

# THE NEW NORMAL IN ASIA

*A National Bureau of Asian Research series exploring ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic might shape or reorder the world across multiple dimensions*

## Uncharted Territory

### *Asian Security after Covid-19*

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Asia for years has been gathering a string of “best in the world” titles, both positive and negative—the center of growth in the global economy, or the region with the most nuclear powers, the largest general-purpose armed forces, and the most geopolitical hot spots. For years it has also been the region with the most natural disasters—earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, volcanic eruptions. As for man-made disasters, Asia also laps the field. It generates the most pollution and is the leading source of pandemics.

The current Covid-19 pandemic is playing out against an intensified geopolitical competition between the United States and China, continued growth in both the general purpose and nuclear forces in the region, and continued, if not increased, confrontation in the region’s hot spots. Only in the area of pollution has the pandemic had a positive effect, and that promises to be short-lived. Do past natural and man-made disasters in Asia offer clues to the eventual outcome of current events?

The SARS outbreak of 2003 was an animal-to-human epidemic that originated in Guangdong Province in China. It was much less destructive than Covid-19 has been, resulting in under a thousand deaths. As in the case of Covid-19, the Chinese government was slow in acknowledging the extent of the epidemic and attempted initially



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to minimize its seriousness. Based on the work of epidemiologist Carlo Urbani, who first identified SARS (and later tragically died of it), the World Health Organization (WHO) took a strong leading international role, despite Chinese obfuscation and uncooperativeness. It issued travel advisories, which China (and other countries) protested, and it publicly condemned Chinese actions. After several months, China reversed its policies, acknowledged the seriousness of the outbreak to its own citizens, fired its minister of health and other officials, and began to cooperate with the WHO. International efforts, with China eventually participating, successfully contained SARS within a few months. During those months, there was little military posturing in the region, and international efforts to deal with the epidemic had high priority.

The December 26, 2004, tsunami caused over 150,000 deaths in Indonesia and over 225,000 total deaths across Asia. In contrast to the Covid-19 response, the global reaction was overwhelmingly helpful and cooperative. All countries in the region sent condolences and provided assistance. If there was international competition, it was in providing assistance. In a startling and welcome development, the tsunami ended what had been a growing insurgency in the Indonesian province of Aceh.

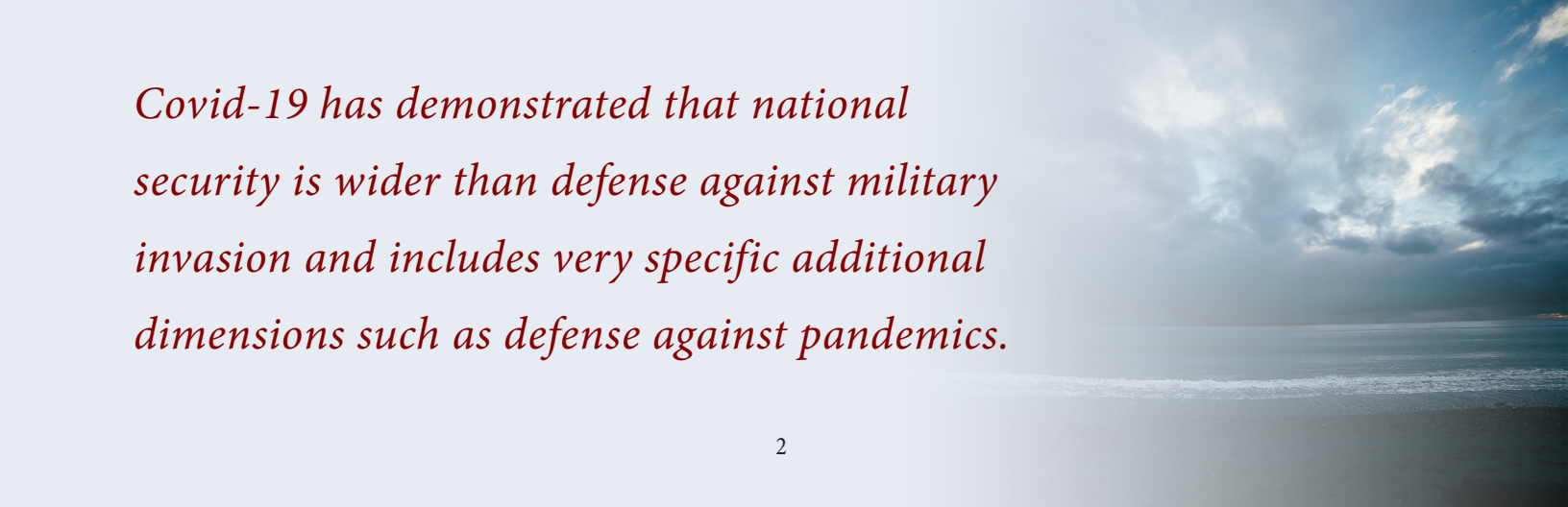
The March 11, 2011, earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan and flooded a nuclear power station in Fukushima showed the fragility of global supply chains. Automobile production throughout the world was affected by the closure of small-parts

manufacturers in the affected area in northern Japan. Again, the world reaction was helpful and cooperative, and geopolitical effects were minimal but positive.

In summary, the legacy of natural disasters in Asia has been generally positive. More often than not, they have engendered international cooperation, albeit sometimes slowly, especially on China's part. They have demonstrated global interdependence, and their lessons have caused some countries to take measures that increased resilience against future disasters.

The coronavirus pandemic shows little promise of adding to this positive legacy, the only real silver lining one can hope for from incidents that are overwhelmingly tragic. From the beginning, China chose not to continue the approach it had taken in the later stages of the SARS epidemic. Rather, it pulled out its old playbook of denial and obfuscation, adding the tactics of blaming others and reacting to criticism with indignation and countercharges. The United States, for its part, took a very narrow nationalistic approach, including blaming China. The WHO fell far short of its independent and fearless performance of 2003. Other countries have been left to fall back on their own resources, which they have done with varying levels of success.

In short, recent history offers us little help in predicting the international environment that will emerge following the current pandemic. We must rely instead on informed judgment. There are three logical effects of the pandemic that will likely shape the Asian security architecture of the future.



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First, neither China nor the United States will gain an advantage in standing, authority, and influence from the way it has handled the epidemic at home and the international leadership it has demonstrated.

China's early stonewalling and misinformation are widely recognized globally. Its aggressive diplomacy and media outreach to shift blame to others, while touting the success of its containment of the virus at home, have been obvious and ineffective. Defective equipment and demands for payment, for example, have undercut China's efforts to publicize the international assistance it has provided.

The U.S. government has shown no international leadership in responding to the pandemic. On the contrary, it has openly prioritized its own needs, cast actions such as travel restrictions as defenses against other countries, and attacked and withdrawn from the WHO, without promoting an alternative forum to coordinate international health cooperation and mutual support. There have been many generous international actions by U.S. NGOs and businesses, but they have not offset the selfish actions by the U.S. government.

As a result, the countries of Asia have largely had to rely on their own decisions and resources to protect their citizens. South Korea and Taiwan have been especially effective in containing the virus, aided by the lessons learned and the standby capacity they developed and maintained following the SARS epidemic. Vietnam also has been very effective in its response, even without the testing and medical resources of richer countries. Using basic

public health policies and practices and tapping patriotism by portraying the campaign as a national struggle, Vietnam has held infections and deaths to very low levels. Other countries of Asia have coped largely on their own, with varying success. India, a veteran of many past health disasters, seems to be bumbling through the latest crisis inefficiently but not disastrously.

For American allies Japan, South Korea, and Australia, the U.S. and Chinese pandemic responses will have only a minor effect on their security policies, which are firmly tied to the United States. The major factors affecting alliances remain U.S. policies toward China—both economic and security policies—and bilateral issues such as the stationing of American forces. However, the United States' self-centered approach during the pandemic will weaken alliance relationships. It is one more data point in a picture of reduced emphasis on alliances as the foundation of U.S. national security policy.

For other countries in Asia, the long-term effect of their pandemic responses will probably be greater self-reliance in areas other than public health, perhaps even security. In general, the region's countries have preferred U.S. security relations and leadership. The United States has a 75-year history of leading with a light hand that is preferable to China's more recent mercantilist and bullying approach of applying its power to both bilateral and multilateral issues. It is unlikely that countries will move toward security relations with China based

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on its performance during the pandemic. Yet, if their confidence diminishes in the United States' continued commitment to leadership on important issues, they will likely favor self-reliance.

Second, the pandemic will affect the basic construct of security concepts in Asia that has generally separated economic and security factors and policies. The crisis has dramatized the linkages between these two spheres and will encourage the region's countries to take these linkages into account in their policies.

At the most basic level, many countries in Asia have attempted to maintain stronger security relationships with the United States, while building economic relationships with China as it has become the largest importer of their products, whether natural resources or manufactured. This has been true for Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, for example. Even close U.S. treaty allies such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia have sought to do increased business with China and to profit from the growing Chinese market. When China has attempted to leverage economic relations in security disputes—such as over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system in South Korea in 2017 or the Japanese arrest of a Chinese fishing vessel in 2012—U.S. allies have resolutely attempted to keep the two spheres separate.

Covid-19 has demonstrated that national security is wider than defense against military invasion and includes very specific additional dimensions such as defense against pandemics. Covid-19 also has demonstrated the dangers of dependence on China

for the most basic medical equipment such as masks, gowns, and swabs. Not only is the quality of some equipment produced in China substandard, but in the connected world of today crises are not confined to single countries, and demand for many items is simultaneous. China has demonstrated that it has first call on domestic production, whether the producer is a Chinese state-owned enterprise or a Chinese subsidiary of an international company.

There are other elements of national security that are not military. 5G wireless infrastructure had become an issue even before the current crisis. China's actions during the pandemic will not support those (such as Huawei's leadership) who argue that the Chinese government would never exploit the wireless equipment its companies installed and maintained in other countries, and that even if it did, a Chinese company could refuse to comply. China's ambition to establish a natural gas energy hub in China will be suspect as well.

Probably most important, however, are China's ambitions to win a share of the dollar's dominance as the world's reserve currency. Will Asian countries want to hold Chinese bonds and clear transactions in renminbi? China's pandemic performance gives little support to the country's pretensions to be a neutral international financial center. The United States has developed a full range of tools to use its dominance of the global financial system for political purposes, but it has used them against common enemies such as drug dealers and terrorist groups, as well as international pariah states such as North Korea and Iran. While these tools have affected

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other countries, including U.S. treaty allies, those countries have not been the primary targets.

While American international leadership during the pandemic has not been up to its historical standard, the United States has not undercut its reliability as an even-handed, transparent business and financial center. China's performance, on the other hand, has cast doubts on the restraint China would show should it gain more economic points of leverage over other countries.

Third, U.S. and Chinese performance during the pandemic has further diminished the hope—a hope shared by the author and one that appears in most American and some Chinese official statements—of “disaggregation” of U.S.-China relations. Disaggregation is the separation of the relationship into areas of competition and cooperation. There are many areas in which, from an objective viewpoint, the United States and China have interests that run parallel: for example, in stable and low energy prices, stability and the suppression of Islamist terrorist groups in the Middle East, a denuclearized North Korea, the reduction of greenhouse gases, and a secure internet. Both countries have much to gain from cooperation in these areas, even as they compete strongly in others.

If there were ever an issue on which cooperation should have been easy, it was the coronavirus pandemic. By the final months of the SARS epidemic, the two countries were cooperating relatively smoothly, brokered by the WHO. Yet seventeen years later, they both reverted to China's approach in the early stages of that epidemic, characterized by rosy and wrong public statements, misuse and abuse of the WHO, and blame and recriminations. If the world's two most powerful countries cannot cooperate on containing a pandemic, what can they cooperate on?

It is clear that American and Chinese leaders, supported by a large proportion of their citizens, see their interests as competitive and thus encourage confrontation in most areas of their relationship, even those that have traditionally offered opportunities for cooperation. The United States and China, with the rest of Asia involved to varying extents, are preparing for a sustained period of across-the-board disputes. The region's experience during the pandemic will encourage other countries to lessen the exposure of their critical supply chains to China and to increase self-reliance within their security relationships with the United States. ∞

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