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Executive Summary

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World Politics amid Great Power Competition: The Pacific and European experiences during COVID-19

- The COVID-19 pandemic has further invigorated existing debates on the transition of the international order. To explore this grand subject, this chapter focuses on the roles of the crucial other players than the United States and China, the two great powers which tend to dominate international strategic discussions, as the primary subjects, in recent years. Scholars and practitioners continue to debate and disagree on what roles countries other than the United States and China may or may not play in the on-going international order transition.
- Section 1 analyses two major views concerning the roles of countries other than the United States and China. On the one hand, many scholars conceive of world politics as increasingly “divided” between the United States and China. As a result, most other countries have limited options other than choosing the relations with either of the two competing great powers. On the other hand, other scholars present an alternative view that world politics is rather becoming multipolar or, to be more precise, “pluralistic,” as the countries other than the U.S. and China have more diverse options and greater influence. Based on this twofold conceptualization, Section 1 demonstrates that, even under the dividing pressure of the Sino-U.S. great power competition, the “pluralistic” trends not only remain observable but have become even more prominent in some instances. “Pluralistic” world politics manifest itself as the countries’ active exploration of their distinctive and even “autonomous” roles in the transitioning international order and the continuing global pandemic.
- To explore such international trends, Sections 2 and 3 turn to both Australian foreign policy and European security affairs centered on the European Union (EU). In the Pacific, Australia continues to play unique roles as a leader of regional cooperation on a range of issues including the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, while struggling to manage, not always successfully, the destabilizing impacts of tensions between the United States and China. The EU and some of its members seek “strategic autonomy” among the great powers. While the Sino-Europe relations deteriorated during COVID-19, the expectation for the improvement of the Atlantic relations has been rising due to the result of the U.S. presidential election. However, it will not necessarily mean that the Europeans and Americans behave all together, and their policy towards China will be different at times.

China: The Xi Administration's Accelerating Hardline Stance due to COVID-19

- The explosion of novel coronavirus cases that originated in Wuhan, Hubei Province resulted in countless infections and deaths. It stagnated China's economy, causing people's dissatisfaction in Xi Jinping's leadership to become an issue. In response, the Xi administration sought to overcome this by restarting economic activities and tightening its control over society. President Xi further increased his political authority following the Fifth Plenum of the Communist Party of China.
- The hardline stance of Xi's leadership has been directed at Hong Kong and Taiwan, too. It pushed forward with the Hong Kong national security law despite opposition and watered down "One Country, Two Systems," and used force to contain the voices of the Hong Kong people demanding freedom and democracy. As for Taiwan, which re-elected President Tsai Ing-wen, who does not embrace the "One-China Policy," it has received high praise from the international community for its successful response to COVID-19. In addition, the United States has dispatched senior government officials to Taiwan, and sold it a number of weapons, strengthening ties in the process. In response, China has overawed Taiwan by stepping up military exercises in the waters and air around Taiwan.
- The Xi administration has also taken a hardline stance in diplomacy. Relations between China and the United States had already deteriorated, but mutual criticism between the two powers has intensified over the responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic. This antagonistic relationship has grown to the point of being called the "new cold war." China's hardline diplomatic stance has been steered toward Australia and India as well. This has resulted in a growing sense of caution toward China by many countries, including European countries.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the People's Liberation Army played a role by dispatching medical personnel and transporting medical supplies, as well as promoting vaccine development and providing assistance to various foreign countries. At the same time, the PLA strengthened military exercises, including launching anti-ship ballistic missiles in the South China Sea, with an eye toward combating the United States military, and it stepped up voyages deeper into the Pacific Ocean by its naval vessels. Moreover, China increased activities of ships belonging to the China Coast Guard in the waters around the Senkaku Islands, which are Japan's territory. These vessels have also approached Japanese fishing vessels in Japan's territorial waters. In this manner, China has further increased its pressure on Japan.

Korean Peninsula: Wavering North-South Relations

- In March 2020, the day after it began launching a series of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM), North Korea blamed the Republic of Korea (ROK) for valuing its alliances over ethnicity. In June, North Korea pressured ROK to correct its “worship of the powerful” promulgated by the United States through the statement of Kim Yo-jong, the Deputy Director of the United Front Department of the Workers' Party of Korea and others. North Korea’s priority target in its diplomatic actions was not its uncertain relations with the United States ahead of the U.S. presidential election. According to North Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the United States should not comment on Inter-Korea relations, which is an internal issue of the same ethnicity. On the other hand, North Korea took a stance of not backing down from elevating tensions if this “worship of the power” is not rectified. This included giving ROK an option to throw out the Inter-Korea military agreement announced at the Inter-Korean summit meeting held in 2018 and blow-up the Inter-Korean Liaison Office. Ahead of the establishment of the new United States administration, North Korea focused on separating ROK from its cooperation with the United States.
- ROK’s Moon Jae-in administration indicated strong motivation to improve inter-Korean relations following North Korea’s actions. ROK’s actions appeared to distance itself from the United States. For example, it limited the discussion matters of the U.S.-ROK Working Group, set up to coordinate policy engagement with North Korea, and increased discussions that ROK should move ahead with cooperation with North Korea independently.
- In addition, the ship interceptor missile SM3, which is part of the missile defense system, was not mentioned in ROK’s mid-term national defense plan announced in August 2020. Following North Korea’s development of SRBM, ROK’s navy stated the need for multilayered missile defense, but it did not adopt SM-3 for this purpose. On the other hand, ROK advocated for “a nation that cannot be shaken by anyone” and “complete missile sovereignty.” By easing the U.S.-ROK Missile Guidelines, which was a framework with the United States to restrict ROK’s missile development, ROK showed a commitment to expand its own missile capabilities. There was little progress seen in the transfer of wartime tactical control authority emphasized by the Moon Jae-in administration. As a result, the sharing of U.S. military base costs, which was not concluded, and U.S.-ROK relations under the new U.S. administration will be in the spotlight.

Southeast Asia: Post-COVID-19 Regional Security Issues

- In 2020, Southeast Asia was impacted greatly by COVID-19. In Indonesia and the Philippines, infections continued to spread or remained the same even after the start of 2021. While some countries in the region managed to nearly contain new infections, other countries have seen the number of infections rise since the second half of 2020. As a result, there is no end to the pandemic in sight for the region.
- Measures taken in response to COVID-19, such as border closures, city-wide lockdowns inside countries and restrictions on activities, caused serious damage to each country's economy, with the poor suffering in particular. There have been examples of authoritarian approaches by government citing response to COVID-19, which has raised concerns about the democracy that has been built up in the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) played a role as a platform for international assistance in response to COVID-19, but this role is seen as limited in nature from the perspective of problem solving by ASEAN itself.
- Regardless of the pandemic, the situation in the South China Sea has seen China further expand its activities with shows of force claiming its own rights, causing tension to continue. In response, Southeast Asian nations have responded militarily and diplomatically wherever possible, considering the disparity in military power with China and the impacts on economic relations. On the other hand, in response to China's actions, Western countries have increased their sense of caution and in particular, the United States has been actively involved in this issue. With the difference in opinion of the United States and China evident even during ASEAN diplomacy, ASEAN appears to be distancing itself from this competition among major powers.
- Despite national defense spending affected by COVID-19 countermeasures, each country is working to increase and modernize their naval fleets aimed at strengthening sea power, as well as boosting their capabilities for anti-ship attacks and maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Also, in terms of military activities, during the first half of 2020 a number of joint exercises were postponed due to COVID-19, but in the second half large-scale exercises were restarted, including by the Indonesian navy.

Russia: The Post-Putin Issue and Changes in the 1993 Constitution System

- After the fall of the former Soviet Union in December 1991, the newly established Russian Federation governed the nation with the federal constitution established in December 1993 as the bedrock. The Boris Yeltsin administration of the 1990s is characterized by chaotic socioeconomic conditions, unstable political order, and centrifugal tendencies in the relationship of central and regional governments. On the other hand, the Vladimir Putin administration established in May 2000 opted for “power vertical,” ushering in large-scale political reforms, including the federal system, and seeking to stabilize the constitutional system. Amidst this, underpinned by stronger anti-terrorism and anti-extremism measures and legislation to tighter control the mass media, problems associated with “rights and freedom of people and citizens” guaranteed in Chapter 2 of the 1993 Constitution emerged, and in recent years, these have become a focal point of Russian politics.
- Through the revision process for the 1993 Constitution that began in earnest from early 2020, a basic mechanism was established to maintain the Putin regime. At the same time, as there are growing voices demanding fundamental socio-political reforms, Russian society is facing a period of volatility. The constitutional revisions clarified the two-term limit on presidency by ruling on the total number of terms. But a clause was added so that the term in office of incumbents and former presidents is not counted. Therefore, President Putin and Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev can run in the next presidential election under this system. This chapter focuses on constitutional issues, gaining insight into the Russian political system and the post-Putin issue.
- Arms control issues between the United States and Russia are attracting international interest. These include the termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and extension of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). European-Russian relations are facing an even more severe stage following the attempted poisoning assassination of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. With the COVID-19 pandemic spreading globally, the Russian military has played a new role, including building multifunctional medical centers, carrying out disinfection activities using the Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Protection Troops, and providing emergency assistance to Italy and Serbia. It continues to move ahead with military equipment upgrades and posture strengthening, while seeking to enhance collaboration with foreign militaries through large-scale exercises (Kavkaz 2020). Russia has also expanded arms exports to African nations.

United States: National Security during the COVID-19 Crisis

- In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to spread, there were important developments in the United States' national security policy, beginning with its policy on China. As part of this, the threat of China within the United States was stressed and awareness deepened that the targets of China's influence operations included state and local government officials in the United States. Following this, the United States implemented specific measures from 2019 to 2020. First, the Department of State now requires prior notification regarding visits by Chinese government officials to state, local and municipal governments. In addition, it designated the 15 Chinese state-owned media companies as "foreign missions" under the Foreign Missions Act of 1982, requiring that they follow the conditions laid out by the Department of State. Furthermore, in June 2020, following rising concern about China's human rights violations in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Congress passed the Uygur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, which requires the U.S. government to levy sanctions on anyone complicit in human rights violations. In July 2020, the United States government froze the assets and banned the entry of certain Chinese authorities, and at the same time, subjected Chinese companies complicit in human rights violations to export restrictions.
- Meanwhile, with each service of the U.S. military developing operations concepts for possible conflicts with China and Russia, the U.S. Department of Defense has commenced development of a new Joint Warfighting Concept, that would align those services-led efforts and give them overarching direction. In addition, in 2020, despite the impacts of COVID-19, the United States actively deployed strategic bombers and aircraft carriers in the Western Pacific.
- On November 3, 2020, the U.S. presidential election was held, and on November 7, former Vice President Joseph Biden was reported to have won. However, President Donald Trump claimed large-scale voter fraud and filed dozens of lawsuits in each battleground states. Furthermore, on January 6, 2021, the United States Capitol, where Congress convened in a joint session to authenticate the results of the electoral voting on December 14, 2020, was stormed by President Trump's supporters.

Japan: Toward Post-COVID-19 Security Posture

- On January 29, after the emerging pandemic situation in China had become apparent, the Ministry of Defense and the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) began the dispatch of personnel to support the quarantine of Japanese nationals repatriated on charter flights from China. Since then, various support operations under the name of disaster relief have been carried out in each prefecture, employing JSDF's own infrastructure for these operations. The JSDF personnel involved in such support operations have not experienced secondary infections, and accordingly, the preventive measures they have taken have received strong praise. Based on lessons in preventing secondary infection learned through their operations, the JSDF is now providing support for education and training, primarily relaying this knowledge to local governments. Going forward, as long as the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 remains a critical challenge, the Ministry of Defense and JSDF are expected to make further contributions utilizing their unique capabilities.
- The year 2020 marked the 60th anniversary of the revision of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which has played a key role in Japan's national security. Although there are no changes in the actual clauses of the revised treaty, bilateral defense cooperation has been substantially deepened through the establishment of the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation and successive revisions. Against this backdrop, the administration of newly-inaugurated Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is expected to continue emphasizing the role of the Japan-U.S. alliance. At the same time, in order to further enhance response and deterrence under the alliance, bilateral defense cooperation with the United States could expand into multi-layered security cooperation—including cooperation with other U.S. allies. In particular, trilateral Japan-U.S.-Australia, Japan-U.S.-ROK, and Japan-U.S.-India security cooperation has been prominently promoted since the 2000s. The expanding bilateral and trilateral security cooperation could be further developed into quadruple cooperation among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India.
- In order to address the increasingly challenging security environment, the National Defense Program Guidelines, published in December 2018, articulate the “Multi-Domain Defense Force” concept and emphasize “cross-domain operations,” leveraging such new domains as space, cyber and the electromagnetic spectrum as force multipliers. In these new domains, the JSDF is enhancing its capacity, particularly by forming new units. However, as cross-domain operations differ considerably from traditional ways of warfare, farsighted policies would be indispensable to the development of operational capability that is sustainable.