



Three Experts Discuss: Will the China Model Conquer the World? What Will Happen? The Xi Jinping System After COVID-19

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What COVID-19 Has Brought to Light

Miyamoto Yuji: COVID-19 has shaken many of the world's fundamentals, revealing things that hadn't been visible before. One is US–China relations. For example, the US's strictest policy against China is decoupling, but COVID-19 has stopped the movement of people, severed supply chains, and had a major negative impact on the US economy, so is it really possible to establish a decoupling relationship with China?

Also, until now, the Xi Jinping administration has talked about the “China Dream” to build a country peerless in the world by the mid-century, but isn't that a dream founded on extremely optimistic predictions? I hope that China can make this experience an opportunity to calmly reassess their international position.

If I were to add something more, when the Japanese economy was doing well in the 1990s, we actually became the world's number-one provider of ODA. Japan at the time was looking at the world broadly and thought it necessary to address issues that transcend national borders. Similar discussions were held in the UN.

The first issue to come up was the environment, followed by infectious diseases. Since COVID-19 is also an infectious disease, it's an issue that humanity as a whole has to deal with. Each country cannot think about their own situation only. Most people ought to notice that despite this, we're living in a world where such calls for solidarity are not raised right now. The current coronavirus has also exposed this state of the international society.



Mr. Miyamoto Yuji



Prof. Kawashima Shin

Kawashima Shin: I also think the situation now is showing the fragility of emerging powers and of globalization.

With SARS in 2003, a kind of endemic disease entered Hong Kong and spread to Australia, Canada, and other old British Empire countries. This time, an unknown disease that broke out somewhere in China has spread rapidly inside China by way of highways, railways and other transportation infrastructure, and then globally. Compared to SARS, the movement of people and goods has become much more vigorous, a vivid depiction of the economic development that China has achieved in the past twenty years.

Yet, this time, China was able to identify the pathogen inside the country and is engaged in vaccine development. Manmade calamities notwithstanding, the development of Chinese science, technology and economy has certainly brought positive effects, although it's equally true that there still remain abuses.

Also, unlike developed countries, China and other emerging powers have both ultramodern areas and areas of absolute poverty. We will likely see more diseases spreading from the latter areas to the world also in the future.

Ako Tomoko: In today's world, many issues exist in a framework of fighting "against China." COVID-19 is a clear example of this.

The Chinese leadership want to boast that they were able to contain it through their own efforts, but in reality, their initial response was crude and led to an unbelievable number of deaths in a short time. This was despite the outbreak happening in Wuhan, one of China's top ten biggest cities. So, is it really appropriate for them to announce to the world that "China has done well"?



Prof. Ako Tomoko

Even though they had experience from SARS, the Wuhan city authorities tried to conceal the problem in the beginning. Not only this, but the first words out of the mouths of those in charge in Wuhan were, "We apologize to the central government." I can't feel anything but sorry for the people who live in a country like that.

China's Influence in the World Is Decreasing

Miyamoto: It's a fact that the COVID-19 infection spread across the world because the Chinese government failed to contain it in Wuhan. We should be careful not to blame China alone, but if China had contained it in the beginning, it probably wouldn't have spread like this.

The question is how China will come to terms with these negative aspects, and especially how much they will actually affect the Chinese economy. The China Model has been praised thus far not because it is attractive in itself but because it yielded the accomplishment of "miraculous" economic growth. If a shadow falls on the economy, this will cast a shadow on the Chinese image. I think the whole world will come to have lower expectations on China as well.

From my perspective, that would be more realistic expectations. China has long been overly self-confident, and the world has held China in too great a regard. The current situation might finally bring us closer to the reality.

Kawashima: I also think that they have suffered a big blow in terms of less trust from other countries. It's also clear that the Xi Jinping administration has taken a lot of damage domestically. In particular, they formulated a range of targets ahead of the 100th year anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021, including a plan to double incomes relative to 2010 by 2020, but now their priority will be to restore the status quo. I think this will be a huge burden precisely because they had set such high goals.

A Test for CCP Governance

Miyamoto: The recent turmoil has become a test for the governance of the Xi Jinping administration as well as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). There have been two trends in Chinese governance until now. One is a system of top-down hierarchy that increases authority and concentrates power as things are advanced by orders from above. The other is a system of deciding things through broad discussion and implementing the decisions by concentrated power. In other words, it is centralization and democracy.

The Xi Jinping administration strengthened the former and tried to effectivize governance. However, this approach weakens power from the middle to the ends. It might have become more effective than before, but the flow from bottom to top has become weaker. COVID-19 has very much brought this to the fore. I believe the key is how the governance is going to change to respect the self-motivation from the middle to the ends.

Ako: There is strong domestic opposition to how the authorities punished the doctors who quickly pointed out the existence of a “pneumonia of unknown etiology,” accusing them of spreading misinformation. This can give us hope that Chinese society is changing.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government’s propaganda is fierce, surveillance is increasing, and there’s now the same kind of system of paying rewards to informants as during the Cultural Revolution, so it’s unclear how much the people trying to change Chinese society can do.

As the Chinese economy was developing and interest for the environment and other social issues was growing, there was much activity among NGOs and other private actors, but these were suppressed. The Chinese government is increasingly cautious of those trying to bring in Western democratic values.

It might be that an iron fist is necessary when trying to manage a country as big as that. However, there used to be a tendency to permit power at the bottom by alternating between tighter and more relaxed measures. Yet the Xi Jinping system is all about tightening. There is no complacency as the economy is deteriorating, so they are not able to permit movements at the bottom. There are many fantastic human rights lawyers and civic activists worthy of respect in China too, but they are not able to work right now.

Will the Xi Jinping System Change?

Kawashima: Even looking at all the dynasties of the past, the CCP administration is an extremely powerful administration and the first to enforce their control down to the farm villages at the end. It’s also the first administration to have successfully curbed population movements between cities and farm villages.

In that sense, it’s a very successful administration, but the problem is that the “Reform and Opening-up” policy since 1978 has tried to create a model of developing the economy without democratizing and strengthening the CCP. As a result, only part of the population has prospered while disparities have widened.

The Hu Jintao administration (2003–2013) tried to rectify this by attempting the building of a system that can accommodate the social diversity that accompanies economic development. This is why local and social self-motivation as well as democratic protests, albeit limited, were budding in that era.

But, at the same time, there was widespread criticism because it caused the issue of the one-party rule of the CCP being undermined. The governance of the Hu administration had a kind of resilience, but that was seen as negative by some in the CCP.

This is why the administration Xi Jinping came to stand atop has regrets about the Hu Jintao era and has tried to restore resilient governance as well as restore strong governance in the hands of the party rather than the government, the center rather than the regions. Furthermore, the “crackdown on both ‘tigers’ and ‘flies’” (anti-corruption campaign) has crushed the local officials. As a result, everybody is looking to Xi Jinping as they’re working and the organization has become stiff. The turmoil surrounding COVID-19 is in a way a product of the Xi Jinping administration and in that sense it’s a manmade calamity.

As they are thinking about how to recover, the issue of how to rebuild governance that can increase on-site discretion again is coming up, and it’s impossible to shine a light on that since it would be tantamount to Xi Jinping recognizing his own mistakes. It might be unavoidable that top-down control becomes even stronger for the time being.

Miyamoto: It’s just that too much top-down control creates problems, as we just said, and the result is that things don’t work out. Because centralization and democracy, two somewhat conflicting concepts, became the organizational principles of the CCP, they’ve had no choice but to come and go between the two. I suspect this is a chronic problem that the CCP will have to keep struggling with.

Does High-Tech Make People Happy?

Kawashima: If we accept that China successfully contained the infectious disease, then that might be a major challenge to the liberal democratic countries.

They not only shut down cities and used digital devices for positioning to manage individuals, but made use of so-called Residents’ Committees as terminal organizations for every company to manage the people there. If they were able to conquer the infectious disease and achieve success by creating a system that involves mutual surveillance among people, then the world might get the impression that the governance system of the China Model can handle emergencies better than democratic systems.

However, just because it went well in China doesn’t mean that Japan should do the same thing. This likely is deeply interlinked with the fight between systems as well.

Ako: When it comes to handling COVID-19, it’s Taiwan that we should pay attention to. They stopped travel from China in early February when the number of infected was very small. They closed schools and offered considerable compensation to households as their earnings decreased. They used IT to full effect to create a system for distributing face masks. Compared to China, they felt more mature.

What about China then? They had such extreme top-down power as they suddenly shut down big cities and built big hospitals in no time. Yet, when you've seen it once, you've seen it all, and this approach definitely developed the economy, but its extremity widened the gap between rich and poor, caused environmental pollution, and really hasn't created a place that is necessarily good for human living. I think it's a prime example of a country built without contents.

No matter how effectively the economy has developed, is it enough to make the people happy as human beings? They might have become easier to control through AI and other forms of advanced technology, but they haven't managed to address whether it is conducive to humane living. It's an emergency, so there's no time to focus too much on human rights, but we are now challenged about how to evaluate China.

Kawashima: As economic development is becoming difficult, the Xi Jinping administration has recently come to justify state authority by "enhancing science and technology." The pillars for legitimacy so far have been the three components of "revolution," "nationalism" and "economy," and now they've added "high-tech." Even if the economy gets even worse, they will probably keep investing in this.

The question is how the high-tech will be used and according to what rules. Unlike advanced countries, it will be used according to a logic of stable governance rather than democratization. China can be said to present one such model.

The Precariousness and Limitations of the "China Model"

Ako: China's strength is one that destroys what democratic societies value. And China is also putting energy into propaganda to create a narrative that China is amazing also out in the world.

Their influence is everywhere so there's quite a few prominent Japanese businesspersons who say, "China is fantastic even though there are various issues." Of course, China is fantastic in some ways, but looking at how they handle governance and how they want to build global norms and a global order, it's problematic to simply say that "China is fantastic."

China is a powerful country, so other countries will have to band together if they want to oppose them. If more countries and regions stand on the Chinese side, the so-called Western camp will become the weaker party. I think it would be best for Japan to already have the awareness that we can't win by ourselves.

Of course, China has positive strengths as well. The political system isn't democratic, but Chinese people have a strong ability to pursue "freedom," which is an important part of democracy. They are strong people who don't trust the state power and will defend the interests of their family and friends even if it means tricking or betraying the state. This is why various companies with strong originality keep appearing in the IT field. In one way, they are doing things that go against central and national policy. It's a strength and tremendous thing of Chinese people that they don't submit to the state. I think this is an area where the Japanese lose to the Chinese.

Miyamoto: The core narrative in the United States is how China is challenging the US in every way and how they are trying to establish ways of doing things different from what mainly Western societies have been doing, but I don't really get that.

There are those who say, “The China Model is excellent. Isn’t the China Model right for global governance too?” Yet in the end, the China Model means that the CCP leads and controls everything. Who will play the role of the CCP in international society? I don’t think anyone will go with a system like that, so I can’t imagine that the China Model will become the international order.

The US Fighting an “Imaginary China”

—How do you think the US–China battle for hegemony will develop?

Miyamoto: The United States is a country that doesn’t easily change its mind if it decides that “This country is our rival.” Japan was previously seen as an American rival and they kept beating us up for twenty years.

I was in the United States around the time when the Japan–US economic war was coming to a close, and the Japan and Japanese described by the Americans was completely different from what I knew. I felt that the Americans were trying to beat a Japan and Japanese that they had made up in their own minds.

I suspect it’s the same between the United States and China, with the US “shadowboxing” with an imaginary China. Once the US has identified China as a rival, the basic American perception of China is unlikely to change. If China approaches the US with power a bit more comparable to theirs, this might change the way the US tries to beat them. But I don’t think the US will change their basic idea of wanting to keep China down.

Kawashima: Hearing what you just said, I think there are two ways of looking at it. First, there’s the issue of global governance that is happening all over the world. Second, there’s the issue of the power balance between the United States and China.

How to deal with worldwide problems of the environment and infectious diseases is a major issue in global governance, and since the establishment of the Trump administration that advocates America First, China has worked pretty hard to plant its national flag in the field of global governance, after originally being China First.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a regional or global strategy that sets out the state logic pretty strongly. Yet BRI has been maintained only because of Chinese funds going to other countries. Those countries’ expectations of China are basically financial, so their hopes for China will drop quickly if the money flow stops. I think a major challenge for China will be how much of their contributions to BRI can be maintained as they use considerable funds domestically to recover after COVID-19. If the infectious spread lingers in Europe and North America, they also might be able to make the BRI space into a block economy.

As regards the power balance, I think it was China and not the United States that started the decoupling. Internet systems, marine cables, satellites, phones... All of these enable China to cut off the US and create “spaces” that are invisible to the US. A big factor in the US–China battle for hegemony will likely be whether China will be able to continue investing in this massive independent infrastructure space. If they can’t maintain it, I feel it will all become a fight within the existing framework and the US will have the advantage.

Miyamoto: It's said that China has the upper hand when it comes to 5G but technological innovation and technological competition will never end. Even if China wins in 5G, that doesn't mean China will keep winning forever. China has to anticipate the future with a clear understanding that they might lose. They have to secure national security and their own growth regardless of whether they win or lose.

The fierce competition between the United States and China will continue, but unless they can also think of what lies beyond that, they will be stepping into a nonsensical world that is strikingly unstable and undetermined.

About China's Maritime Expansion

—In connection with the US–China battle for hegemony and BRI, what are your thoughts on China's maritime expansion into the South China Sea and territorial incursions around the Senkaku Islands?

Kawashima: China decided on a broad diplomatic framework around 2016 that aimed to create a Chinese “Global Order” to compete with the “World Order” created by the United States. The World Order consists of the following elements: (1) the United Nations and international law, (2) a security network centering on the United States, and (3) Western values. China supports only the first one.

China is saying no to both Western value and security systems. This is why they have no qualms about the territorial incursions around the Senkaku Islands and don't see it as a human rights issue when they detain a Hokkaido University professor. If China's diplomatic framework is directly applied to Japan–China relations, it becomes quite clear what the Xi Jinping administration is doing.

China is a country that heads into another country if it becomes weak, and likewise thinks that others will come into them if they become weak. That is why they attack first. The same goes with the timing of the recent spread of COVID-19. They are flying aircraft to the east of Taiwan and have been increasing the number of public vessels around the Senkaku Islands since February 2020 because they don't want others to think that China's national power is deteriorating. They don't want others to think they are weak.

Miyamoto: I want to point out that we now have a structure of Japan and the United States fighting China together in order to resist what China is doing around the Senkaku Islands. This has raised the US–Japan Security Treaty to a new level and made it stronger. With the establishment of a basic stance of Japan and the US defending the Senkaku Islands together, Japan can no longer act indifferently to the American activities in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. It appears that China planned to make the Senkaku Islands its own territory, but once it became clear that Japan and the US would oppose this together, China lost the means to realize this no matter how hard they try. They only have themselves to blame.

The same thing is happening in the South China Sea. So when considering how best to stabilize this region, China will have to gradually shift policy and that's what I hope will happen.

How Should Japan Interact with China?

—President Xi Jinping was scheduled to visit Japan as a state guest in April, but this was postponed due to COVID-19. How would you like to see Japan–China relations develop from a short-term perspective with the prospect of a visit as well as from a medium- to long-term perspective that also includes infectious disease measures.

Miyamoto: I think it was for the better to postpone the visit rather than to force it at this point in time. Yet when the visit to Japan actually happens, I think it's time to think about the next stage. That's Japan and China in dialog, seriously discussing what to do with regard to the international order and mechanisms. Japan's basic stance should be, "Don't just pick the good parts."

As stated by the former international civil servant, Mr. Akasaka Kiyotaka [*Why the Pro-China Bias? – The WHO's True Identity*¹, *Chuokoron* April, 2020], China currently engages with the WHO, the WTO, and other aspects of the existing system only when it suits themselves, but don't participate in the OECD's development assistance and other projects that don't benefit them.

Will China co-exist in the existing international order or exit from it? They have to decide on this clearly. Western society has the right on its side and must sometimes band together to force China to think that "It's not OK to just pick the good parts."

Conversely, China has to move forward by one step, two steps, and three steps. For example, when they say, "We will defend free trade," that free trade means preparing an open and fair domestic market for the world. There's no free trade that lacks that. We need to make sure that China clarifies whether they are ready to do that or not.

We will have to change our response depending on what China does. If China says that it will not join the existing world, then we can't walk together. We should have a cooperative relationship that is built on this understanding, by which Japan, China and the world work together in a good direction.

If I were to say something as a diplomatic expert about what would benefit Japan, it is that building a stable cooperative relationship with China will definitely benefit Japan. However, the Chinese situation has many aspects, so it's not so that we can cooperate simply by Japan becoming servile. Diplomacy is all about considering how to build a stable cooperative relationship without emotional responses like, "China is outrageous; let's cut ties!" Sometimes it must also involve a consideration about how to change the other party.

Kawashima: I will echo some of what you said, but firstly, we need to recognize that China is an important country to Japan. It's important in terms of both supply chains and markets, and it's evident that maintaining stable relations with China is a national interest since we're neighbors.

¹ *A Preeminent Japanese Former International Civil Servant Reveals: Why the Pro-China Bias? – The WHO's True Identity* [<https://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/diplomacy/pt20200623142045.html>]

Having said that, this doesn't mean that we should accept all Chinese demands. Just because we really want Xi Jinping to visit Japan, is it OK if more and more ships come near the Senkaku Islands? Is it OK with incidents like university professors conducting research in China being detained? We have to say no when we need to say no.

Secondly, the emergence of China might lead to the collapse of the existing foundation of East Asia, meaning the balance of the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. Also here, we need to consider what is best for Japan and deal with China in a way that can maintain such a situation as much as possible from a long-term perspective.

Thirdly, we need to thoroughly demand mutualism. We are providing a free space where Chinese people can engage in a variety of activities freely in Japan, so why can't we do the same in China? This is an issue not just for Japan but for the whole world.

Fourthly, an example of what's important about Japan's position in the conflict between the United States and China is how the Abe administration added four conditions to BRI (openness, transparency, economic efficiency, financial soundness). The Trump administration has specified that they will have no engagement with China (American policy on China), so Japan mustn't stop working to bring China into the existing order, the free and open international order, as much as possible. Since that likely cannot be achieved by Japan alone, we should continue our efforts together with other countries. Then, we should display this to the world. Unless we do that, we will end up with a world of unabashed "XX First."

Ako: As both of you pointed out, the relationship between China and Japan isn't based on mutualism, so it feels like Japan is pulled along by China. It's the same with the COVID-19 response. I think Japan wasn't able to stop travel from China because the plan was to welcome Xi Jinping as a state guest.

I suspect China is looking down on Japan because Japan's economic influence in the world is decreasing. If Japan wants to build an equal relationship despite that, we have to show something that can amaze them.

For example, the populations of the Northern European countries are small, but they shine when it comes to education and high-tech. If Japan engages with China without conveying a conviction that wants them to create a partnership, explaining that Japan values such and such things and that Japan is this kind of country, then I think we'll just get pulled along.

Miyamoto: A state's influence in the international society cannot be measured in economics alone. The UK has maintained influence in international politics even after being surpassed by the US in economic size, and this is because of the soft power in British diplomacy. From now on, we have to think about how we can enhance our soft power. That means enhancing our ability to identify global issues and coming up with solutions to them. It's the age of solutions touted by the business world, in which the new kind of business is proposing everything from problem identification to solution. We have to do the same thing in diplomacy.

But before that, saying things like "China has surpassed us economically" and "We can't win in science and technology either" is nothing other than defeatism. It's clear that Japan's presence has

diminished, but we still have the world's third largest GDP, so it's far from over. I think it's too early for us to give up.

Ako: I'll cite the example of Taiwan again. The Taiwanese people and civic groups are putting quite a lot of pressure on the government. By contrast, Japanese people might have a tremendous ability to spontaneously create systems of cooperation when there's a problem, but there's too few citizens who actively participate in politics.

The Abe administration has both good and bad sides, but the people are not expressing strong criticism although it's unthinkable for a democratic country to not leave records of official documents [some of the minutes of the COVID-19 Expert Committee]. That makes us no different from China. I want to ask whether nobody minds us becoming like China? If Japan wants to become strong as a nation, the people have to become stronger too.

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