COVID-19 and Its Effect on the Indo-Pacific Region

For now, many countries worldwide are still under siege from the Coronavirus, threatening millions of lives. However, it is leaving a much different mark, for instance, in the Indo-Pacific Region. Even before the pandemic hit, it had been far from smooth sailing in the area due to a number of disputes and conflicting interests between regional players, for whom the geopolitical, geoeconomic bickering between the US and China has been particularly brutal, driving them at times to the brink of open war.

Over recent weeks, the media has put out a number of releases about how Beijing has allegedly gone under the radar in using COVID-19 as a cover for increasing its influence and reinforcing its footholds, while its opponents fight the unprecedented plague of the 21st century, as well as significant economic losses and new challenges. This has caused many to call for urgent US action in the region, before China fully gets over its many losses to the coronavirus. Others categorically claim that COVID-19 presents the golden opportunity to reorganize the Indo-Pacific region in the interests of a US government quickly losing ground. A third group is adamant that virus or not, Beijing is wasting no time in growing its strength wherever it can, especially in the South China Sea. Although, initially, hopes were high that both nations, being faced with the same threat would combine forces in fighting it. But it wasn’t meant to be. The pandemic just propelled the US-Chinese rat race to new heights.

We’ll touch on a few of these new heights, leaving out economics, trade war, the advantage of this or that side of technology, political models, ideology etc. China’s Sea Guardian-2020 spent January 2020 in the Arabian Sea conducting nautical maneuvers with Pakistan (the sixth and counting) with the help of large battleships and special forces. Don’t forget that in 2019, Beijing announced the construction of four vessels for its stalwart ally, all top-of-the-line and equipped with the latest anti-vessel and anti-submarine systems. As the coronavirus began to give up ground, in April of this year China took several seemingly meaningless, but sensitive measures affecting the interests of its neighbors: coast guard boats encroaching on the economic boundaries of Vietnam and Indonesia, while the Haiyang Dizhi ship was seen in Malaysian waters just a little later on. A Vietnamese fishing schooner was sunk. Chinese sea militia forces were long deployed near the island of Thitu (the Philippines) in the South China Sea. On April 18, Beijing announced the placement of two new administrative regions on man-made islands. Finally, a group of war ships was deployed to the Taiwan Strait, headed up by the only Chinese aircraft carrier the Liaoning, to tighten control over both Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Apparently, the region is entering a new phase of the bitter fight over local and global dominance between China and the US, which will most definitely be dragged out for an extended amount of time, during which Beijing will significantly increase its activity in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Of course, Washington felt obligated to react to this challenge. The 2020 Indo-Pacific Strategy report from the US Department of Defense drafted in November 2019, and presented to Congress in January 2020 noted that the Indo-Pacific Region is in many ways high priority for the US, specifically for the Pentagon. The United States has remained the unchallenged governing authority in the region for seven decades. But currently, under such depressing socio-economic circumstances in the US due to COVID-19 (they rank first in the world by number of cases with millions unemployed, domestic instability sparked by mass protests over racial and other issues, damage done in 40 cities, which is escalating into a civil war and has spread to other countries), the United States has felt some instability in the face of China’s progression in the Indo-Pacific Region, a stability and predictability deficit, replaced by situational, fluctuating, frequent changes. The above mentioned report, very intentionally underlined
new measures towards strengthening cooperation with allies and partners through various channels. The intention being both reestablishing the US and its allies as leading players in the region and dialing China’s actions a notch.

The measures for implementing these goals include:

- in April this year, the US Indo-Pacific Command presented to Congress a document on the necessity of new defense funding, to the amount of 20 billion dollars. Although specific details are still being discussed, the task at hand is clear: creating a runway for anti-Chinese measures to take off from.

- following the heightened tenseness in April in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, for the first time in years, three American aircraft carriers, the Theodore Roosevelt, the Nimitz and the Ronald Reagan began patrolling Indo-Pacific waters as of June, accompanied by large groups of battleships, support vessels and aircrafts. This is in spite their bitter lack in the US Navy due to reconstruction or relocation to other parts of the world. In June, Rear Admiral S. Koehler, Director of Operations for U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, at a press-conference in Hawaii stated that these actions are not only a show of American force, but also visible support for allies and partners.

- in early June, a C-40 US transport plane (equivalent to a Boeing 747) flew over Taiwan en route to Thailand. Simultaneously, a US naval destroyer with active rockets on board crossed into the Taiwan Strait. If Reann Mommsen, US Navy representative, was able to shrug this off as routine actions based on freedom of navigation principles, then China considered this an open act of aggression towards its authority.

The US failed to use the pandemic as another channel for strengthening cooperation with its allies and partners. Its significant dependence on Chinese pharmaceuticals and inability to aid other countries in fighting the virus have become very evident. For this reason, Washington went back on a number of agreements with China and gave some backbone to its bilateral relations and informational exchange with countries like South Korea, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Taiwan.

March 20, 2020 kicked off the start of a multifaceted coordinated effort to fight the pandemic by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (USA, Japan, Australia, India - QUAD). A conference was held at the request of Deputy Secretary of State, Steve Biegun, including members from South Korea, Vietnam, New Zealand intending to determine the level of aid warranted by the countries in the region most in need. The State Department and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced the provision of a quarter billion dollars in funding to fight the pandemic ($2.9 mln. for India, $1.3 mln. for Shri Lanka, $3.4 mln. for Bangladesh, nearly $18 mln. for ASEAN countries), and June 6, 2020, the G20, which includes several of the countries listed, agreed to allocate over $21 billion.

Allies and partners also responded to the aggravated situation in the Indo-Pacific Region, according to their abilities. So India, on the one hand, responded harshly to the above mentioned Chinese-Pakistani maneuvers in the Arabian Sea in January this year. On April 14, the Indian Naval Command based on a report from the ORF, warned in a special communiqué that the Dornier squadron of Eastern Airforce and Naval forces will give the appropriate response to a dozen Chinese UUVs (Haiyi) entering Bay of Bengal waters, even during the pandemic. On the other hand, even under difficult domestic circumstances due to the coronavirus, since the end of March India has equipped Bangladesh, Bhutan, Shri Lanka, Afghanistan with medical supplies and sent groups of medical personnel to Madagascar, the Comoros, Mauritius and the Maldives. Don’t forget that island nations, especially the Maldives and Comoros, have long been objects of intense disputes over influence, but this time, with COVID-19 conditions, they are becoming the playing field for a political phenomenon, a so-called “race to aid” (who gives first and the most) between Beijing and Delhi, in which China has won thanks to its quickly beating the pandemic and its superior resources.

Australia and New Zealand initially closed their borders, and burned bridges on different levels with their island neighbors, who have sought help in responding to COVID-19 based on South Pacific regionalism principles at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Pacific Community (SPC). However, the best they could do within their boundaries, is information exchange, coordinating actions and relations with Australia and New Zealand. These middle governments collectively financed an Oceania response plan with WHO at 1 million dollars. Australia corrected its aid budget for the islands in fighting the coronavirus, changing the slogan from “develop Oceania faster” to “fight COVID-19 faster” in a populist manner. The FRANZ structure between France, Australia and New Zealand on coordinating humanitarian aid in Oceania has also been involved. However, their potential was very limited when faced by the pandemic.

A second wave of the coronavirus in Beijing and other countries in June 2020 showed the virus’s versatility in
mutating and leading world virologists will long have to study its treacherous nuances, before finding a real solution. It is hard to say when that solution will be found. It is equally difficult to guess what new turns the Chinese-American rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region will take, either with or without the coronavirus in the equation.

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