

Corona and a changing world order

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You and I can live the way we do now because our social world is guaranteed by a leading state, a so-called hegemon. A hegemon is a first among equals. To be the hegemon means that other states will always think about what you will do and how you will react. You have everybody's attention, with all the practical advantages and all the status that entails.

However, to be the hegemon is not only a question of pride. It also comes with the responsibility of being in charge of how the system operates. It takes hard political, economic and legal work to uphold, say, a global banking system, or a system for oil trade, or intellectual property rights, or rules for how to handle a pandemic. It is the hegemon that underwrites the stability of a system, by paying for its institutions, warding off problems, ensuring smooth sailing.

It matters who this hegemon is, for he who pays the piper, calls the tune. The present hegemon, the US, established itself out of the crisis that was the Second World War. It did so, first, by handing out gifts to other states. It helped other states with the sundry medical and repatriation problems that popped up in the wake of the war. Then it went on to set up institutions that served its own purposes and supported its leading role in the system. The gifts given by the Marshall programme might serve as an example. They were really helpful for Europe, and they served to tie Europeans down as American allies. The US dominated and

eventually derailed its key challenger, the Soviet Union, by doing all this hegemonic work better than did the Soviets.

During the past four decades, a new hegemonic challenge has been in the making. China's power has grown steadily, to the point that it is now challenging the United States as the leading power in the world. The Corona crisis has presented China with an excellent opportunity to demonstrate its world-wide power. Nothing surprising here; crises are always key drivers of social change, and that includes the fight over who should be the states system's top dog. Pundits talk about this as hegemonic change.

As American presidents from George Bush on have spent less resources on maintaining the liberal world order of which it was the leading hegemon, China has gradually stepped up its efforts to replace it. President Trump's avid attacks on American allies and on the global institutions of the US's own making has further paved the way for China. Now, as the world is in the midst of its worst crisis since the Second World War, China seizes the opportunity to attack American hegemony head on. Note that its strategy shadows the US's own historical strategy of how to become a hegemon: China offers medicines, doctors, material assistance to alleviate a crisis. The Chinese gifts that are now being gratefully received by a number of other states, will at some point have to be met with counter-gifts. China is aptly using the Corona crisis to build up political favours, with a view to replacing American hegemony with Chinese hegemony.

Each and every one of us depends on the institutions upheld by the hegemon, so that we can buy the goods we like, go where we like, live as we like. Chinese hegemony will change not

only what we consume, but also what kind of political world we think of as 'natural'. To give but one example, in China, access to education, hospitals and foreign travel is regulated not primarily in terms of citizens' rights or buying power, but in terms of good behaviour. Loyalty to the state pays. Chinese hegemony would mean that this way of thinking about social services would spread to the rest of the world.

There is a cost to being the hegemon. A US that alienates its allies, does not pay for the upkeep of global institutions and fails to take the lead in crises, cannot remain the hegemon. One reading of the current crisis is that China is using it to stake its claim as the new hegemon. In lieu of American and European leadership, China continues its rise to world leadership.