



EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WORLD POLITICS

Wikistrat's COVID-19 Webinar Series
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BACKGROUND

Since its outbreak in late 2019, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted most countries and regions across the world and is considered by many analysts to be a game-changing event in world politics. To better understand how the pandemic will impact international affairs, US-China relations, globalization, transatlantic relations, and other global issues, Wikistrat interviewed political-military analyst Dr. Richard Weitz.



Dr. Richard Weitz

Dr. Richard Weitz is senior fellow and director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at Hudson Institute. His current research includes regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia, as well as US foreign and defense policies.

KEY INSIGHTS

The spread of COVID-19 in Russia is contradicting messaging on the alleged superior nature of autocratic leadership: The evidence of mounting cases in Russia, signaling that the country still has to reach the peak of infections, is going to clearly undermine the rhetoric, promoted by various state media outlets, contending that the country's authoritarian governance system has minimized the virus' damage to the Russian people.

Military operations are impacted worldwide. NATO has postponed a major military exercise in Europe, while many state and non-state actors are preoccupied with force protection measures. However, the People's Liberation Army, whose leaders implausibly claim has not experienced any COVID-19 infections, has continued to engage in provocative exercises in the South China Sea and near Taiwan. These actions undercut the PRC's messaging about China's benign and cooperative intentions during the pandemic.

US COVID-19-related aid exceeds that of China's, but Chinese "mask diplomacy" has more visibility due to its novelty: Secretary Pompeo and other State Department officials highlight generous US assistance to other countries suffering from COVID-19. However, China's providing masks and other medical supplies gets more attention due to its novelty, while US aid is taken for granted. Ironically, China received free assistance when it was suffering most earlier this year but is now charging countries for the masks it provides, many of which have been defective. US officials need to highlight these facts better.

The pandemic might lead to a harder Brexit: The pandemic arrived at a bad time for the BREXIT negotiations, catching Britons and Europeans in the midst of an uncertain negotiation process, which has now unsurprisingly been further delayed. The pandemic is certainly going to make it harder to soon reach a Brexit with a more integrated Britain with the EU.

LIVE WEBINAR: FULL TRANSCRIPT

Wikistrat: Welcome to this Special Webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on world politics, part of our series of Webinars which analyze the impact of COVID-19 on different regions and countries in the world. This section will look at the broader picture of the impact of COVID-19 on international relations and geopolitics broadly speaking, in different areas, different regions, and global trends. This webinar will be conducted with Dr. Richard Weitz, senior fellow and director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at Hudson Institute. Richard, what do you think are the global implications of COVID-19 so far?

Weitz: I am very grateful to have the chance to have a conversation about this with you. The fundamental issue is, we don't know how long the crisis will persist, and how deep it will cut, and then how quickly we can decrease its impact. That said, we're seeing some implications, in my view, already. The crisis reinforces some tendencies that have been evident in the last 20 years. For example, at the political level, Russia and China have been staying close together; the two governments have avoided criticizing each other. The Chinese silence regarding Russia is notable because Beijing has been criticizing the US and other countries for cutting off air travel

to and from China, while at the same time, overlooking Russia's similar actions.

In addition, the tensions we've seen between the US and Europe have been clear. We've seen Russia stand a bit aside from the whole process. Attention has focused on the dynamic relationship between the US and China, with other countries positioning themselves, at least initially, in that regard.

The military implications have been a short-term weakening, probably, in the readiness of all countries' forces, resulting in a reduction in joint exercises, in particular. The virus so far has derailed a planned NATO exercise. But the key question is, how long is this going to persist? And, fundamentally, is one, or are several, countries going to be more adversely affected than others in the long-term?

Will this, as some speculated initially, derail China's decades-long plans to become the leading world economy? Will it, for example, inflict a mortal blow on future US leadership of the "free world"? Does it reaffirm that the EU is hopelessly divided and ineffective in world politics, and international institutions, such as the World Health Organization, are unable to

act when they're most needed? Or is this just going to have a temporary impact; the crisis will end, and the economies revive, and, overall, this crisis will not have had much of an impact?

Wikistrat: Do you see any particular impact looking now, for example, at European level, or on South Asia? Is there anything you might want to add to that broader picture?

Weitz: There are some striking variations by region. China was clearly hurt by the initial outbreak, but according to Chinese figures, they have been able to manage the crisis and are now planning to recover by restarting its economy. Meanwhile, Europe has been remarkably adversely affected by the crisis. The aggregate damage, in terms of casualties and lost economies, resulted in the continent being most seriously affected. That is going to be a major long-term blow to the EU's aspirations to manage Brexit and still retain the role of an important global player. We're seeing the cracks in the EU between North and South, divisions over how to deal with Russia and China and the US being much more evident.

The US was spared for a while from the crisis, but now it's become the most seriously affected, at least in terms of aggregate numbers per one country. This is further causing Americans to turn inward. But at the same time, Washington's national security leadership has still kept the US globally involved.

In South Asia, we're sort of waiting for the big boom there. So far, the figures reported are low. Russia appears to be now on the cutting edge of the crisis. It's probably been more prevalent there than people

thought, just because we're getting a lot of reports now that, of the Chinese returning from Russia, a large number of them have the virus, so it's probably much more widespread there. Now we're seeing this clearly in Moscow, with the rising number of deaths.

With regards to the Middle East, Iran has been very adversely affected by the crisis, because of its ties with China, which has led to some very interesting criticism among Iranian leaders against China, for not warning them adequately about the nature of the crisis. Otherwise, it's been a deepening separation between Iran and some of its Persian Gulf neighbors, because much of human and commercial flow were cut early on in the crisis.

There are all these different variations at the regional level, though it's hard to say for sure that China's now clear and that Europe and the US are moving into the depths, and Russia's about to get the next wave of the crisis. However, that's what it looks like at the moment.

Wikistrat: How do you see the pandemic impacting US-China relations?

Weitz: In the near term, it clearly reinforced some of the negative tendencies, and managed to derail whatever rebound we might have seen by that Phase One trade deal. President Trump took a strong reaction when the crisis started to disconnect the US from China, at least in terms of the flow of people. Beijing and the US blamed each other for who is responsible for the crisis. We have periodically seen statements of the need to cooperate by President Trump and the Chinese leader, but actually, it's just deepening the alienation.

It's going to probably further efforts in the US to cut off supply chains, for example, of medical supplies from China. Washington and Beijing are putting pressure on other countries over how they should respond. Particularly in Europe, we are witnessing competitive gamesmanship over donations. And this is just going to further lead to the separation between the two, and competition between them will grow stronger.

Wikistrat: Since the outbreak of COVID-19, many have argued that the US should finally decouple from China, and some commentators even recently forecasted that a difficult but necessary separation lies ahead. In your assessment, will the US seek to further distance itself from China following the outbreak of the pandemic?

Weitz: This, certainly, is the policy of the current administration. Biden has been less negative on China; if he becomes President, that might change, but Congress is still upset about many Chinese policies. There's now a move to make China pay reparations for all the damage related to the pandemic, on the ground that the country has mishandled the early stages of the outbreak. This, of course, isn't going to go anywhere, but it might be useful for politicians in both parties to adopt this as a slogan. Just like President Trump will say Mexico will pay for the wall, we can now say that China will pay for the recovery.

I don't see anything good in the virus' impact on the relationship. This is just going to further deepen decoupling, exacerbate tensions further between them. This will, in turn, force other countries, including, for example, Israel, to have to make a choice about which of the countries to keep its ties

with, economically and technologically.

Wikistrat: Given the very global nature of this challenge, do you also see any possibilities for closer cooperation, in the attempt to counter, at least on a medical and scientific level, the threat posed by COVID-19?

Weitz: You would think that there would be some people who would want to proceed by focusing on finding a vaccine first and then come back to the politically contentious matters. There were some scientists able to establish that international cooperation, but those ties have been steadily cut over the years. There are a lot of restrictions about US government scientists contacting China. We are experiencing cut-offs of visas between the US, canceling long-term visas of Chinese scientists, for fear of technological theft.

There will surely be calls for joint cooperation and research, but a lot of those programs have been cut back, and what's been happening now could just as easily further weaken those as cause them to strengthen, at least in the near term.

Wikistrat: The pandemic caused nationalist responses in many countries, including the US. In your assessment, will this impact transatlantic relations?

Weitz: We have witnessed nationalist responses in Europe as well, with feuds sparking both between Europe and the US and between the European countries. A lot of complaints about inadequate cooperation. There's not a clear leader in the European response because of this. Germany, France, Italy are either bogged down in their own national response or unable, for whatever reason, to show strong leadership. In some past

crises, some of the countries, like Poland for example, would turn to the US as an alternative great power patron, or perhaps Britain. But that's not happening now; each country is going at it on its own.

Then the question is: is this going to cause a fundamental weakening of what holds the Europeans together, or is this virus crisis going to occur on the sideline, and they'll still be able to cooperate in other areas beyond the virus response?

Wikistrat: How do you think that the pandemic will impact military alliances, including NATO?

Weitz: For the moment, it's just having a limited effect on their readiness. NATO had been planning this big exercise this year, to test and basically show off the US ability to come to Europeans' defense in a crisis by sending forces from the US to Europe, and they've now cut that back because of the fear of spreading the virus. NATO has not done a lot in the crisis that is very visible. The Alliance is not really designed to do that. Some members, one member in particular, is very much opposed to the alliance, being very involved in this area. But in the longer term, I would worry about a cutback in countries' defense spending. Pressure to spend the money more on health could undermine this long-fought effort to boost NATO defense spending.

Wikistrat: Following up on that, do you think that both in the short and long term, Russia will try to seize the moment here, in trying to exploit this crisis, by engaging in an attempt to enhance its power vis-à-vis EU countries?

Weitz: Russia's done a little of that. It's been a lot less active than China, or than Russia itself was in 2016. Some Russian media outlets

say that COVID-19 is a US virus built in a biolab in Georgia. Some spread rumors that the US troops in Europe have the virus, and so, therefore, they're endangering Europeans by their presence. But that's been scattershot; it has not been a big effort, and it hasn't had much impact. You have these donations to Serbia, and now to Italy, with the military, which were very high-profile operations, but they've been met by effective counter-messaging on the part of the EU itself.

The more serious and enduring Russian goal appears to be to get the EU countries not to renew the sanctions. As you know, they have to renew them every six months, and it has to be unanimous, and so perhaps if you can give aid to Italy, you can get the Italians to not support renewal. But it is not clear if that's going to occur yet.

When the US administration imposed sanctions on Nord Stream 2, I didn't think they would really work, imagining that they might just delay the project for a while. But now this crisis, with its lower energy prices, is going to definitely delay Russian plans to deepen its energy ties with Europe for a while, at least in terms of building new pipelines. I haven't seen any major Russian gains, and with the crisis now spreading to Russia, the possibility of Russia, like China, claiming that its superior governance system has been able to minimize the damage to the Russian people are being exposed, as now Russia is going to suffer as much as everybody else.

Wikistrat: You mentioned a few minutes ago that this crisis has negatively affected militaries all around the world. Do you think that this would be a good moment for so-called "bad actors", violent non-state actors,

jihadists and otherwise, to strengthen their ranks, seize disputed territories, or make preparations for attacks, capitalizing on the weakness of the international community, especially of Western states, during this moment of crisis?

Weitz: You would think that the Western states are now more vulnerable, because they're focusing inward, and their militaries have had to reduce their readiness, due to the virus. But in practice, we've also seen that potential rogue actors, be they nation-states like Iran and North Korea or terrorist groups, are also focusing inward and being preoccupied.

There was a report in The Guardian that the ISIS groups have told their followers to avoid entering Europe at the moment for fear of catching and spreading the virus, with the caveat that, if they know they already have the virus, then they should try and go to Europe and spread it to as many people as possible.

Nonetheless, they don't appear to be engaged in any major operations. Syria is still continuing, but the virus appears to be spreading there. Yemen, who knows how that's going to work? Iran has definitely been weakened in its ability to respond, because of the virus. In Iraq, it is true that US forces are being cut back and avoiding training with Iraqi forces for fear of spreading the virus, but I don't really see the Iranian-controlled militia there being very active as well. The same goes for Russia.

The only country whose military has been very active is China. The Chinese claim that none of their two-million PLA members have the virus, something that

is hard to believe, but we haven't seen a major change in Chinese operating patterns. We've just seen them continue their provocative exercises, for example near Taiwan, or the South China Sea.

Wikistrat: Do you think that the Trump administration's handling of this crisis will affect the US's global leadership and standing substantially in the future?

Weitz: The Trump administration already had shown a penchant for unilateral solutions, such as the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem against the international consensus, pulling out of the Iran deal, and this has just reinforced that impression that, in this regard, nothing has really changed. I doubt whether this is going to make any major difference. My impression is most Europeans didn't really expect much from the Trump administration in this crisis and have actually been more alarmed by the failure of the European governments to cooperate and so on.

I'm sure there are some officials in China who think it's their moment and they should seize the opportunity. I suspect that, if the crisis continues for a while and the US is fundamentally weakened, the economy slows down for a year, and millions of people die, whereas China is able to fully recover, and not see the virus anymore as a threat, then this could have perhaps a more enduring impact.

Pavel Luzhin: Mr. Weitz, after the lockdown, in the post-coronavirus world, will we see more confrontation?

Weitz: I don't necessarily think that's true. It depends on how the national reactions occur. So, if the US is fundamentally crippled by the crisis, it has to cut back on its foreign military operations and defense spending to help the American economy, it could lead to more confrontations if other countries try to take advantage of that gap. Then the US might respond. But, if the US really doesn't respond, or the other countries are crippled as well, the pandemic will likely dampen confrontations in the immediate [future], because everybody's been more focused inward, trying to manage the crisis.

The fundamental issue everybody's worried about is, how is this going to affect the long-term relationship between China and the US? Will the Chinese take the crisis as vindication of their superior leadership skills, and see this as legitimization of their push for global leadership, and therefore think this is the time to confront the US, and then the US will respond? Or will the Chinese continue to focus inward because of the crisis?

At the moment, my impression is that, at least for the short term, the crisis will decrease international conflict, and the long-term horizon then depends on how countries interpret it. It will depend on who recovers from the crisis most quickly first, and then, if they think they have an advantage, they might risk conflict right now, while the others are still weakened, then we could get more of it. It's really hard to predict if that's going to occur.

Robert Cutler: I just wanted to add something that seems so far to have escaped attention, which is that, in my view anyway, this global medical emergency coupled with the near-universal recognition of China's bad

behavior in many respects, both before and after its emergence, will in the longer term lead to, and in fact accelerate, China's economic decline, which is already in the cards, for demographic reasons.

Already, supply chains are switching out of China. The Japanese are paying their companies to leave China. There's talk about that in the US. I don't want to pick on anybody, they're not here, but many people criticized the Chinese, including Carl Bildt in Europe. And if you've lost Carl Bildt, then my goodness, you have no hope left.

I can only see that China will be significantly weakened by this pandemic in terms of its standing as a global strategic political actor, especially as the dollar as a reserve currency will dissolve all myths of either the euro or the yuan challenging it as a potential substitute reserve currency.

In addition to this, one thing that often escapes mention or notice is Xi Jinping's domestic calculations. Many of his domestic opponents seem to have caught the coronavirus and disappeared. There is political competition inside China, with the clans of Hu Yaobang and Deng Xiaoping competing with the Xi Jinping clan. This will significantly weaken his primacy, and this conflict will preoccupy Chinese elites to a degree, therefore, causing them to give less attention than they might otherwise do to foreign power projection, which will diminish the efficiency of that foreign power projection.

I just wanted to throw those things into the mix. If you want to call it a triangle, Russia, China, US, or the US-Chinese competition, I only see that this will enhance in the medium term, by the middle of the decade, if it isn't already, and it will be exacerbated

by the end of the decade. China is going to lose any claim to being a world power, which they don't have anyway, because they can't project military power, and the dollar as a reserve currency is going to only be reinforced in this role.

Weitz: Interesting points. I'm not an Asian expert, but it sounds plausible.

Christopher H.: Are we investing in the right national security capabilities, considering what the real threats are and what the imagined threats are?

Weitz: This is becoming clearly an object of debate. [Those] on the Democratic side in the US and the national security community are coming to the conclusion that we have to have a broader conception of national security, to reduce spending on defense and consider health, both of the economy, which is a goal that Republicans also deem important, and the health of the population, as a national security goal. This would translate into having a national security budget that would adequately fund all those components.

Wikistrat: How does the issue of foreign aid here, especially humanitarian aid as well as American public diplomacy, play to the Trump administration's response to the COVID-19 crisis?

Weitz: Secretary Pompeo and other officials in the State Department highlight how much aid the US gives. The Chinese get all this credit for this "mask diplomacy," but they were showing that in terms of actual numbers, the US just gives a lot more health aid, and it's just not getting the credit for it. They might have to learn how to use aid more effectively in this struggle with China, which I think will

have an important impact on American foreign relations. China's providing masks and other medical supplies gets more attention due to its novelty, while US aid is taken for granted. Ironically, China received free assistance when it was suffering most earlier this year but is now charging countries for the masks it provides, many of which have been defective. US officials need to highlight these facts better.

Wikistrat: Do you see, maybe, any change in that trend from the Trump administration, as the pandemic continues to spread in more countries around the world?

Weitz: I haven't seen any trend. I imagine that people in favor of boosting foreign aid are going to either make an argument recognizing the need to address this crisis globally or justify foreign aid as an important tool to compete with Beijing and Moscow, which have both engaged in high-profile humanitarian missions. Opponents, on the other hand, are going to maintain that the whole operation is a waste of money in the face of the ungrateful attitude of receiving countries which will not be changed by more aid. People will pick their own narrative to support their preexisting views.

Anka: Are we taking for granted the fact that the European Union is becoming more integrated as a result of this crisis, or do you think that's still an open question?

Weitz: I would think it would be the opposite. My impressions, if anything, at least in the short term, it's reinforced a decline in the functioning of the European institutions. Schengen has become non-operative, and the US administration is blaming that kind of free movement of people among Europeans as one reason why the virus

has transmitted very rapidly in Europe. I imagine there are many Europeans that feel the same way.

What we should probably ask is whether the nationalization of borders and health issues is going to carry over into the more important realms for the European Single Market in terms of trade and investment? So, maybe it will be bifurcated. We'll see a decreased movement of people, but continuing movement of goods. I wouldn't necessarily think that, long term, this is going to encourage further European integration. I could see it having the opposite effect.

Anka: I share with you concern around the unity of the European Union. Do you predict any change in the relationship between the European Union and Britain, as a result of this crisis?

Weitz: The pandemic arrived at a really bad time because the British and the Europeans are supposed to resolve what's going to

happen, with the implementation of Brexit being delayed. I don't know what the long-term impact's going to be. Right now, the British, they're very focused inward, but the pandemic is certainly going to make it harder to reach a negotiated Brexit, and to agree to a more open, more free, more integrated Britain with the EU. But I think it's just too early to tell now. In the short term, at least, it's certainly delayed what were supposed to be very important negotiations between the British and the existing EU members.

Wikistrat: Thank you so much, Richard, for these fascinating insights, and a very lively discussion on the global impact of COVID-19 in different areas.



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