war of conquest on Ukraine, threatening to take the world back to the jungle. It could be argued that this war was unreasonable and unnecessary. It is estimated that the war might come to an end by the end of 2022; but it could last longer. There will be no winners, and the peoples on both sides have been made to pay such a high price: the Ukrainian people with their dead, wounded and displaced, not to speak of loss in property, transportation and communications, the restoration of which would require a huge investment in manpower and money. The Western nations are more than obliged to aid. As for Russia, it has suffered primarily due to sanctions by the West and their effect on daily life. And in a long-range perspective, it has suffered because the country was exposed as a weak and corrupt country, no longer capable of playing a leading role in international affairs. As for the world economy, according to the OECD Economic Outlook Interim Report issued in September 2022, it “is paying a high price... With the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic still lingering, the war is dragging down growth and putting additional pressure on prices, above all for food and energy. Global GDP stagnated in the second quarter of 2022 and output declined in the G7 economies. High inflation in the first half of 2022 was at its highest since the

39 World Health Organization. 2022. “WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing–14 September 2022.” in <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing--14-september-2022>. Latest update: 9 October 2022.

1980s. With recent indicators taking a turn for the worse, the world economic outlook has darkened.⁴⁰

For the three alternatives discussed briefly in this paper, it is clear that, first, the United States cannot continue in its role as supreme predominant power, and it would be good for all concerned if the United States faced up to the realities. The second choice, to return to a multipolar system would most likely to prevail if no great effort were made to change its course. Most scholars of the political realist theory would have preferred it, this writer tends to assume. Yet it would be highly unstable, harboring the seeds of self-destruction and war. Only the third alternative, a genuine inclusive, open and fair world order will provide the foundation of peace and security and ensure development and promotion and protection of basic rights and freedoms for all .

40 OECD. 2022. "Paying the price of War: OECD Economic Outlook, Interim Report, September 2022." in <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/September-2022>.

在十字路口的中國： 新冠疫情、俄烏戰爭與一個開放與 公平的世界秩序

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摘要

中國面對三個抉擇：一、挑戰美國的霸權地位，也可能因之引爆大戰。二、接受多極的國際秩序、維持在亞洲的主導地位，並與美國爭取東南亞及一帶一路國家的支持。三、與美國及西方國家合作，形塑並維持一個開放與公平的世界秩序、追求和平並提升全人類的生活水平與尊嚴的生活。

關鍵字

新冠肺炎疫情、俄烏戰爭、自由國際秩序、世界秩序
