Meta-Geopolitics of Pandemics: The Case of Covid-19

By Nayef Al-Rodhan - 08 May 2020

Nayef Al-Rodhan overviews the pandemic's affects so far and offer recommendations for states and international organisations seeking to learn from the crisis.

From the early days of our civilization, pathogens have claimed lives and destroyed livelihoods, triggering long lasting impacts on social, political and economic systems. One of the oldest known epidemics in history dates back to 3000 B.C in northeastern China. Mass graves were found, testifying to a large-scale infection with no time for proper burial.

During Antiquity, the Antonine Plague killed approximately 5 million people and supported the end of the Pax Romana. Similarly, it is estimated that the bubonic Plague of Justinian (541-542) killed 10 percent of the world population and marked the start of the Byzantine Empire's decline.

Later, global interconnectedness and urbanization increased the spread of diseases, their deadliness and also triggered serious geopolitical consequences. However, healthcare systems improved relatively, and some innovations were possible. The Black Death of 1346 which killed over half of Europe's population, also allowed for higher wages and better working conditions. Significant industrial innovations were developed at this time to compensate for the loss of workers on the continent.

After the First World War, the Spanish Flu claimed at least 50 million lives; it however triggered significant steps in global health governance such as the creation of the League of Nations' Health Organization which later became the World Health Organization (WHO). Similarly, more recent epidemics and pandemics caused by HIV (AIDS), A/H1N1 or the Ebola virus, supported the enhancement of international cooperation and preparedness. As other pandemics, the recent Covid-19 outbreak will bring significant transformations.

Traditional geopolitical frameworks focus on the hard capacities of states to analyze the consequences of an event. This realist conceptualization fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of modern statecraft, which is critical to navigate an ongoing crisis and forecast its implications for global order.

I analyze the recent Covid-19 pandemic using the seven state capacities paradigm (social & health issues, domestic politics, economics, environment, science & human potential, military & security issues) defined in my comprehensive [meta-geopolitics framework](#). Later, this article offers practical recommendations for an enhanced response to future pandemics.

1. Social & Health Issues

The COVID-19 pandemic uncovered the limits of national healthcare systems worldwide. The level of preparedness and adaptability of numerous countries was severely tested. Limits in the [provision of ventilators](#), sanitary products and protective gears further put citizens and health workers at risk. Overall, the number of deaths weakened states' demographics. As an example, at the time of writing this article, the current death toll in the [United States](#) already surpasses the number of American casualties during the Vietnam War. Losing this number of people has several implications for the psychological wellbeing of the remaining population and states' resources.

Additionally, the confinement measures exposed inequalities and triggered deeper social issues which weaken state power. Numerous families dependent on the informal economy become particularly vulnerable. These trends could be mitigated by the emergence of new solidarities at the local level (e.g. charitable efforts), but they risk making governments appear disengaged and unable to rise to the challenge. Additionally, social distancing poses critical challenges to individual wellbeing, with associated social and health costs. As I showed in a recent article, these measures trigger negative [neurochemical processes](#), similar to what was previously observed in expeditioners in extreme isolation; notably drops in levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, a brain protein associated with certain cognitive performances.

II Domestic Politics

The fears triggered by the pandemic exacerbates nationalism and populism. The measures taken by many governments at the outset of the crisis supported xenophobic narratives, and endangered fundamental freedoms. Borders have been closed even in spaces where [freedom of movement](#) has been a reality for decades. Globalization processes are openly criticized, and extraordinary powers have been granted to governments without significant opposition. These decisions coupled with a lack of international cooperation reinforce counter-globalization and counter-liberal ideals like cooperation, understanding, connectivity, as well as symbiotic and ubiquitous growth.

In addition, trust in policymakers is also tested. Incomplete and unverified information around the new virus led to policy adjustments and perceptions of uncertainty. Alternative disinformation channels reinforced the lack of trust. The spread of [fake news](#) through social media networks reinforced inaccurate scientific claims. These campaigns fed fundamental fears, increased doubt in policymakers and put national responses at risk.

II Economics

All economies have been heavily impacted by COVID-19 and the confinement measures. 170 countries will see their [GDP per capital](#) fall by the end of the year. According to the IMF, the [global GDP](#) could fall by 3 percent, and pessimistic forecasts expect a decrease by 31.9% of [world merchandise trade](#).

On the other hand, the digital economy has thrived as numerous entities have shifted their activities online. Tech giants were reinforced by the increased use of platforms and the production of data by users. The outbreak allowed for Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft, to initially constitute 20% of the S&P 500 value.

However, most countries cannot rely on a strong digital economic sector. The recent oil collapse due to the abrupt lack of demand (as a result of lockdowns, individual and corporate) exacerbated the situation for several international companies, employment and economies. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the pandemic could cause 195 million job losses worldwide. This situation will increase inequalities within and between countries.

IV Environment

The economic downturn triggered numerous positive effects on the environment. Pollution is notably, temporarily, decreasing due to the reduction of traffic (air, land and sea) and closure of factories as are CO_2 emissions. The impact on global supply chains also created a positive effect for local producers who benefit from an increase in demand. At the individual level, in addition to buying local, other sustainable habits could be integrated in everyday such as avoiding food waste. These efforts would further help governments in meeting their engagements under recent international agreements to mitigate climate change.

States could also take this opportunity to re-launch international cooperation in this domain – despite the fact that the COP26 conference is for now postponed. However, the inevitable austerity measures coming could diminish investment on sustainable energies or other costly technologies required for an ecological transition. Such fears have notably been formulated regarding the European Green Deal. States will be able to offer a cleaner environment to their citizens only if they manage to transform this crisis into an opportunity for gradual and balanced long-term ecological transformation.

V Science & Human Potential

The Covid-19 outbreak allowed for greater investment in research and development to produce efficient treatments and vaccines. Numerous countries and private companies are working to develop such tools, with 70 vaccines being currently tested. Additionally, the increased use of new technologies in the development of medical tools but also in the practical response to the pandemic, promise significant progress in this field. For instance, artificial intelligence has been used to accelerate the sequencing of the virus and potentially forecast responses to it, and big data tools use tracing apps to better identify cases and their contacts to slow the spread of the virus; this is useful, although not without potential negative consequences for privacy and civil liberties.

The challenge for states will be to ensure efficiency while protecting the fundamental freedoms of citizens. Additionally, the threat of technological nationalism cannot be ignored. The willingness of many countries to increase such capacities might trigger a race that will inevitably reinforce tensions. Priority will be given to national development, often at the price of others' security.

VI Military and Security Issues

This brings us to the significant military and security issues Covid-19 has brought to statecraft. The rise of populism, and in some cases, the trust crisis in leadership could trigger severe social conflicts. Indeed, the coming economic crisis could re-activate tensions pre-dating the pandemic. Moreover, security services should be worried by the new vulnerabilities brought by the increased use of technological tools. Cyber-criminality and cyberwarfare will certainly become more common and aggressive. Additionally, despite the sophisticated and enhanced capabilities needed to design and control synthetic pathogens, malicious states and non-state actors might attempt to increase their efforts to weaponize biology.

In the face of these new threats, we could expect significant cuts to military budgets due to austerity measures, although, at the same time, the rise of international tensions and nationalism might compel some governments to justify higher security and military expenditures. Another possibility is a recalibration of spending with more investments in civilian capabilities for pandemic preparedness, biological security and cybersecurity.

VII International Diplomacy

International diplomacy, which is central to statecraft, is strongly impacted by the pandemic. Regional and global cooperation has been tested with poor results. In the early weeks of the crisis, the European Union did not stand up to its principles of solidarity and cooperation. There has been a return to national reflexes and bilateral cooperation in humanitarian aid. The crisis has also been used as an opportunity for power projection by some states, which actively communicated on the assistance they sent to other countries or the help they provided in repatriation efforts. International organizations have been particularly challenged by these trends, which exposed their limits as independent and impartial actors. Governments did not turn towards them for expertise but rather used them as scapegoats, threatening their funding and existence.

Moreover, the crisis transformed the very core of diplomacy and diplomatic practices. The need to limit physical contacts promoted a turn to digital diplomacy. As an example, the first meeting of the United Nations Security Council on the pandemic took place by videoconference, as did the G20. States developing such platforms and condensing the required skills and resources will have a significant advantage in the months to come.

VIII Implications for Global Order

International politics is threatened by increased tensions, blame and finger-pointing between the United States and China. It is also likely that nativist/populist blocs worldwide will be reinforced and may play on current fears to reduce cultural understanding, increase xenophobic tendencies and aim to use these and such short-sighted attitudes to influence policies and elections that could threaten international cooperation. Conversely, for enlightened minds, these clear, visible and shared human vulnerabilities could potentially increase transnational and trans-cultural understanding and cooperation, and hopefully reduce tensions in the long run.

The global economic environment will suffer from a weakened industrial globalization. Isolationism coupled with environmentalist positions supporting a de-growth theory, could impact policies. The increased need and use of digital tools might ignite a new revolution in technological globalized

connectivity with increased commerce and exchanges that were not thought feasible before. States will need to adapt to this evolution and reinforce their capacity in hardware and software production.

Finally, global security will be affected in the short/medium term by the pandemic. The rise of inequalities risks bringing numerous countries to the verge of collapse. Additionally, the predictable race in cyberwarfare capabilities risk exacerbating tensions while non-state actors could find the development of biological weapons attractive. In the long term however, common threats to survival, security and prosperity, will likely support increased cooperation between governments.

It is here that international organizations could become critical. The UN system, and more precisely the WHO, though highly weakened by the crisis, remains an important pool of expertise. The IMF has been responsive by providing increased lending capacity, emergency financing and debt service relief. In a similar way, despite being weakened by tensions in the transatlantic alliance, NATO provided efficient humanitarian cooperation tools for member states. Some regional institutions like the EU failed to live up to its ideals and commitments; and so, a real and urgent repair mechanism is needed to fix the EU's credibility, utility and dependability, in times of crisis as well as in times of peace and prosperity. It is probably through small steps at the regional level that international cooperation will regain its legitimacy in a context of rising isolationism.

Conclusion

States are weakened in all domains. In the short-term, nationalism and populism will be reinforced. The different races to catch up in the economic, military, science and digital spheres will increase tensions. Before a return of cooperation, priority should be given to innovation and adaptation, ensuring the resilience of governments, their economies, domestic health and institutions.

Policy Recommendations

For States

Improving pandemic preparedness is crucial. Measures need to include: increasing hospital bed capacities, stocks and manufacturing capacities of drug treatments, health technologies (like ventilators), testing kits, vaccination research, bioinformatics, machine learning and AI, sanitary products, masks and other protective equipment for health workers and citizens. Response plans should also be improved through the ongoing practice of pandemic scenarios.

Strong social, economic and political recovery plans should be designed. As shown by the meta-geopolitics framework, this pandemic (as any major crisis) has significant impacts on multiple aspects of our societies. Governments' plans should foresee actions in the seven state capabilities to avoid significant long-term challenges.

States should re-value expertise and fight disinformation vigorously. National scientific councils should be the primary source of information. Improving cybersecurity but also education in identifying credible news sources will be fundamental to counter disinformation.

Additionally, open and frank debates and understandings will need to be undertaken at all levels of societies, in order to empower states institutions to do what is necessary in times of crises (like

quarantines, social distancing, social protection programs etc.) while guaranteeing the sanctity of privacy and civil liberties.

Economic support programs like a universal basic income (UBI), should be enacted by various governments as a social and economic safety-net, in order to safeguard the dignity of all citizens, at all times and under all circumstances (including but not exclusive to crises like this one).

For International Organizations

International organizations should reinstate their role as agenda setters. They must improve their ability to influence states' behavior and preparedness early and often with clear, independent and timely data through enhanced analytical and early warning mechanisms.

The threat of potential budget cuts is an existential one for such organizations. Enhancing budget resilience appears critical and could take the form of internal re-structuring, increased level of talent or additional funding options, without losing their independence, impartiality, efficacy or credibility.

Finally, creating new tools to foster cooperation notably in the digital, security and health sectors will be an essential task. It could be done through more digital engagements and increased citizen participation in international mechanisms.

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