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# A Review of 2020

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# Moving Singapore into a Post-COVID World

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At the start of 2020, an unknown virus was afflicting the Chinese city of Wuhan under a cloud of mystery. Most observers, however, were paying attention to seemingly more immediate and visceral global affairs going on at the time: bushfires in Australia, Iran-US tensions, and the impeachment process of US President Donald Trump.

Observers saw that these new situations could potentially change global dynamics and even our understanding of the world. While the risks of contagious diseases were known, the idea that one could result in a global pandemic still seemed to be the stuff of science fiction. However, it was precisely this event which fundamentally disrupted the entire global system within a couple of months.

By the end of January, the disease had a name – "COVID-19" – and had initiated a global freeze on travel as the early notable cases beyond China tended to be active globe trotters like celebrities, businessmen, sports stars, and diplomats. Accounts of overwhelmed healthcare workers and speculation about its modes of transmission rattled markets and led to shutdowns and restrictions globally, with severe economic impacts and rapidly developing contagion in both the biological and socio-economic senses of the term.

## From pre-COVID to post-COVID world

At the time of writing (October 2020), few can say when the COVID-19 pandemic will pass. Yet there is a recognition that at some point – hopefully sooner rather than later – the pandemic will end, and the world will look very different from what it was before COVID-19. As such, scholars are examining the geopolitical changes caused or amplified by the pandemic and questioning what the new international dynamics might look like. To this end, three elements merit special attention: (i) the international structure; (ii) state-to-state relations; and (iii) domestic politics.

Given US-China tensions, the international system is likely to witness greater bifurcation along ideological lines. While the choices proffered to countries are not binary (after all, there are 193 member states in the United Nations), the fact that Washington and Beijing have outsized political influence compared to others means that their political ideas – for better or worse – will generate greater effects and consequences.

Secondly, the closing of borders because of COVID-19 has led to a pause in many diplomatic and economic activities. While politicians and policymakers made use of technology to maintain contact with foreign counterparts and mitigate the impact of reduced communication, state-to-state relations are likely to witness short-term uncertainty as states come to grips with the changed social, economic, and even political reality of other states. For instance, the loss of jobs worldwide has driven countries towards more protectionist labour policies.

Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the challenges in domestic governance in many countries as governments are forced to wrestle with the trade-offs and unintended consequences of social policies at home. Many countries – regardless of political system – are searching for answers on how to navigate a post-COVID world. Politics has become more fractious with established institutions and systems in a flux, and the challenge of setting clear and consistent domestic and foreign policies will be paramount in the coming years.

## Singapore's rocky road ahead

Singapore has not been spared from the socio-economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the city-state's dependence on a free and open economy, tourism, as well as its status as a regional hub have left it potentially vulnerable to the negative consequences arising from the imposition of travel bans and the predicted decline in global trade.

Singapore's economy is in recession and facing its highest unemployment in a decade. Amid expectations in mid-2020 that Singapore was heading for its worst recession since independence in 1965, Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Trade and Industry, declared that "we are not returning to a pre-COVID-19 world" and underlined the need for Singapore to "chart a new direction now."

While domestic debates on how much weight a Singaporean "core" should occupy within its deeply globalised economy continue, most would agree that Singapore must develop a core capable of navigating an uncertain and challenging international environment in the years ahead.

Singapore's success in creating a structure that allowed its citizens to thrive is now being supplanted by a challenge for them to thrive in a bigger world where, as we have outlined above, conditions are uncertain and in transition.

## Navigating a world in transition

This calls not only for people to be technically competent, but also sensitive to the political dynamics of the world – people adept and nimble enough to seize the opportunities or offer solutions in a changing world. These capacities should then be plugged into key sectors crucial to Singapore's society and economy in a post-COVID world, such as info-communications technology, supply chains, and medical services.

Moreover, even as countries across the globe focus more on addressing domestic challenges during this period, it is vital for Singapore to persist in forging deeper links with its traditional and new partners. As a small nation-state lacking in natural resources, Singapore needs to rely on its connections with the rest of the world for its survival and prosperity.

This may be a tall order given deteriorating China-US relations, rising protectionism, and social upheaval in some countries. Nevertheless, the principles upon which Singapore's foreign policy has traditionally been based – such as embracing a pragmatic and non-ideological approach, bolstering multilateral institutions, and seeking mutually beneficial partnerships – will continue to serve it well in the post-COVID age.

As the world begins to move on from the peak of the pandemic, Singapore will face a rocky road ahead – both in its domestic and external environments. As 2020 has shown, the pressing needs of a nation may rapidly shift before our very eyes. For the city-state to overcome these challenges caused or exacerbated by the pandemic, a combination of foresight, flexibility, and fortitude will be essential.



# Digital Transformation, Empathy, Resilience, and Inclusion

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When we look back on 2020, one of the things we will remember (besides the hoarding of toilet paper) is how "we have seen two years' worth of digital transformation in just two months" – in the words of Satya Nadella, President & CEO of Microsoft. This unprecedented change has also brought unprecedented risks, which we must address as we move forward into the new decade.

In Singapore, as with many other countries, organisations struggled to cope when most employees were required to work from home because of emergency measures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations had to quickly provide employees remote access to corporate systems to stay productive. Businesses large and small, from supermarkets to neighbourhood food stalls, had to either pivot to providing goods and services online or go out of business.

This enabled cyberattacks to increase hundredfold as cyberthreat actors (cybercriminals, nation states, hackers) capitalised on the disruption. Phishing attempts (misleading emails that trick readers to click on links leading to scams or malware), especially those using COVID-19 related topics to prey on readers' fears, doubled over the first two quarters of 2020.

Besides the pandemic, a worldwide "infodemic" – the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and rumours about the coronavirus – was happening. From fake viral cures to conspiracy theories about secret labs and mind-control vaccines, authorities fought to keep these hoaxes in check as they could hamper effective public health responses and create confusion and distrust among people.

Both cyberattacks and the infodemic thrived because we had become extremely vulnerable. The shift to remote work resulted in longer working hours and greater stress for many, especially those who had to juggle multiple demands from work and home. Many had to get work done on home computers and networks that were not as effective or secure as in the office. In this vulnerable condition, it was and still is easy to fall prey to phishing emails, cyberfraud, and fake news.

The damage extended into the physical world with cyber-physical attacks increasing. As hospitals came under intense pressure dealing

with COVID-19 infections, they became prime targets for ruthless cybercriminals. One woman died from delayed treatment because of a ransomware attack on a hospital in Germany, possibly the first death directly linked to a cyberattack.

The Cyber Security Agency of Singapore observed in mid-2020 that malicious cyber activities will continue to rise so long as COVID-19 remains a global healthcare crisis. What is more worrying is that they will persist well into the coming years, whether a cure or vaccine is developed or not.

As the world adapts to limitations on movement, a huge majority of employees surveyed in Singapore want to continue working from home even after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Many employers also see productivity benefits as well as cost savings from reducing office space. Businesses which have successfully made the transition online want to continue reaping the gains of their e-commerce customer base. The pandemic has effectively pushed us all into an accelerated digital transformation.

However, this comes with all the risks noted above. Going forward, we need digital empathy, resilience, and inclusion, to secure the rapid phase of digital transformation brought about by COVID-19.

**Digital empathy** means creating an environment and providing tools that are "forgiving" of mistakes. Even if we attend the best cyber hygiene training in the world, it just takes one split second of distraction (and there are many while working from home) to click on a phishing email or to expose a password. When this happens, we need processes and technology that will prevent our networks, data, or money from being compromised. We also need to grow a culture that supports the people whose stress and confusion make them vulnerable, instead of blaming and shaming them for making mistakes, which only drives the problem underground where it will fester (and where malware will spread).

**Digital resilience** means building up people, processes, and systems that can carry on even after an incident has occurred. The pandemic has shown how reliant we are on technology for our daily needs, so we need backup plans in case of technology failures or cyberattacks. For example, a hospital that is hit by ransomware needs to be able to continue treating patients and saving lives. If a smart city power grid, rail transportation, or telecommunication network is knocked out by a cyberattack, the population needs to be able to cope and adapt.

Digital resilience also includes the population's ability to resist rumours, misinformation, and disinformation which can accompany a cyberattack. These could sow discord, suspicion, and fear aimed at tearing society apart, or slowly poison it from within. Human empathy – the ability to step into the shoes of others – reminds us not to believe the worst lies about them. The SG Secure tagline "Be Prepared. Our Response Matters." applies here too.

**Digital inclusion** means providing access, capabilities, and security to all members of society. We have seen how digital technology can help us overcome challenges, stay productive, stay connected, unlock opportunities, and improve people's lives. But we have also seen how less-privileged families are at a great disadvantage if they do not have access to technology. For example, low-income children may lack suitable computers for home-based learning, while adults may lack the skills and tools to access work opportunities or financial aid.

While non-governmental organisations, civil society, and the government have been helping to provide them with some computers and broadband connectivity, they also need more training on digital skills, online safety, and digital literacy, to avoid becoming victims of cybercrime or disinformation. They also need cybersecurity technology that can accommodate their diverse needs, circumstances, and skills. Our smart nation, with all its interconnectedness, is only as secure as the most vulnerable members in our society.

Digital empathy, resilience, and inclusion have been studied and promoted for a very long time. COVID-19 has only helped to bring into sharp focus how important they are, not just for the future of digital transformation, but for the progress and security of our society, as we continue to cope with and grow beyond the pandemic.

# Presidential Elections, Geopolitical Uncertainty, and Hopes for Overcoming the Sino-US Conflict

*Dr Adrian Ang, Research Fellow with the US Programme in IDSS*

On his third try at the presidency, and after four tense days of vote counting in Pennsylvania, former Vice President Joe Biden will be the 46th President of the United States. For another consecutive election, however, the polling appears to have been flawed and it was not the predicted Biden romp to the White House. Instead, the widely anticipated Democratic "blue" wave was matched by a corresponding "red" Republican wave amidst record voter turnout. In the Electoral College (EC), Biden successfully flipped the three key Rust Belt states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, and two Sun Belt states, Arizona and Georgia – but it appears by only a combined total of around 105,000 votes. Thus, while Biden will win the national popular vote by over five million votes – 77.9 million to 72.5 million – and 306 to 232 in the EC once all the votes are tallied, the country is not merely polarised after a bitterly fought campaign, it is also very evenly divided.

The division is more evident when we examine the down ballot races. House Democrats saw their majority diminish despite having a clear fundraising advantage and having to defend fewer open seats. The post-election inquest has reignited an intra-party feud between moderate and progressive Democrats. Republicans look to be in a very good position to retake the House in 2022 given the usual midterm backlash against the president's party as well as having retained advantages in more state houses than Democrats going into a critical redistricting year. The Senate also looks to remain in GOP hands, with both Georgia Senate races going to runoffs in January; at best, the Democrats enjoy only even odds to win those two races. Thus, unlike the last two Democratic presidents, Biden appears unlikely to have unified control of government upon taking office. We have to go all the way back to 1884 to find a newly-elected Democratic president – Grover Cleveland – who won without his party also having won control of Congress. Accomplishing his political agenda will require Biden to navigate delicate intra-Democratic Party politics while negotiating with his erstwhile Senate colleague, GOP Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who will look to obstruct him at every turn.

Biden's top priority will be coming to grips with a coronavirus pandemic, that far from having "magically disappeared", is in its third wave and threatening to infect an additional seven million and kill 150,000 Americans even before Inauguration Day. In addition to the human and economic toll, the pandemic has damaged American soft power. In a recent Pew Research Center poll, a median of only 15 per cent of respondents across 13 countries surveyed said that the US had done "a good job" in handling the pandemic. While few respondents thought that China has handled it well, it still received better reviews than the American response. While dealing effectively with the pandemic is more likely to occur under Biden, he will face enormous challenges. The US may now be well past the point of being able to defeat the coronavirus, and Biden's plan for a national test-trace-isolate regime to "flatten the curve" of infections and deaths until a vaccine is available is likely to be opposed by an emboldened GOP-controlled Senate, Republican governors, and a science-sceptical population – the legacy of the Trump administration's weaponisation of a public health matter into another polarising issue in the nation's toxic culture wars.

Biden will also have to confront the fiscal fallout of the pandemic and its geopolitical consequences. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projects the cumulative US national debt to exceed annual GDP in FY 2021, and it assumes no new borrowing moving forward – an unrealistic assumption given that a Biden administration will surely pursue further coronavirus relief spending. During his address to the U.N. General Assembly, President Donald Trump boasted of boosting spending on the military by some $2.5 trillion to make it "the most powerful in the

world." Days of such largesse might soon be over: America's "welfare-warfare" state is approaching the point of unsustainability – the annual cost of interest on the national debt will overtake the cost of national defense by the end of the decade. US debt is expected to exceed 200 per cent of GDP by mid-century, and the country cannot continue to spend at such a rate without severe economic, social, and geopolitical consequences. Biden will thus have the fraught task of aligning the long-term sustainability of domestic social programmes with US global ambitions and commitments, and politically acceptable levels of taxation.

The most pressing geopolitical issue facing Biden is the precarious state of Sino-US relations. It is also the most critical issue for states in Southeast Asia attempting on the one hand to balance an aggressive resurgence of Chinese power in the region with the continued benefits of economic engagement, and on the other hand to seek the reassurance of an American security presence without being dragged into a full-spectrum confrontation with China. However, the last remaining redoubt of bipartisan agreement in Washington is the need to take a tougher approach against China, and a Biden administration will differ more from Trump's in tone than in substance. Biden will be less overtly confrontational in dealing with Beijing – he and some of his closest foreign policy advisers have said that they do not want a new Cold War with Beijing - and will attempt to seek China's cooperation on issues such as climate change and arms control, but he nonetheless intends to corral a broad coalition of states to confront and contain China. Thus, even Biden's "multilateral" approach seeks to widen the Sino-US conflict through linkages and threatens to constrain the geopolitical space available to states in the region and force them into choosing sides.

The Sino-US geopolitical struggle has most often been viewed through the lens of the so-called "Thucydides Trap." While the potential for military conflict is real and ought not to be underestimated, of greater gravity are the negative externalities from the "Kindleberger Trap" - that the two superpowers jostling to assert the prerogatives rather than the responsibilities of hegemons, are failing to provide international public goods and direct concerted action. The worst public health and economic crises in a century failed to elicit any meaningful cooperation between the two superpowers. However, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership is testament to the ability of small and medium Asian states to deliver regional public goods through their concerted efforts without the involvement of either the US or China, and long may that continue. Thus, the challenge of Sino-US geopolitical competition also provides space and incentives for Asian states to continue seeking greater cooperation and coordination in areas such as public health and data governance, to ensure that the potential of an "Asian Century" is not jeopardised regardless of the dynamics of American domestic politics.

## What Goes Around Comes Around: American Carnage and Trump's Legacy to Biden

(As of 8 January 2021)

The waning days of the Trump presidency are set to be consumed by "American carnage" – the grim spectre that President Donald Trump invoked at his inauguration – as for the first time since the Civil War, the transfer of power turned violent and deadly after he incited supporters to storm Capitol Hill, disrupting the joint session of Congress convened to formally tally the Electoral College votes and declare Joe Biden the winner of the 2020 presidential election. What Senator Mitt Romney decried as an "insurrection" is the logical – and tragic – culmination of a months-long campaign by the defeated incumbent, aided, abetted, and enabled by a not-insignificant coterie of Republican officeholders tempted by political opportunism, to overturn the election results on the basis of unfounded and unsubstantiated allegations of pervasive voter fraud. With Vice President Mike Pence and lawmakers forced to either evacuate or shelter behind locked doors as the mob sacked the Capitol building, President Trump could only muster enough effort to ask his supporters to "go home with love and peace," while steadfastly adhering to his voter fraud conspiracy theories that prompted the violence in the first place.

The "failed insurrection" threatens to overshadow the results of the two Georgia Senate run-off elections that will give Biden and the Democrats unified control of the US government come January 20, but only just barely. House Democrats will have their slimmest majority since the 1940s, and the election of Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff will allow Kamala Harris to cast the tie-breaking vote in a 50-50 Senate in favour of the Democrats. This does not mean that Biden will have it all his own way in pursuing his agenda, but it does indicate that key negotiations will happen within the Democratic caucus – elevating Joe Manchin (West Virginia) as arguably the second-most powerful Democrat in Washington after Biden as the critical 50th vote in the Senate – rather than with Sen. Mitch McConnell and the Republicans. This marks a remarkable *volte-face* from the immediate aftermath of the November elections when Democrats were embroiled in mutual recriminations over the failure to retake the Senate and the stunning loss of seats in the House.

In light of the mob assault on Capitol Hill, it is the Republicans who now face a reckoning over their relationship with Trump and Trumpism moving forward. While a majority (62 per cent) of registered voters in a YouGov survey found the storming of the Capitol a "threat to democracy," two-thirds of Republicans (68 per cent) thought otherwise. The survey also found Republicans to be almost evenly split in their active support of the actions of those at the Capitol (45 per cent) and in their expressed opposition (43 per cent), and overwhelming (69 per cent) in their belief that Trump is "not much" or "not at all" to blame for the mob's actions, and that it would be "inappropriate" (85 per cent) to remove him from office over the events at the Capitol. Given these findings, it should not be shocking that even after the Trumpian mob assault on the Capitol, six Republican senators and well over half the GOP Conference in the House still voted to object to the electoral returns of Arizona and Pennsylvania. There is a perverse electoral incentive for ambitious Republican politicians to court the 20-25 per cent of the electorate that is inclined to authoritarian-populist Trumpism.

The assault on the US Capitol should reinforce the notion that despite the laundry list of foreign policy problems facing the incoming Biden administration – Sino-US relations, North Korea, Iran, climate change – the principal problems that will occupy its bandwidth and consume its political capital are domestic: COVID-19, the recession, and a deeply divided and polarised country. In the 2020 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey, Americans ranked the coronavirus pandemic, domestic violent extremism, and political polarisation as greater "critical threats" to the vital interests of the US than the rise of China as a world power. Joe Biden has spoken of bringing about national healing in the post-Trump era, but the events at the Capitol show the scale of the challenge. The deep polarisation will continue and there is a genuine concern that this is just the start of political violence in the US. If there is anything the four years of the Trump presidency should teach us is that democratic institutions and norms are much less resilient than thought to be – and that the "Weimarization" of the United States should no longer be an unthinkable prospect.


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