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The Post-Covid New World Order

May I begin by wishing all friends and supporters of GSF if not a happy, at least a considerably better, New Year than the last one. In the last twelve months our country has been through the wringer and sadly that is not yet over. Even if it were - and the new vaccines must give us hope - the effects of Covid-19 will be with us as a nation for a long time to come.

In previous generations, world-shattering events (amongst which Covid-19 must now rank) have been followed by dramatic and sometimes even revolutionary changes. I suspect that this crisis will prove no different. Crises of these types lead to bouts of severe introspection, some economic, some social and some ethical which in turn can lead to dramatic changes of outlook and behaviour. Part of that introspection challenges hitherto givens and can either suddenly or over time lead

to the shifting of what previously has been regarded as solid ground. I suspect with some trepidation that this will once again prove to be the case.

I do not intend to become involved in predicting what effect these inevitable changes will have domestically. I fear that some of greatest threatened changes will be external, emanating - if we are not prepared to confront them - from the international arena and its format. The greatest current danger is that we in the West will be so involved in beginning (if we can) to deconstruct the regulatory state which we have built in the fight against the pandemic and reducing the levels of debt we have incurred in the building of it that we will not even be aware of the changes which threaten us particularly internationally.

In the piece I wrote before Christmas I hinted at this when I wrote: *'What is alarming is that this is not just about us*



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alone. It is also the case in a majority of Western democracies. What should make us sit up is that, in contrast, our more totalitarian neighbours are not even bothering to dismantle their Covid regulations. Micro-controlling their societies is part of their political DNA – as indeed is forbidding dissent. By definition statism suits them. And therein lies the greatest challenge looming over the horizon towards us.'

Since then, the focus on this has sharpened. We in the West are continuing to strengthen our regulatory framework as the pandemic continues pre-vaccine to grow. We are still heavily involved within our so-called bubbles in fighting what is in truth a rearguard action almost to the exclusion of anything else. I am not for a moment suggesting that we should give up the fight against Covid. Of course not. I am calling for balance.

We need urgently to come out of our Covid bubble and consider what internationally confronts us. We have often talked about Putin's Russia as the major international threat to our freedoms. They would clearly like to be, but looking to the post-Covid world, Russia's star is visibly and relatively declining; and so is that of its leader. It may remain a threat certainly to be taken seriously for a while, but a wider scan of the horizon shows China inexorably growing in strength and usurping its position. We should remember that deep within the psyche of China they have never forgotten the bitter lessons of the Industrial

Revolution two hundred years ago which for various reasons passed them by, and from which exclusion they are relatively only recently and resentfully emerging, determined to regain the preeminent position in the world which they believe is rightly theirs.

Despite claims that they are merely pursuing economic prosperity, it is becoming increasingly clear that above all they seek global hegemony. The fact that they have a harsh and ideological totalitarian regime which scorns human rights and rides roughshod over dissent makes their objective even more achievable as recent events in Hong Kong have graphically demonstrated. The fact that they are faced with a democratic world that is afraid to stand up to them in any meaningful way lends more power to their elbow. In practical terms, this means that they can proceed with their strategy in the knowledge that for all our protests we will do nothing effective to stand in their way. For all President-elect Biden's bold campaigning language, I doubt that anything is going to change much in the foreseeable future.

The added and ironic danger is that as we in the democratic West, deep in the fog of Covid, struggle to reboot our own productive economies, we will increasingly rely on supplies from an accelerating China. Far from confronting or containing them, we will actually be fuelling their strategy.

China's economic ambitions are currently relentless and without limits. Through



their Belt and Road Initiative they are penetrating into countries not just along the old Silk Road routes but deep down into Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula, much of the African continent as well as South East Asia. This form of neo-colonialism is now becoming apparent in South America as well. And all the West can do is to stand idly by and watch.

There is also another Chinese dimension which we should not and cannot ignore. China is quite openly enhancing its military capacity right across the board. In both naval and army resources, they are expanding in manpower and in equipment. They are also flexing these new military muscles in controversial areas such as the South China Sea. The West sailing a flag-waving warship or two through the disputed waters achieves less than nothing. The alternative is that as we emerge from our Covid-induced isolation we should, hopefully along with Biden's new America, agree and set out publicly the parameters within which we might effectively respond to China short of starting a Third World War. And that is not without its risks in today's 'instant' world.

This becomes even more pressing in relation to Taiwan. We can scoff at Chinese threats, but if they were, as they might well be, followed up, it would create a catastrophic global crisis.

If China was to attack Taiwan, what would we do? International sanctions would be a busted flush before they were even

imposed. Frantic diplomacy might be one route, but with a confident and trenchant China it would be a very long shot. So what then? The UN would quickly be seen for the toothless tiger it has long been. The EU would have even less clout. It is difficult to see the post-Trump US wanting directly to become involved in a military confrontation with China. There is of course NATO. Possibly in conjunction with other military alliances in the southern hemisphere, it might be able to bring some weight to bear. But in these Covid days, how much of anything like this has even seriously been thought about.

All this may seem farfetched, but in a world altered by Covid, if China considers the time is right events might suddenly conspire to make it a reality. This is why it is vital that we raise our eyes and start seriously thinking about such things.

China is not the only thing we should be thinking about. I have already mentioned Russia, still there, very well armed, and equally well versed in armed interventions. If rumours are to be given any credence, Modi's India is considering becoming a one-party state, a move which would swiftly move it towards the totalitarian side of the world slate. The world's two biggest nations on the same side of the slate is nothing if not daunting. Alone we can do little, but this surely could be the moment for the too frequently dismissed Commonwealth to show some clout. Given India's historic antipathy to China, there are surely opportunities there.



Elsewhere the growth of totalitarianism also continues apace. Al Sisi in Egypt makes Hosni Mubarak look like a moderate. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia descends slowly into savage autocracy. While Israel remains technically a democracy, the recent behaviour of Prime Minister Netanyahu gives good reason to doubt this in practice. Erdogan in Turkey, nominally a NATO democracy, relishes and brandishes his neo-Ottomanism. Across the Atlantic, South America's biggest state Brazil in the hands of Bolsonaro is hardly a paragon of democracy; and Maduro in Venezuela no longer even makes the pretence. For the moment these are all independent states, but with totalitarianism once again a strong force in the world, I suspect it will not be long before they begin to make common cause under the economically and military persuasive leadership of China.

Iran remains a smouldering threat on the periphery of the Arab world, one which could fully ignite if the bellicose strategy of Israel, one of the few regional democracies but hardly a liberal one, is somehow not contained by her western allies.

All this may seem over-dramatic. But the world is not as it was before. The world which is likely to emerge from Covid will contain all the instabilities, popular pressures, and resentments which the pandemic has created. That is why we cannot afford to become totally enmeshed in trying to disentangle ourselves from the Covid bureaucracy and its financial consequences which at the moment is

foremost in the public mind. We have got to rise above this tangled mess and look towards the horizon and to the massive task which lies ahead.

I have said little or nothing about the United States. Given the departure of President Trump and the accession of President Biden, while many of the same threats will apply to the US, the direction of response remains unclear to an extent that it is unwise to speculate. We must hope that as partners in the Western alliance we will make common cause against the totalitarian threat; but as the US wrestles with deep internal divisions it would be risky to make detailed predictions upon which we could securely act.

There can be no doubt that China's hegemonic ambitions pose a threat to the liberal democracies. Aided by other autocracies that threat becomes greater. We have not got the luxury of time to begin to undermine and eventually defeat that threat; but nor do we have the indulgence of being able to claim that we are too busy dealing with Covid and its aftermath to become involved.

It is of course daunting to consider the military might of those that we will have to confront. But it is however also a waste of nervous energy. Even if the liberal democracies including the US came together militarily it would be unthinkable to envisage a full-blown military confrontation with China. Both sides are nuclear armed and neither side



would consider using such weapons in this context given the collateral damage which it would entail. The only purpose of military action in these circumstances might be to deter or contain already limited actions by the aggressors.

More relevant will be for countries such as ourselves, either with or without the United States, to make it clear that we will not do business with China or her totalitarian allies. Given that this would inevitably damage our international trade we need to brace ourselves, look to the future and remember that it will damage China's as well. We need to send a message to China; and appeasement is not the right one. If our strategy is coordinated and full enough it will hurt China, and that will be a start. And we should apply the same standards to other totalitarian states as well. If President Biden's campaign rhetoric is to be believed, the US will be marching the same route.

We should treat our peoples as mature and explain why we are doing what we are doing. It will be their freedoms and their prosperity which will be at stake in the long term. We may have to take some pain but in that long term it will have been worthwhile. And if there is to be pain, we should use that time to reorganise our industries to be fit for the future. We

may need to swallow our pride and give up on some of our traditional industries at the margins of viability and turn to the industries of the future where we already have the basic skills to build them into our new industrial base. One such future may well be in cyber which with application, courage and investment we could make a major element of that base.

Moreover, as technology advances and makes conventional military strength relatively less important in the face of new infinitely more affordable technological alternatives, the balances of power in the world may begin to alter too. We should make it our purpose that we are right in there at the beginning. A world of totalitarian Goliaths looks a good deal less threatening if it is also populated by emerging Davids.

And that after all is where we started.

Lord Lothian
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