

Politics, Governance, and the Law

Will the COVID-19 Crisis Change Global International Affairs?

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It is hard to foresee how a global emergency will end or what results it will have when we are still in the middle of its wreckage. What is clear is that the COVID-19 pandemic will exert a terrible cost in terms of human lives and suffering, and that our original estimates of the scale of the destruction were wildly inaccurate. It is very likely that we will have to revise these estimated losses upwards again several times as the year 2020 progresses and well into 2021. Eventually a safe vaccine will be developed and distributed, but before that happens, the world will have changed at a quicker pace than at any time since the end of the Cold War. While there will undoubtedly be some new trends coming out of the COVID crisis, there is every reason to believe that the main outcome—in addition to the millions of lives lost or destroyed—will be to exacerbate and speed up trends that were already underway before the pandemic happened. This is usually the case when great disasters strike: they concentrate or distill tendencies that are in existence and make them more visible and therefore more powerful than before.

In this brief piece, I will list some of the major changes and indicate how I think COVID-19 will influence them. But before I do that, a word or two about some of the constants in international affairs and how our view of them will be refined by this crisis.

The first is the **significance of a geographical and cultural approach** to the study of the international. To some, stressing this point indicates a return to debates about geostrategy in the form of “geography is destiny.” I am not so sure about that. What it does do is highlight how human responses to the pandemic are influenced by location and by customs. The spread of the illness itself is, of course, determined by geography: even though long-distance travel disperses the disease, its prevalence in local populations is decided by the behavior of those you live next to and the geographical layout of where you reside. Location matters in epidemics.

Likewise, cultural and social norms have massive impacts on how societies respond to a public health crisis—or any crisis, for that matter. Societies that have a high level of trust in local communities and in institutions have done better than others in this pandemic. Countries in which collective values and a sense of individual and group responsibility for the common good are prevalent—such as South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, or Vietnam, but also some European countries—have done better than others. In social terms, a high tolerance for state intervention has helped some countries overcome the crisis, as has always been the case with epidemics in the past. Where the state is weak or dysfunctional, people have died in higher numbers.

The second constant is the **relative slowness of processes of global change**. Sometimes we do have a tendency to be able to foresee change, but we time it incorrectly. Having spotted a trend, we tend to think that its manifestation will arrive much faster than it usually does. The old order is generally more durable than what we foresee. In the late nineteenth century, many thought that Germany would become the predominant state in Europe. That did happen, but it took a hundred years—and uncountable disasters—to get there. In the late twentieth century, some people thought that Russia would become a European-style democratic state. It has not gotten there yet, if it ever will. In the early twenty-first century, many predicted that automation and robotics would be the future of production. My bet is that that will happen, just much more slowly than what was foreseen. The trends that I see as strengthened by COVID-19 are also likely to be slow in implementation, though the pandemic and its consequences may have moved them from the long-term to the middle-term future, from a generation’s perspective to that of a half generation.

Even though all of these shifts are, of course, intimately linked, on top of my global trends for the next decade and a half is the **increased significance of Asia** in international affairs. The trend has already been there for a generation. Growth figures in most Asian countries are significantly higher than elsewhere. Populations are getting richer, healthier, and better educated. The global system of trade and investment is increasingly geared toward not only Asian producers but Asian consumers too. The effect of the current pandemic will be to speed up these trends. The fact that most of Asia, including China, has handled the COVID crisis better than much of Europe and the United States is important in itself, of course, but first and foremost, it is a symptom of already existing underlying trends, showing that many Asian societies now have strong basics in terms of integration, economic surplus, and state capacity. “If the 21st century turns out to be an Asian century as the 20th was an American one, the pandemic may well be remembered as the turning point,” claims former US secretary of the treasury Larry Summers (2020).

The next trend is **significant challenges to Europe (including Russia) and to the United States**. Again, the trend has already been there for some time. In Europe rapid decline is now visible on all fronts: In economic terms, in governance, and in international affairs. European integration is under threat. State capacity is so weakened in many countries that the COVID crisis was simply too much to handle. Public trust in government is dramatically reduced in many, if not in all, countries. Russia claims to be an exception, but

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that is true only if the point of comparison is the chaotic new Russian state back in the 1990s. Otherwise Russia has not fared well in the current crisis. The real exceptions may be Germany, the Baltics, and some of the Nordics. But even there, it is hard to see how the crisis can be a starting point for future growth.

For the United States, the crisis has mainly been visible in terms of governance, including state capacity. The US economy, at least before the crisis, was relatively strong, at least compared with Europe. But it had perhaps the worst-functioning health-care system in the industrialized world and a federal leadership that for ideological reasons was incapable of strong, concerted action. The result has been a sizable domestic humanitarian catastrophe and a significant reduction in America's global position, both indicative of a situation that existed before but that has been exacerbated by the COVID crisis.

A key global trend that has become more visible because of the pandemic is the **increasing centrality of the state**. Across the globe, people have realized that only government can provide immediate relief in situations like this, and that the state therefore needs to have the necessary qualifications to carry out such operations, be it through issuing regulations that are obeyed, coordinating the health-care response, or providing assistance to those who face financial devastation. The global trend had been in this direction for some time, perhaps with an exception for the United States, the United Kingdom, and parts of southern Europe (interestingly, the very countries that are now hardest hit by the coronavirus). And the trend is set to intensify with the world-war levels of government relief that have now come into play, measures that undoubtedly will make states more central to economies worldwide.

A big question, of course, is what kind of state this will be. In the United States, will it be the federal government, which at times has seemed entirely rudderless in its policy response to the crisis? Or will it be the individual state governments, which—in many cases—have delivered by far the most effective response to the pandemic? In Europe, will it be the European Union, which seems to have floundered in this crisis, as in many of the smaller crises that went before? Or will it be national governments, at least in those countries where they have had a successful crisis response? The trend seems to favor the small over the big, the near over the far away. Though the current crisis has also been a reminder that there are some issues that cannot be resolved at the small-scale level alone.

In asking what kind of state will emerge, the question of what are acceptable levels of intervention in people's daily lives will also loom large. Will we have to give up significant freedoms in order to prevent the next pandemic? While it is obvious, as discussed above, that any answer to these questions will be determined to some extent by differences in cultural and social norms, some of the pressures will be universal. This is in part because some of the most draconian regulations have been the most effective. In Singapore, citizens are urged to install TraceTogether, an app that uses Bluetooth signals to determine those you have been close to. In South Korea, the Corona100m app instantaneously collects government data to allow users to spot any diagnosed COVID-19 patient within a hundred-meter

radius, along with the patient's diagnosis date and other personal information. In Hong Kong, where the government has also used the crisis to attack the political opposition, new arrivals are required to wear wristbands that can help locate them immediately. And in China, with its massive emphasis on surveillance, an app uses AI to estimate individual COVID-19 risk factors based on collected data: getting "Code Red" means a mandatory two-week quarantine. The user is never told why.

Finally, there will undoubtedly be **further restrictions on the globalization of goods, services, and migrations**. Some of this is connected to the strengthening of isolationism and of nationalism, processes already underway before the pandemic began. But now the primacy of markets will come under more pressure, both from the Left and from the Right. As governments hasten to create new monetary, fiscal, trade, and production responses, we are seeing something more than just a replay of the last global economic crisis. Parties of the Left are proposing large-scale nationalizations and public assistance programs. Parties of the Right are discussing moving production, through government intervention, back behind national borders and are whispering about the need for "industrial policies," perhaps the most hated term for the Right a generation ago. Migration and migrants are under attack everywhere.

First and foremost, our current situation is a reminder of the role epidemics have always played in human history. The fact that illness can spread like wildfire through populations that have no immunity may be a revelation for Europeans or North Americans, but not for South Asians, Africans, or indigenous people worldwide whose epidemiological experience over the last generation has been very different. In 2018 more than four hundred thousand Africans died from malaria, more than all that have died globally from COVID-19 up to late May 2020. In 2019 the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone saw more than three hundred thousand new cases of measles. The COVID-19 numbers will grow higher—much higher, in my view. But estimates for those who have died from malaria, mainly in Africa, are also a gross deflation of the real numbers, especially among children and the elderly. The real reminders here are that we live in *one* world, that disasters do not happen only to others, and that history never pauses for long at one's own highest inflection point.

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Odd Arne Westad is a scholar of modern international and global history, with a specialization in the history of eastern Asia since the 18th century. He studied history, philosophy, and modern languages at the University of Oslo before doing a graduate degree in US/international history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he primarily worked with Michael H. Hunt. Westad has published sixteen books, most of which deal with twentieth century Asian and global history.

Today, Westad is mainly interested in researching histories of empire and imperialism, first and foremost in Asia, but also world-wide. He is also trying to figure out how China's late twentieth century economic reforms came into being and how their results changed the global economy.

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