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Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder No. 7
November 2021

Major Power Rivalry and the Management of Global Threats

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INTRODUCTION

Before the COVID-19 crisis wreaked its havoc, there were good reasons to extrapolate from what had happened in earlier global crises that the major powers—the United States, China, India, Japan, Russia, and the leading European states—would put aside their growing geopolitical rivalry to manage shared global threats when it truly mattered. Indeed, the necessity of having to work together to tackle these challenges would act to leaven their rivalry and create ballast against otherwise escalating tensions. As the scale of damage from the pandemic and accumulating costs of climate change have become clear, progressive American voices have taken the argument further and argued that cooperation with countries such as China and Russia to tackle shared challenges should displace geopolitical competition altogether.¹

These positions assume that cooperation on global issues will endure because of deep common interests, and that tackling shared problems can forge a degree of trust among rivals. They also assume that domestic politics in the United States and Europe can sustain a strategy that incorporates cooperation with China and Russia, even though public opinion increasingly views both countries—whose leaders continue to tighten their internal controls and expand their international ambitions—with concern.

At the other end of the spectrum, what could be called the “double tragedy” is an increasing cause of concern: the tragedy of great power politics—the way tensions and competition arise even when the basic structure of interests need not dictate that they do so—could impede efforts to make serious progress on climate change or prevent the next financial crisis or pandemic.² This credible prospect demands hard thinking about how to structure negotiations on global issues during periods of sustained distrust.

Unfortunately, the history of cooperation among great powers on global issues and the structure of interests in those issues themselves does not suggest that working together on global issues will, in any meaningful way, lessen tensions among them. Furthermore, the structure of interests across the global issues of financial crises, climate change, and infectious disease suggests that only in extremis are interests closely aligned. As the COVID-19 crisis has shown, even shared global exposure to a pandemic disease did not generate effective collective action but rather narrow sovereignty competition among the top powers and short-sighted nationalism. The reality of divergent interests is even more pronounced when looking at transnational threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation. In abstract terms, all the powers oppose nonstate terrorism and nuclear proliferation; in practice, their actual policy responses are closely linked to the underlying territorial and security dynamics at play in specific cases.

All this suggests that global issues should not be thought of in terms of cooperation at all—at least, not as that term is commonly used to connote trust or a measure of comity. Such approaches seem likely to fail both in domestic political terms and, because they underestimate the degree of divergent interests in the issues and policies under negotiation, among great powers. Rather, global issues should be approached with a recognition of the reality of *distinct* (though occasionally overlapping) interests. They should thus be viewed as matters for collective negotiation in which *distrust* is the baseline condition—leveraging a critical variable in policy outcomes—and independent *verification* of commitments a necessary complement to agreement. In these ways, policymaking on global issues in the contemporary international order should draw less from the experience of forging instruments for collective action in the post-Cold War period—a time of broad comity in great and major power relations—and more from the psychology of negotiating arms control agreements during the Cold War. Working with mistrusted adversaries to avoid disastrous outcomes is not as attractive as a notion of cooperation, but it is a more viable pathway to sustained policy results.

MAJOR POWER COOPERATION ON GLOBAL PROBLEMS: EVOLVING DYNAMICS

The terms “global issues” or “global and transnational threats” (what former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan more eloquently called “problems without passports”) are associated with the post–Cold War era, and some aspects of them are unique to this period. It was only toward the end of the 1980s, as the Cold War was winding down, that climate change emerged as a major public policy concern, and only in the 1990s, when Asia’s economy became integrated with the West’s, that a genuinely global financial crisis resonated around the world. The lessons from major power cooperation on these issues are therefore limited in time, but nonetheless offer certain insights. In two domains— infectious diseases and the proliferation of nuclear weapons—there exist earlier examples of collaboration among the world’s top, competing powers, as well as early lessons from the limits of that cooperation. One of the earliest examples came in an area highly relevant to today’s dynamics—combating infectious diseases.

INFECTIOUS DISEASE

At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, some within the Washington policy establishment argued that the issue was so severe that it should take precedence over competition with Beijing—that both powers should lay down arms, so to speak, to collaborate on the shared objective of stopping the pandemic. The aspiration was short-lived, but it was not naive. It was informed by the memory of collaboration between the United States and the Soviet Union to tackle infectious viruses at the height of the Cold War.³

At that time, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in competition with each other in multiple domains, including numerous

proxy wars. Despite this, American and Soviet scientists, with the support and facilitation of their respective governments, conducted years of “vaccine diplomacy” that was crucial to the eradication of smallpox and the huge progress made during that period in eradicating polio. Millions of lives were saved in the process.

U.S.-Soviet efforts to combat polio began during a particularly intense period of the early Cold War, only a few years after Moscow developed its own nuclear weapons and as both superpowers took part in the space race. In the 1950s, the United States was still in the depths of a “red scare” over the Soviet Union’s geopolitical might and reputed growing technological prowess. It was also experiencing the widespread effects of endemic polio.⁴ In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, fear of the rapidly spreading virus prompted its political leadership to set aside deep suspicion of the United States and request permission to send a team of scientists to the United States. In 1956, the State Department and the Soviet Foreign Ministry arranged for U.S. virologist Albert Sabin and Soviet virologists Mikhail Chumakov and Anatoli Smorodintsev to jointly work on scaling up Sabin’s new polio vaccine for testing on millions of Soviet citizens.⁵ Sabin, a professor at the University of Cincinnati, had developed a polio vaccine with lifelong immunity that was also easier to administer than its predecessor, the Salk vaccine. But because of how widely the Salk vaccine had already been administered in the United States, Sabin did not have access to a large enough pool of uninoculated participants to collect sufficient data on the new vaccine’s efficacy and safety.⁶ Two years after the first meeting of Sabin and his Soviet counterparts took place, the United States began delivering his polio vaccines to the Soviet Union. Following tests on millions of Soviet citizens, the World Health Organization (WHO) affirmed the vaccine’s safety, paving the way for its use virtually everywhere in the world and contributing substantially to the near eradication of the disease.⁷

This concerted effort to eradicate polio opened an era of health science exchanges between the superpowers. The Soviet Union, which had left the WHO in 1950, rejoined the organization and began to conduct exchanges with the United States focused on heart disease and cancer.⁸ Within the WHO, the two cooperated on efforts to eradicate malaria.⁹ Then in the 1960s, only a few years after the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the two superpowers closer to nuclear war than at any point before or since, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and its Soviet counterpart cooperated to distribute smallpox vaccinations via the WHO. Smallpox had run rampant across the globe for millennia—it wiped out the Aztecs, killed Czar Peter II of Russia and Queen Mary of England, and accounted

for perhaps three hundred million deaths in the twentieth century alone.¹⁰ Within fifteen years of the launch of U.S.-Soviet-WHO cooperation, it had been all but eradicated from the globe.¹¹

U.S.-Soviet cooperation set a pattern of widespread international collaboration in response to infectious disease, usually working through the WHO.¹² International collaboration met the Avian Flu outbreak of 1997 and the first major Ebola outbreak in Central Africa in the 1990s. The 2014–16 Ebola outbreak in West Africa occurred at a moment of mounting tension among the West and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) yet saw more than one hundred countries cosponsor a U.S. resolution providing UN General Assembly authorization for U.S. troops to be deployed to West Africa to lead the Ebola response.¹³

This pattern had one important—and in hindsight, revealing—interruption. The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak of 2002–03 saw nationalist sentiment cloud the early response. Because the outbreak had its origins in China, Beijing was distrustful of international cooperation in response and fought references to the Chinese origins of SARS whenever it could.¹⁴ It was an early indication that the Cold War and post-Cold War experience of collaborating to combat infectious diseases might not hold—especially when the outbreak in question occurred *inside* China, thereby becoming an issue of internal sovereignty.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

It was roughly in the same period of U.S.-Soviet collaboration on infectious diseases that the two also began to work together on preventing nuclear proliferation. During the John F. Kennedy administration, Washington and Moscow coordinated (after much tense pre-negotiation) the adoption of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty at the United Nations and the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The simple logic was that neither superpower wanted nuclear weapons in the hands of anyone other than their closest allies. Designating responsibility for monitoring the issue to an international institution allowed both Washington and Moscow to partake in diplomacy on proliferation without one necessarily needing to follow the other's lead or be seen as collaborating too closely.

As the Cold War and the immediate salience of nuclear weapons receded, cooperation on counter-proliferation deepened. Under the Nunn-Lugar program, the United States and Russia cooperated on

getting control of the post-Soviet nuclear stockpile. Moscow acceded to Washington's suggestion to work through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the IAEA to install nuclear detection devices in major Eastern and Central European border crossings to detect nuclear smuggling. The two countries also actively shared intelligence to help shut down the nuclear smuggling operations of the Abdul Qadeer Khan network.¹⁵

But there were just as many instances of *noncooperation* on nuclear issues. The United States and the Soviet Union did not treat India's nuclear weapons program as a common concern or a topic for shared diplomacy, to say nothing of Pakistan's program. The United States has at times been uneasy about Israel's nuclear program, but not to the extent of seeing it as an issue on which it should collaborate with non-allies. North Korea's nuclear program has been an on-again, off-again topic of shared diplomacy among the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea, but over time concern has been more off-again than on-again. When it comes to the proliferation of nuclear weapons by state actors, the world's top powers have repeatedly viewed the issue more through the prism of security competition than of cooperation on a transnational threat.

Both cooperative and rivalrous dynamics have been present in diplomacy by the P5+1—that is, the United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) and Germany—on Iran's nuclear program. This effort included three rounds of sanctions agreed on by the P5, myriad rounds of P5+1 negotiations, support from the European Union (EU) and the IAEA, and ultimately the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and UN Security Council Resolution 2231. Throughout, the Western posture differed from that of Beijing and Moscow; but ultimately, both of those capitals agreed to successive Western proposals for sanctions and inspection arrangements. All this was eventually undermined, of course, when the United States under President Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA—along the way, adding to a track record of U.S. unreliability on global and transnational issues.

TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

The great powers' efforts to tackle terrorism, which has not always been viewed as an issue of overlapping interests, provide similar mixed lessons. Indeed, during the Cold War, several of the world's most significant terrorist organizations were supported and/or financed by the

Soviet Union and were thus a weapon of geopolitical confrontation. Others, such as the Aum Shinrikyo group, which dispersed Sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, had limited national reach. But the emergence of transnational radical Islamist organizations that committed acts of terrorism in the post-Cold War era gave rise to a sense that transnational terrorism was a new, shared threat.

That being said, the “shared” threat and the notion of collective response has always been partial. The most significant instance of transnational terrorism—the 9/11 attacks on the United States—occasioned several distinct geopolitical responses. The United States organized direct, if partial, operational cooperation with non-Western states on the war on terrorism, most importantly securing Russian support for U.S. Air Force refueling operations. It also conducted joint U.S.-China intelligence operations against Afghanistan-based Uyghurs. Those and other countries issued diplomatic statements of mutual support for the global campaign against radical Islamist terrorism (along the way lending tacit support to China’s anti-Uyghur campaign, now apparently forgotten by many in the West). Simultaneously, geopolitical tensions rose over the expansion of American hard power in Central Asia. The balance between collaboration and tension shifted over time as the virulence of the Islamist threat beyond the West abated, the United States shifted its campaign to Iraq, and the U.S. presence in Central Asia grew and endured.

Although such terrorist threats transcend borders, they are also inextricably bound up in territorial struggles that fall into classical paradigms of international security and great power relations. A transnational threat still exists in the national dimension. The complete collapse of the UN-centered effort to forge a compromise among the United States, Europe, and Russia on Syria when the self-proclaimed Islamic State was a potent threat there provides a vivid illustration of the fact that the transnational dimension of a problem need not outweigh its national or regional dimension and the resulting geopolitical lens on the response. Indeed, the longer the greater Middle East has been mired in a combination of civil war and terrorism, the more the crises there have come to be seen as occasions for geopolitical competition, rather than as opportunities for collaboration on counterterrorism.

FINANCIAL CRISES

Great power interaction has a better history in the domain of financial crises. The contemporary lessons are fewer here, of course. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union operated in distinct

economic and financial spheres with limited interaction. In the early part of the post–Cold War period, economic integration between the West and a rising Asia remained limited. But that had changed by the Asian financial crisis in 1997; and by 2008, the global financial crisis revealed that deepening integration had erased any remaining boundaries between the economic systems of the former nonaligned world, the former Soviet world, and the West.¹⁶

The response to the global financial crisis probably stands as the most elaborated moment of great power cooperation in response to a global issue yet. As international politics professor Dan Drezner’s authoritative account of the moment described it, “the system worked.”¹⁷

Significantly, this crisis was “made in America,” something rarely highlighted in U.S. accounting of the episode. It emerged from Wall Street and was not foreseen or prevented by the Securities and Exchange Commission or any other Washington agency. Those facts were not lost on all other countries affected by the crisis, which influenced international perceptions of U.S. reliability on global issues.

Origins notwithstanding, the United States was the only economy with the financial muscle to respond at scale, and respond it did—with nearly \$5 trillion in financial facilities made available both within the United States and to its allies, largely through central bank credit swaps.¹⁸ Also vital was the adoption of reciprocal non-protectionist commitments, which held for nearly a decade—long enough for the immediate crisis to pass. The immediate response, through the Basel network of central bankers, reinforced perceptions of functional cooperation.¹⁹ However, it further revealed that the West could no longer bear the weight of a global economic crisis by itself; the management of global affairs now required sustained interaction with the leading Asian economies, especially China.

As a result, the Group of Twenty (G20) effectively displaced the Group of Eight as the world’s steering mechanism for economic affairs.²⁰ Notably, in the first phase of the G20 response, the United States, China, India, Japan, and Saudi Arabia largely agreed on policy proposals, while Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom—three of the United States’ closest allies—opposed the main thrust of stimulus and quantitative easing. At the same time, Russia attempted to use the global financial crisis to break the U.S. dollar as a reserve currency—proposing to China early in the crisis that the two countries coordinate to that effect.²¹ That China slammed the brakes on Russia’s dangerous proposition is an important yet underemphasized point in U.S.-China relations. Nonetheless, in spite of competing

global interests, the G20 emerged as the premier international forum in global economic affairs.

COUNTER-TRADE PIRACY

Trade globalization, like financial globalization, necessitates international cooperation, as evidenced in the operational collaboration among the navies of the United States, China, Europe, India, and Russia to combat transnational piracy. That collaboration extended as far as both the Chinese and Russian navies sailing in coordination with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) via the so-called Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism, part of a wider effort to tackle Somali-based piracy in the Indian Ocean.²² The joint effort began in 2005, gained steam in the latter part of that decade, and continues to this day. It is not the only counter-piracy collaboration: in the Malacca Strait, more than twenty nations, including the United States, China, India, Pakistan, and Russia, collaborate on counter-piracy strategy to keep that vital artery of international trade open.

Even in this domain, however, initial enthusiasm for operational collaboration among the United States, China, and Russia in counter-piracy operations has yielded to mounting concern. The U.S. Navy is increasingly convinced that China has used its counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean as a mechanism to train and develop the global reach of its navy.²³ Nations have shared interests in global trade and trade protection, but the deployment of naval assets for that trade protection quickly bleeds into the domain of geopolitical competition.

It is too early to tell how cooperative or competitive dynamics could play out in dealing with cyber piracy. But other examples of nonstate violence or crime suggest shared action against cybercriminals or cyber pirates is likely if the initiating group or network operates from small countries or without meaningful support from a powerful state. For example, the United States, China, the EU, and Russia could agree to collaborate or collectively empower Interpol or a similar agency to tackle the activities of a network of Filipino, Nigerian, or Somali cybercriminals. Alternatively, if the United States suspects that a cyber hijacking group (for example, DarkSide, which attacked the U.S. Colonial Pipeline) has meaningful support from Russian intelligence assets or acted with the connivance of the Kremlin, the reaction will reflect great power military competition and deterrence, not collaboration. As with other transnational threats, the ultimate geographical origins of the threat shape whether it is viewed primarily through a cooperative or competitive lens.

CLIMATE CHANGE

And then there is climate change, which brings us from the past to the present.

A short history of the long negotiations over a global climate change agreement can be summarized as one of narrowing the differences between arrangements for the world's developed and developing economies. The first genuinely global climate deal, the Kyoto Protocol, was only concluded when this distinction was agreed on, all but exempting then-poor countries such as Brazil, China, India, and Nigeria from far-reaching restrictions on their carbon emissions. Although it initially signed the agreement, the United States eventually balked at this arrangement and withdrew from the protocol. It was surely a fair arrangement in ethical and historical terms—and possibly the only workable arrangement at the time—but it did leave a giant loophole. The ensuing decades saw massive increases in China's carbon emissions as it grew leaps and bounds, eventually becoming the largest carbon emitter in the world.²⁴ Subsequent rounds of negotiations maintained the distinction between developed and developing economies but increased the responsibility of developing nations. The Paris Agreement, negotiated over several rounds and concluded in 2015, essentially eliminated the distinction in the case of the major economies. It constituted the first ever global climate arrangement that incorporated every leading carbon emitter—until the United States under Trump initiated withdrawal procedures the following year.

The return of the United States to the Paris Agreement under Biden thus marks the start of the first multiyear period ever when every major economy is participating in a global climate treaty—albeit one that leaves it up to individual nations to set their own energy pathway and has yet to negotiate a credible monitoring and verification agreement. Moreover, if *every* country fully lived up to its current national climate targets as submitted to the United Nations under the Paris Agreement framework, the world would still miss the goal of limiting climate change to less than 2°C. And so far, *no* country has implemented a plan for consumption and industrial production that would meet even those pledges. The gap between diplomatic ambition and industrial reality is yawning.²⁵

These arrangements to combat climate change are surprisingly spare for an issue in which every power has a vital set of interests. A closer look across the full set of great and major powers complicates the notion that those interests are, as is often presumed, shared ones.

Take Russia: if the world were, by some set of rapid technological and industrial advances, able to more fully and more rapidly decarbonize economic production, the resultant drop-off in global sales of oil and gas would devastate the Russian economy and collapse the political economy of Russian President Vladimir Putin's rule. Russia could see some potential gains—easier access to the energy-rich waters of the Barents Sea, northern forestry, and the like. But those benefits are far outpaced by the dire economic consequences of a falloff in global demand for oil and gas. For Putin's government, climate change is not an existential threat—climate change *policy* is. Saudi Arabia is in a similar bind but has begun—haltingly—to explore alternative economic models for its young population.

India accepts the threat from climate change, parts of which directly threaten it as a polity (e.g., air quality and water supply), but it also fundamentally needs to further urbanize and industrialize, tackle the profound poverty that remains in India, and address the nearly four hundred million Indians who have almost no access to modern energy. If India industrializes and urbanizes using the same technologies that the West and China did, the world will blow past 4°C of average global temperature rise. India's dilemma is acute and has global consequence.²⁶

As for Europe: in principle, the United States and Europe should be aligned on climate, but they have not been for the past several years, since former President Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement. Nor have Europeans forgotten that this was not the first time the United States reversed course on climate—it did so during the administration of former U.S. President George W. Bush, who reversed his father's signature on the Kyoto Protocol.

These differences are further complicated by the more immediate questions of adaptation to climate change. As sea levels rise as a function of both overall warming and Arctic and Antarctic ice melt, the effects play out differently in differing locales. For example, further warming in the shallow waters of the East and South China Seas will have deleterious consequences for already over-pressured fishing stocks, sending Chinese fishing fleets in search of new grounds as far away as Angola, whereas cooling in the north Atlantic Ocean and the Norwegian Sea will boost already fertile U.S. fishing grounds.²⁷ As rising global temperature averages put pressure on agricultural production, competition will likely intensify among Western, Chinese, and Indian buyers for agricultural land, especially in Africa. Overall, climate adaptation—ostensibly, the ultimate “we're all in this together” issue—looks set to stoke *competition*, not collaboration.²⁸

None of this voids the point that all countries share overlapping interests in avoiding catastrophic climate change; they do. And they have shown a willingness to negotiate arrangements that, at least in theory (if not yet in practice), will constrain them. But everything short of those outcomes—the pathways for transition, the markets for renewables, and the dynamics of adaptation—is far more challenging. Indeed, the diplomacy of climate change is surprisingly similar to that of nuclear weapons: competition and divergent interests characterize everything up to catastrophic outcomes, which everyone has an interest in avoiding.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The lessons from contemporary history are partial but should nonetheless inform how to simultaneously navigate geopolitical tensions and negotiations on global issues. To an extent, they are a Rorschach test. The example of U.S.-Soviet cooperation on infectious diseases during the Cold War supports two conclusions, each the inverse of the other. Despite deep distrust and fear, two powers locked in existential struggle managed to find a way to collaborate on a global challenge to both their own and all of humanity's benefit. This rendering puts in sharp relief the petty geopolitical way Washington and Beijing initially approached the COVID-19 crisis. But that sustained U.S.-Soviet collaboration on infectious diseases over several decades did almost nothing to lessen tensions between these powers. After all, between their collaboration on polio and their joint effort on smallpox came the Cuban Missile Crisis—the moment of greatest tension and gravest danger of the entire Cold War. Any supposed ballast in the relationship gained from collaboration on infectious disease was quickly jettisoned.

These experiences also highlight that the more closely tied an issue is to classical territorial dynamics, the more likely it is to be viewed by the powers through the prism of security competition rather than transnational cooperation. What matters is the distinction between the general and the specific. In principle, and at a general level, the powers have shown willingness to agree to common frameworks for tackling issues such as terrorism and nonproliferation; but in practice, in specific instances, more classical win-loss dynamics tend to shape security responses.

The limited history of cooperation on financial crises provides more equivocal lessons. When faced with a crisis that would affect their domestic economic interests, leaders of the most powerful countries

of the world were willing to look beyond potential relative gain-loss dynamics and act to limit and reverse the 2008 financial crisis. Two points seem salient: the fast pace of the crisis and the ability to move through opaque central banking mechanisms. Both diminished the prevalence of domestic political opposition to collective action. But importantly, the crisis happened at a moment of relative comity between the United States and China, and while China was profiting from rising within the existing order. Neither the United States nor China can count on this kind of comity in a future crisis. Leaders in the United States and China, to say nothing of Russia, could look more to relative loss dynamics than to collective prevention.

One observation is often neglected in the American debate on these issues: multilateral institutions play a crucial role in the powers' efforts to collaborate on global issues. These institutions—be it the WHO, the IAEA, or the United Nations—provide two germane assets: a global infrastructure and a cutout between the powers, allowing each to work with the other via a middle man (so to speak), which can minimize miscommunication between distrusting actors. The strategic dialogue in the United States rarely focuses on multilateral institutions, and when it does it tends to swing between neglect and contempt. But little from the pattern of top powers' collaboration on global issues suggests that these institutions will be anything less than essential. How effective they can be should be a matter for sustained policy attention, not episodic commentary.

One more lesson bears highlighting. In the broad history of the post-Cold War, the United States has been a serially unreliable actor in the management of global issues. After repeated U.S. withdrawals from climate agreements, lack of sustained attention to multilateral institutions, and the unfortunate experience of the egregious reversals by President Trump from the Iran deal, the Paris Agreement, and even the WHO—some would add President Biden's precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, the original locus of the modern American counterterrorism campaign, to the list—few countries have grounds to view the United States as a likely leader in the forging of new resolutions to global and transnational challenges. American policymakers could find it difficult to internalize this lesson, but policy analysts should not be surprised if other countries—even close allies—balk at signing on to lasting arrangements to tackle global issues that are proposed by the United States. Washington will have to get more comfortable with working with European (or Canadian or Australian) or multilateral policy leadership.

MANAGING GLOBAL ISSUES UNDER CONDITIONS OF RIVALRY

As Beijing and Moscow intensify their internal repression, expand their international ambition, and increase the scope of their collaboration, the notion that the United States or other Western countries should set aside their differences over core strategy in order to cooperate on global issues is deeply problematic, not to mention politically infeasible. It *could* be sustained as an ethical position if there was strong evidence to support the notion that collaboration on shared problems alleviated wider tension, and if there were no alternatives but a diplomacy of cooperation to address global issues; but neither condition holds. Even an effort to use collaboration on global issues to provide ballast in otherwise contentious relations, while potentially more sustainable, finds little ammunition in the history and evolution of great power management of global issues. But there is enough in that history to suggest that even during periods of intense rivalry, some pattern of collaboration in combating global issues is sustainable. The question is how to structure those arrangements and the negotiations to achieve them.

“PARALLEL PROCESSING”: THE SILOES APPROACH

Climate, diseases, and financial crises are serious issues that demand solutions, but the great power tensions will likely remain in a state of rivalry and competition. A possible path is to approach the issues in siloes. Consider former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s strategy for the Middle East peace process: when faced with upticks in Palestinian terrorist activity, Rabin famously said that Israel would “fight the terror as if there is no peace process, and negotiate as if there is no terror.” Just so, the United States and China (and others) could advance issues such as pandemic disease collaboration, climate policy, and

monitoring and responding to financial crises as if there were no tensions in the Western Pacific (and over technology, governance, and economic terms), while at the same time compete in the Western Pacific (and elsewhere) as if there were no global issues.

This strategy could be a viable model. It holds if U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia relations remain in the domain of rivalry and competition; it becomes significantly harder if they tip into outright enmity. It is not impossible even then, of course—as illustrated by the example of U.S.-Soviet collaboration on smallpox at the height of the Cold War. But the obstacles to initiation will be higher, the risks of reversals will be greater, and the temptation to use progress on global issues as bargaining chips in other parts of the relationship will be high.

Of course, this kind of siloes approach—as Rabin learned the hard way—risks being overwhelmed by domestic politics and downturns in the relationship. If the United States were to boycott the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, for example, China could, as a result, refuse to participate in a U.S.-hosted summit on climate change.

Consider the early efforts of the Biden Administration to collaborate with China on climate change, efforts that were impeded by domestic politics. When Presidential Envoy John Kerry first visited China to discuss climate change, he quickly reached a joint statement with his Chinese counterpart.²⁹ Among the points of emphasis was a “commitment to cooperating.” In subsequent interviews Kerry argued that the United States needed to have China as “a partner” on climate change.³⁰ He noted widespread human rights concerns and geopolitical differences with China but said, in effect, that the United States should not let those issues impede a U.S.-China partnership on climate change. In other words, he argued for a siloing of the issues. But he was quickly pilloried; the *Wall*

Street Journal complained that he had “kowtowed” to China, and conservatives argued that he was turning a blind eye to genocidal actions by China and naively believing its promises of cooperation.³¹ Republicans in the Senate pounced when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, commenting on Chinese President Xi Jinping’s participation in Biden’s inaugural climate summit, said that further collaboration was possible if “the United States no longer interferes in China’s internal affairs.”³² The reactions illustrated how challenging it will be for Kerry and Biden to sustain a politics of partnership or cooperation with China on climate: they face opposition within the Senate, in much of the press, among conservatives, and even in their own administration.

What is more, although the approach could work in U.S.-China terms, it does not adequately account for the plurilateral dynamics that need to accompany serious action on global issues. The other major and middle powers required for the response are highly unlikely to accede to agreements negotiated bilaterally; they will insist on a major role in setting the rules of the game and shaping policy. Unlike with smaller countries in multilateral settings, Washington and Beijing cannot ignore those demands; both capitals will have to consider the views of Brussels, New Delhi, Tokyo, and others. Relations among this wider set of actors are now overall characterized by distrust: no serious policymaker in Europe or Japan gives credence to China’s claim to the mantle of leadership in multilateral affairs, but few of them have sufficient trust in the United States either. Tough plurilateral negotiations, not siloed U.S.-China agreements, are the likely path ahead.

“LEVERAGE COOPERATION”: THE COMPETITIVE APPROACH

Given this, some have argued for tackling global and transnational issues through a competitive approach. That is, the major economies of the West could work collectively to pressure China on climate change, infectious disease, and other issues.

Scholars Andrew Erickson and Gabriel Collins recently laid out the case that pressure to compete, rather than diplomatic negotiations, is more likely to spur climate innovation in China.³³ They similarly argue for combined pressure on China from groups of democratic states (in their argument, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). Erickson and Collins specifically propose domestic climate taxes, which could prove unfeasible in the United States (the head of Biden’s Council of Economic Advisors recently described climate

taxes as a political nonstarter in the United States). Still, the general argument could have merit, creating both costs to China for noncompliance and competitive reasons for a “race to the top” dynamic. For example, the United States could lay out a strategy for deep cooperation with Europe on carbon capture technology, with Korea on batteries, with India on solar, and so on. Cooperation would require strong transparency rules and agreements on reporting. This would have the double benefit of showcasing how democracies can address climate change in practice and creating diplomatic pressure on China to adopt similar measures of transparency.³⁴

These approaches neglect one serious obstacle: they depend on the United States being a reliable actor on global public goods. Yet after Trump’s deadly foolishness on COVID-19 and his withdrawal from the JCPOA, the United States’ repeated reversals on climate, and its cross-party, cross-decade skepticism about multilateralism writ large, there is serious doubt as to whether other states sufficiently trust the United States on these issues to tie their policy to Washington’s strategy. Many European elites, at least, could seek more structured arrangements than are likely to emerge from efforts to organize around pressuring China—to say nothing of the developing world, where deep anger about the West’s response to COVID-19 is fueling anti-Western sentiment that would limit the breadth of coalitions that the United States could mobilize in a “compete with China” approach.

“DISTRUST AND VERIFY”: AN ARMS CONTROL APPROACH

Finally, a case could be made for rejecting cooperative models altogether. Cooperation, at least in the narrow sense of the term, is unlikely to withstand the deeper political dynamics of tensions among the great powers or to generate ballast in those relations. Competitive approaches could work if the United States is a consistent actor. But an alternative could prove resilient to domestic politics and great power rivalry, drawing (loosely) from the concepts that underpinned arms control diplomacy—approaches that take distrust, cheating, domestic constraint, and the possibility of reversals as their starting point. An arms control approach eschews the hope that cooperation on global issues will serve as ballast in the relationship, recognizing the limits of that approach and the risk that it is as likely to lead to disappointment as to the leavening of tensions.

The basic contours of such an approach on climate would be to recognize that the United States, China, Japan, and Europe all need to

decarbonize, that they have powerful incentives to cheat or avoid doing so, and that cheating or avoidance by any of those actors will likely create political incentives for the others to do the same. Thus, monitoring and verification of implementation of commitments become critical. Credible reporting on implementation could reinforce confidence in other parties that their counterparts continue to move down a decarbonization pathway, diminish incentives for cheating, and deter cheating by documenting and disseminating any instances.

Similarly, on infectious disease, an approach premised not on the psychology of cooperation but on the premise of disaster avoidance—surely not a hard approach to envisage amidst the ravages of COVID-19—would require an emphasis on surveillance and early detection. In the best-case scenario, all states, including the United States and China, would allow for unfettered monitoring by the WHO. Less ideal but still pragmatic would be the approach suggested by Tom Wright and Colin Kahl in their forthcoming book on the geopolitics of COVID-19.³⁵ They argue for what they call a Global Arrangement for Pandemic Preparedness, a fallback approach wherein monitoring and reporting arrangements are global (through the WHO), but wherein a large coalition of states could fall back to sub-global closures and border controls vis-à-vis any state that was not reporting fully or that aroused suspicions of a lack of transparency around outbreaks.

This is far from an ironclad approach—but there are no ironclad approaches, only diplomatic agreements that will be implemented to a lesser or greater degree depending on a combination of domestic politics and diplomatic pressure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General principles can guide the United States and other Western countries in negotiations with China or Russia. While specific policy recommendations will have to consider the issue, the timing, and the negotiating counterpart, the United States should follow a broad strategy of “democratic multilateralism.” Such an approach would include the following:

- The United States should start with a detailed assessment of where U.S. interests *diverge* from those of the other powers. Broadly shared disaster-reduction end goals (avoid greater than 2°C rise, avoid financial crisis, or avoid infectious disease outbreak) are all well and good, but they offer little with which to orient negotiating strategies.
- The United States should eschew the temptation to approach negotiations as if they were trust-building exercises, or trust-requiring ones. Doing so risks setting the table for failure, not necessarily in terms of reaching a negotiated outcome but in terms of actual policy implementation. Almost nothing in the domestic politics of Washington, Beijing, or Moscow supports the notion that such an approach can be sustained. Rather, those issues should be approached as ones requiring leverage. The United States cannot enter a negotiation over energy transitions with Russia, financial transparency with China, or nuclear proliferation with India without developing a position of strength. Yes, those other countries have an incentive to negotiate, just as the Soviets did during arms control. But the pathway from a general will to negotiate to specific outcomes needs to be shaped through leverage and pressure.

- The West, in most scenarios, should seek to act in a unified manner in negotiations with China and Russia. That will not be easy. U.S. and European interests and politics on global and transnational issues vary a good deal. But the odds of achieving meaningful outcomes will be greater if the West sets the stage by agreeing on core principles or basic parameters in negotiations with non-Western powers—in both direct negotiations with the authoritarian powers and negotiations within multilateral institutions.
- Even better will be if the United States, principal European nations, and major non-Western but non-authoritarian states can reach common agreements—i.e., if India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and other major emerging markets can be part of a common negotiating position. That approach could require important concessions from the United States, especially on independent verification and on financing, as well as some horse trading within multilateral negotiations.
- The United States should therefore work to develop a more mature posture on multilateral arrangements as a necessary feature of managing global issues. The current posture swings between relative neglect (under Democratic presidents) and passive hostility (under Republicans). But multilateral institutions play important roles in agenda setting, in creating forums for great power negotiations, and sometimes in policy implementation. The United States should also draw on increased bipartisan concern about advances in Chinese penetration of those same institutions. It should do so in close consultation with the subset of major and middle powers that routinely provide major, sustained funding to those institutions and wield substantial influence there—principally the United Kingdom, but also Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries.

These strategies of democratic multilateralism depict a pathway that captures the advantages of Western unity, does not go so far as risking a full break of order by adopting a club of democracies per se, and keeps dialogue open to non-Western, nondemocratic but constructive actors—whose participation is necessary in the implementation of many global issue responses.

CONCLUSION

Rather than looking at global and transnational issues through the lens of cooperation, the United States and the rest of the West should look at them as variants of arms control processes. During the Cold War, the United States sought to avoid the catastrophe of nuclear war, and for that purpose partook in tough negotiations with the Soviets on nuclear weapons reduction, the establishment of hotlines and other instruments of de-escalation, and crisis avoidance. No one thought the United States needed to trust the Soviets to work with them, or that the arms control negotiations would significantly leaven the other tensions in the relationship. Rather, Washington used the classical tools of diplomacy: leverage, reciprocity, third-party communication, and verification.

To invoke those methods and that moment is not to assert a precise parallel. Climate change is not a weapon to be pointed at the Chinese, or for them to point at the United States. Infectious diseases of course can be used as weapons, but non-weapon variants are the more pressing concern.³⁶ And while a financial crisis could be induced for the purpose of weakening another great power, it could only be done at huge self-inflicted cost. Truly global issues are not weapons aimed by one great power at another. Yet the patterns of diplomacy that helped avoid nuclear catastrophe could provide pathways for the negotiation and management of these semi-shared problems.

U.S. policymakers will also need to be clear-eyed about the fact that in many quarters (including friendly ones) Washington is not viewed as a trusted actor on global and transnational issues. The United States' size and power deem it a necessary actor on any global and most transnational issues; but it is no longer a sufficient actor, nor necessarily a trusted one. Working closely with European and Asian allies that have a longer history of commitments to multilateral order can diminish this challenge.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Jones is a senior fellow at the Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology at the Brookings Institution, where he directs the project on international order and strategy. He is also affiliated with the Center for East Asia Policy Studies and is a nonresident affiliate of Yale University's Paul Tsai China Center. His current research is on great power competition, and his book *To Rule the Waves* charts the changing patterns of great power rivalry competition in global trade, naval rivalry, and energy flows. Jones previously served as the vice president and director of the foreign policy program at Brookings. Prior to that, he was the lead scholar for the International Task Force on Global Public Goods and the deputy research director of the United Nation's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change. He has written extensively on issues of international negotiations, including when he was director of the NYU Center on International Cooperation. Jones holds a BA in political science from the University of Toronto, an MSc in economics from the London School of Economics, and a PhD in international relations from the London School of Economics.

*Cover photo: An iceberg floats in a fjord near the town of Tasilaq, Greenland, June 18, 2018.
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Council on Foreign Relations
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58 East 68th Street
New York, NY 10065
tel 212.434.9400

1777 F Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
tel 202.509.8400

