Roundtable talk: How to Face the "Invisible Threat": Thinking about the International Order of Norms, Technology, and Institutions

Parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is facing a variety of challenges. Will the Biden administration be able to regain the "normative power" of the United States? What is the problem with the emergence of Chinese companies in telecommunications space? Of importance here should be that we calmly interpret the actuality of these "threats" as well as the revival and restoration of liberal society itself.

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Hosoya Yuichi: This is a roundtable talk to get an outlook on 2021, but we have to start with a dark topic. Right at the beginning of the year on January 6, Trump supporters invaded the United States Capitol and occupied it temporarily, leading to five deaths.

Kohno Kenji: When it comes to the 2021 United States Capitol attack, the "main" media outlets in the US talk about it as a blot on democracy, but when the question "Do you think it was an attack on democracy?" was asked in a poll, 70% of Republicans responded "No." Put a bit extremely, there exist two entirely different parallel worlds in the US, divided between countryside and cities, those who view Fox and those who view CNN. How are we supposed to understand the workings of politics and democracy under such circumstances? I think society won't be able to agree and this division will continue in the long term.

Oba Mie: Opinions about the incident have been varied in Southeast Asia. The main English-language newspapers very much covered it in Southeast Asia after it happened, and the Philippine *Inquirer* and the Indonesian *Jakarta Post* called it a major blow to democracy. Meanwhile, the Singaporean *Straits Times* viewed it with composure and cynicism. I remember an expert's comment that if the people who invaded the Capitol had been black, there would likely have been more victims. It's also interesting to note that no English-language newspapers reported the incident in Cambodia or Laos. At the same time, the response in China was one of deriding American democracy, saying that "While Hong Kong is stable and its order maintained, Washington is utterly chaotic."

Suzuki Kazuto: American democracy was trusted not only domestically but broadly by international society as a whole. Even now, Japan and many other countries see themselves as having freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and other values in common with the US. I think the damage of losing that trust that international society had for the US is immeasurable.

In addition, they have previously taken the lead among Western countries to encourage China, Russia, Turkey, and others "to democratize," but will they be able to do that in the same way in the future? The European countries are worried that the "standard" of democracy will change. I wonder to what extent the Biden administration will be able to restore that "standard"…

Kohno: The Biden administration itself is creating a senior post in charge of democratization in the United States National Security Council (NSC) and is eager to engage in diplomacy that promotes democracy just like the Obama administration. However, how the world sees this is a different question.

We're post-Obama administration and post-Trump administration

Hosoya: The Biden administration appears to be committing itself to global issues like democracy, human rights, and climate change. Unlike the Trump administration, some say the Biden administration is the "third Obama administration," but how do you think it differs from the Obama administration?

Kohno: If we look at the people in the Biden administration, they're all "well-known faces" from the Obama era. I spoke to someone I know in the State Department who welcomed this, saying that "People I can communicate with have come back," but American diplomacy changed a lot during the four years of the Trump administration. When it comes to China policy, there's quite a few, both Republican and Democrat, who'd say that the Trump administration changed an optimistic view on China domestically. I suppose the members of Team Obama are wondering how to work in the "results" of the Trump administration as they try to distinguish themselves.

A major figure like John Kerry (former United States Secretary of State) was appointed the United States Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, so it is clear that there's been a major shift from Trump's diplomacy. Meanwhile, they also seem to consider important a perspective of Trumpian diplomacy that benefits the people, which Jake Sullivan, who is becoming United States National Security Advisor, calls a "foreign policy for the middle class." Eyes are on them to see how they will adjust and develop the diplomacy that was the aspiration during the Obama era to suit the current international environment.

Suzuki: On the diplomatic front, environment and climate change issues are the administration's top priorities, but that is not enough to conduct diplomacy. Just looking at the staffing makes it seem like a continuation of Obama's diplomacy, but it's not really clear what Obama's diplomacy was to begin with. We know the story of promoting a nuclear deal with Iran according to the principle of a "nuclear-free world," but the Obama administration's stance vis-à-vis Russia and China was ambiguous. By contrast, the Trump administration set up a confrontation between the US and China by pushing "America First", while also deteriorating relations with allies in Europe and implementing unilateral tariffs to cause confusion to trade rules, pursuing its unique policy that deviates from previous administrations. I guess the Biden administration will improve relations with allies and refrain from unilateral and aggressive action, but it's not clear what it will do beyond that—for example, what will it do with the "New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START)" with Russia and will it pursue a hardline policy against China similar to that of the Trump administration due to pressure from Congress. We shouldn't predict so much but wait and see.

Oba: In Southeast Asia, it appears that quite a few have an emotional attachment to President Trump. It might be that they like his top-down style of saying things as they are. At least, they don't reject him as much as they do in Europe. There's also a tendency to positively evaluate Trump's diplomacy from a utility perspective. Especially Vietnam, which is in a fierce struggle with China over the South China Sea issue, felt positive about the Trump administration for being strong on China and has gained "utility" through surging investments into the country because of the tariff rivalry between the US and China. Since the Trump administration was clear on its hardline stance against China, for good or bad, worries about the Democratic Party's Biden administration becoming too weak on China can at least be seen in the media reporting. Although I'm sure that won't happen.

Hosoya: I feel that the baseline of American diplomacy has changed because of Trump.

Kohno: If we take a slightly longer perspective, there was a time before World War II when the US interacted with the world through commercial relations. After the war, they came to shoulder values like freedom and democracy on the diplomatic front. The Trump administration saw that as an encumbrance and decided to put it down. The idea was to become more carefree and only do what benefits the US, which made their dealings with not just China but the entire world more unabashed. Considering that white voters in the Midwest passionately supported this, it also changed American political trends to some extent. With that development in mind, it may not be possible to simply revive the Obama line.

Suzuki: I don't think the Biden administration will shoulder the American postwar burden as a hegemonic power but will instead narrow it down to a selected few points, such as environmental issues and human rights issues. However, pursuing climate change issues, which means decarbonizing energy, is a direct challenge to the interests of the energy industry in the Midwest and South. President Biden will likely keep talking about the importance of climate change, but I don't think it's going to go well at all. In the end, I would imagine he plans to reform the energy industry by forcefully strengthening regulations and, if needed, pay reparations.

In this sense, the Biden administration has to engage in diplomacy while containing the domestic division. As a result, other countries have to constantly interact with a divided America. If the policy range grows wide not only in domestic politics but also diplomacy, this will reduce trust in the US. It's a very tough situation for the international community.

Why is China a threat?

Hosoya: The waning of American influence and the loss of American values are frequently talked about in connection with the rise of China. As with the "Belt and Road initiative" (BRI), the vision of a Chinese international order spreading across the Eurasian continent would never have been discussed 30 years ago, setting aside its actual feasibility. At the moment, it's become normal to think of US-China relations at the center when wanting to know about trends in international politics. If we consider this in a span of 10 or 20 years, how should we frame China within the international society?

Suzuki: The first thing we should think about is whether China will become a hegemonic state or not. I'm skeptical about this. It's true that China keeps advancing economically into and is exercising influence in many parts of the Eurasian continent and Africa, but that is with regard to economic matters only. It's also not necessarily the case that this economic power translates those countries into allies of China. Even the autocratic states in Central Asia likely have no intention of incorporating all aspects of China's governance model even if they use the Chinese facial recognition system. In this sense, I feel that the US might be wrong to view China as a hegemonic competitor.

Also on the military side, China is not in a formal military alliance with any country besides North Korea. They are likewise not committed to helping anyone within the scope of something like the right of collective self-defense. China will stick to its policy of non-intervention and, therefore, it will not get involved in other countries' conflicts. Considering this, it really doesn't look like they are trying to expand their sphere of influence like the Soviet Union did with Eastern Europe, Vietnam, and other satellite or buffer states during the Cold War period. We should think about the economic influence as something separate.

Hosoya: How do you see China's actions in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Suzuki: We ought to be worried about the situations in the South China Sea, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but regardless of what the international society says, China considers all of them its own "territories," intends to create spaces there that are comfortable for itself, and will do as it wishes in the name of domestic affairs. China does not intend to expand its political and military commitments beyond its own territories. Even if they were to do so, that would only be selective interference as it suits China and not an alliance commitment to help other countries if they are in trouble. In this sense, the extent of interference is far weaker than that of the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. I think we should think about the global expansion of economic influence as separate from the military commitment limited to the region.

Oba: That might be true globally. However, I don't think we can be as optimistic in East Asia, including Japan. China differentiates between actions on the global scene and actions with neighbors and in its

own territories. It adopts a rather hardline stance regarding the latter, especially when it comes to sovereignty, which is what is threatening regional stability. What China is doing in the South China Sea and the East China Sea is nothing short of trying to change the status quo through force from the perspective of other countries, regardless of how much China claims they are its own "territories." The fear that China might keep expanding the scope of what it perceives as its "territories" is a very real issue to East Asian countries.

Also, if we look at Southeast Asia, we can't ignore that China has some form of influence. That is, even if China is not trying to deliberately spread its "China model" like in the earlier "export of revolution," China is demonstrating that "economic development is possible without democracy" and that "economic development does not necessarily lead to democratization" by its example. We can't ignore the influence of that in itself.

Kohno: The China threat is not only about visible power like territorial expansion and military might but also has to do with growing influence in invisible realms like cyberspace, technology, and data. Frankly, the South China Sea is a distant world to most Americans. However, talk about Huawei, 5G, big data, and other forms of economy and technology is more familiar, and when China tries to advance there, it can easily be perceived as a threat.

Suzuki: Because you can't see cyberspace, the fears are easily amplified in your head. It's a kind of paranoia, but I think we're living in a time when that is easily legitimized. Even so, how wary should we be of technologies coming out of China? We might have to be careful with Huawei, but what threats are hiding in TikTok, which are 45-second videos of middle- and high-school students dancing? We have to be discerning or we won't be able to use any technology that comes from China.

Kohno: China has a grand strategy of achieving technological hegemony and all technologies made in China reflect the intentions of the Chinese government from start to finish—this is true in the discussion of Michael Pillsbury's *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, but ideas like these easily take hold in the US where conspiracy theories are popular. Even if reality isn't necessarily so.

Suzuki: The reason Huawei is taking the lead in 5G is not because the Chinese government is intentionally trying to control the global market but because Huawei's products are competitive in terms of both technology and price, so it boils down to market principles. However, the mere words "Made in China" are enough to spark a political issue. Nonetheless, if we think about who will own technologies like 5G that will impact how the world works in the future and if Chinese companies end up taking those markets, then it's very possible that that can serve as leverage to gain political power. I'm certain that the groundwork is there for technological superiority to become political power and for the economic order to have a major influence over the political order.

The malfunctioning AIIB

Oba: Another thing we should watch concerning China is its growing presence in international organizations like the WHO. It seems that that the Chinese government is advancing this quite strategically. It is engaging in what might be termed very refined diplomacy by getting involved in global

governance through international organizations and international frameworks, dispatching people, and converting those contributions into political power, especially with global issues like health and environment.

Suzuki: As you said, China is deliberately increasing its presence in international organizations. However, many international organizations such as the United Nations are largely dominated by Europe and North America, so nobody is going to listen to you unless you push your way through and get in there, be it China or Japan. In this sense, the Chinese approach is strategic but can't really be considered hegemonic. Rather, it's something Japan should emulate.

Oba: Many of the top-level decision-making positions in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have been occupied by Westerners. Although Japan has somehow managed to get a seat. It's indeed perfectly natural that China, with its rapid economic development, wants to get in there.

Suzuki: At the same time, it's not necessarily so that international organizations led by China or where China plays a central part are really run well. An obvious example is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). It opened in 2016 with a flourish of trumpets, but only about half of the financing target has been reached.

Oba: Most AIIB loans are small or loans co-financed with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Still, China has always had organizations that can provide support freely, so it might be okay to say that AIIB is managed like a fairly well-governed international bank.

Hosoya: This is what's tricky about international organizations. China has domestic organizations that can provide assistance by themselves, like the Export-Import Bank of China, so by using them, it can basically make investments as it wishes. With European countries joining the AIIB, the agenda setting powers have actually fallen into the hands of the UK and Germany. If so, it naturally has to abide by international rules and China is no longer able to make investments based solely on its strategic intentions. To begin with, the AIIB was established as a rather unplanned result of compromise in the power struggles among Chinese government agencies and trying to find a way to use ample funds. If we consider this starting point, I think the reality is far removed from the worries loudly expressed by the media in the beginning, that China has a grand design to control the Eurasian economy.

China's determination as seen in the RCEP

Hosoya: The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) was signed by 15 countries in November 2020. They were saying that China was expanding its influence also with this and some say that the RCEP will become a Chinese tool for economic control without the participation of the US and India.

Oba: I don't necessarily think that's the case. China made quite significant compromises regarding tariff removals by joining the RCEP, and it's now subject to common rules about investment, intellectual property, and electronic commerce that will restrict it. Of course, the standards for the RCEP are pretty loose compared to TPP, but China nonetheless has to do some domestic reforms to match those rules.

Current development in East Asia is based on a scheme of global companies crossing national borders to expand supply chains. Emerging and developing countries like China find growth opportunities there and join those supply chain networks. The RCEP is a framework that develops this and makes flows of people, goods, and capital investments smoother, thereby accelerating "21st-century trade." Thus, if China were to arbitrarily change standards based on political intentions, it would likely exclude China from the supply chains. I don't think that's what China wants, and I don't think it's suitable for the economic development in East Asia as a whole.

Hosoya: From a geopolitical point of view, TPP and the RCEP can be seen as opposites. There was also talk about India joining the RCEP to counterbalance China, although they didn't join in the end. What are your thoughts about this?

Oba: I believe TPP and the RCEP are at root the same and don't have many oppositional elements. Of course, TPP is more liberal and has a higher rule standard. But both aspire to a free and open international economic order by driving 21st-century trade and object to protectionist tendencies. Thus, if China were to want to make more effort and join the TPP, I think that's something we should welcome.

However, the RCEP is a framework for everyone to develop by expanding their supply chains, so China's influence in the RCEP area will increase since it already has a significant presence in the supply chain networks. If we don't like China standing out, we must deepen and develop supply chain networks with countries other than China. These efforts will lead to the diversification of supply chains.

Some expect India to contain China, but looking at the size of Indian GDP, unfortunately it isn't huge. Strong domestic objections have also prevented the Modi administration from liberalizing flows of goods needed to include the Indian economy in the supply chains and removing domestic regulations. If India prepared to join the RCEP, it would likely gain great power considering India's future economic potential. But right now, I think it's unrealistic to pin too great hopes on India.

The "affinity" of pandemic measures and authoritarianism

Hosoya: Lastly, as you might expect, I want to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on the international order. Vaccine development and distribution has become a focal point of international politics.

Kohno: The US prioritizes curbing domestic spread and is not in a position to support other countries. As you said, the key is vaccine distribution, but it hasn't gone according to plan. It will probably take until the end of the year before it reaches all parts of the country.

It will take quite a while before the US is able to conduct any vaccine diplomacy. Western vaccines like Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca will basically go to Western countries first and foremost, and won't be reaching other parts of the world right now. China used this opportunity to develop a vaccine with no need for a cold chain and is trying to export it to Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America. It's already in Brazil.

Oba: India has also developed a domestic vaccine through collaboration between the Indian pharmaceutical company Bharat Biotech and a government research institute. The vaccine developed

by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca will also be manufactured by another Indian pharmaceutical company called Serum Institute of India (SII), and it's been reported that negotiations have concluded for Myanmar to buy that vaccine. India is showing an intention to provide the vaccine to Myanmar and other neighbors like Bangladesh and Nepal, so it will probably become a global actor of vaccine diplomacy.

Compared to the West, Asian countries have been relatively successful in keeping down infections, but the situation differs greatly between countries and areas. The fight is still ongoing in the Philippines and Indonesia, and it's spreading again, centering on Rakhine State in Myanmar, so the situation might be getting worse.

Suzuki: I don't think vaccine development will become a game changer in international politics. Like Mr. Kohno said, vaccines made in the West will mainly be consumed domestically so developing countries will be getting vaccines made by China, India, and Russia for the time being. But high-quality vaccines from the West will start reaching them at some point. That is, it's basically a question of time, just like with face masks. At present, Chinese vaccine diplomacy is advancing, but I don't think that will lead to any changes in the hegemony of using international organizations and international regimes.

Oba: It won't be a power change, but while developed countries have generally failed in their COVID-19 measures, some emerging and developing countries seem to have it under control, which might increase the presence of those countries. There are worries that COVID-19 measures will lead to structural changes in domestic politics. They are used to strengthen authoritarian systems in emerging and developing countries, and some level of success is achieved.

There is a risk of weakened democratic functions. For example, in Indonesia and the Philippines, the military and security agencies are bolstering their positions through authoritarian measures that are dubbed COVID-19 measures, and this serves to strengthen the control of authoritarian regimes even when they don't necessarily help reduce infections. To begin with, we ought to realize that thoroughly implementing pandemic measures has to infringe on citizens' free rights to some extent and that "successful pandemic measures" in themselves contain elements that threaten democracy.

Suzuki: With regard to domestic governance, we also can't ignore the relationship between the pandemic and the economy. We have yet to see the economic repercussions of the global pandemic, but China has somehow kept infections down and is letting its economy recover. The same goes for Vietnam. Countries that successfully keep infections down are able to maintain economic growth. In this sense, policymakers have to prove their worth.

If so, I want to go back to what we said in the beginning, as the current situation in the US is a simultaneous collapse of the superiority of the democratic model, superiority in science and technology, and the driving force of economic growth. In reality, not only have policies failed, but they're losing the ability to show and spread certain norms. Will the Biden administration be able to reverse this? Prospects aren't bright, but I'm sure they'll do their very best to ensure that it doesn't get any worse. I hope we can glean some hope from those continuous efforts.

Translated from "Zadankai: 'Mienai kyoi' to domukiauka—Kihan, gijutsu, seido wo meguru kokusaichitsujo wo kangaeru (Roundtable talk: How to Face the "Invisible Threat": Thinking about the International Order of Norms, Technology, and Institutions), Vol. 65 Jan./Feb. 2020pp. 20-29. (Courtesy of Toshi Shuppan) [September 2021]

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