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The Pandemic and International Politics

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The disruption afflicting the modern world is a ‘perfect storm’, combining a deadly and highly infectious virus, a global economic recession, the erosion of global governance and the failure to coordinate a coordinated global response. This was not a ‘black swan’ event, something unpredictable but with enormous ramifications, but a ‘grey rhino’, something that had been both predictable and predicted. The devastating effect of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic is magnified by its specific characteristics, including ease of transfer, delay in the appearance of symptoms, lethality, and the lack of vaccines and adequate testing facilities.

The crisis turned into a moment of truth, in which the presumptions, prejudices and processes of the post-Cold War era were exposed in a harsh light. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated long-term changes and exposed some underlying truths about our societies and pattern of international relations. No new global and regional balance of power will emerge as a result of the pandemic. However, trends that have already been visible for some time will emerge with greater clarity.

The crisis once again brought the nation state to the centre of social life, as the only force with the power and resources to deal with the epidemiological and health consequences as well as the management of populations and economies. By the same token, the crisis revealed the weakness of certain states, with low trust between the centre and the regions and the inadequacy of public health and welfare provision. Other states, with a healthy relationship between the central government and the regions and between state and society, emerged with great credit.

In other words, the crisis was a test not only for states and the instruments of international governance, but also for types of state management. Countries with extended welfare state tended to manage the pandemic better than in those with fragmented and financialised health systems. There was no immediate correlation between crisis performance and regime type. In other words, the measure was not so much democracy or authoritarianism, but state capacity and leadership competence.

The crisis also highlighted the importance of international cooperation agencies. The G-7 once again proved itself too narrow a body to have a significant impact on managing the crisis, while the G-20 group was unable to assume the leadership role that it had done following the financial collapse of autumn 2008. No new balance between nationalism and multilateralism is apparent. Instead, the weakness of global governance in the present era has become all too clear.

The conduct of international politics has become even more state-centred than before. Globalisation had earlier suggested that certain economic imperatives transcend state policies. However, when urgent action was required it was the state that acted. The problems may well have been global in scale, but national responses were crucial. The importance of national welfare and health provision was reinforced, which years of austerity since the

economic crisis of 2008-09 followed by the Eurozone crisis of 2011 had reduced to a parlous state in a number of European countries.

Responses to the Great Pandemic became a new proxy for measurement of the adequacy of government, with the US scoring badly, while China's early mismanagement of the health crisis amidst attempts to suppress information was offset by the timely sharing of the genetic structure of the novel virus and resolute action to suppress its spread. In Germany the combination of effective central policy, strong federal governance and high societal trust mitigated the crisis, throwing into stark light the absence in the US of an inclusive public health care system and social safety net.

The pandemic accelerated the decline in influence of both the United States and Europe. The crucial role of multilateral agencies and problem sharing was demonstrated, but long-standing American ambivalence about global governance institutions was taken to a wholly new level. At the height of the crisis the Trump administration even withdrew funding from the UN's World Health Organisation. However, it soon became clear no country, even one as powerful as the US, could deal with the crisis and its various economic, health and social ramifications in isolation.

The already visible tendencies towards deglobalisation intensified, accompanied by a repudiation of the some of the universalism of the liberal global order. This was accompanied by a strengthening of anti-democratic trends, isolationism and growth in the appetite for strong hand authoritarianism. There were also counter-trends, with the EU hosting a donors' conference on 4 April 2020 to gain funds for vaccine research and dissemination, and in many countries opposed political forces cooperated to provide bipartisan support for public health responses.

The pandemic struck at a time when the balance of forces and ideological commitments was already in flux. There is an intensifying crisis of world order marked by the re-emergence of great power conflict and a nascent return to a bipolar structure to international politics, with the US and its allies on the one side, and China and those who align with it on the other.

Trump's rejection of the universalism of the liberal order, as well as its hubristic 'humanitarian' and regime change interventions, was welcomed by many as an essential rebalancing of US foreign policy towards greater concern for domestic development. However, this is accompanied by the exacerbation of long-term conflicts. This in particular concerns relations with China. The trade war launched in late 2018 was resolved in early 2020 with the signing of part one of a deal. However, as the US was gripped by the most extensive outbreak of the pandemic, accompanied by a high death toll, Trump's early nonchalance about the virus came to haunt him. The crisis magnified and exposed the drawbacks of his governance style and the larger failings of the American healthcare and crisis management system. Attention turned to China, blaming it not only for early failings to get to grips with the outbreak in Wuhan, but then seeking reparations for the enormous damage the crisis caused to the US and global economy.

Even before that Russia had been subject to escalating sanctions, with the latest imposed against the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea to Germany. Despite Trump proclaiming in 2016 that it made sense to 'get on' with Russia, the allegations of Russian electoral interference stymied moves towards rapprochement. Trump's friendly words towards Putin may have been motivated by a grudging respect for his power, but above

all by the strategic goal of peeling Russia away from alignment with China. This alignment has been developing since the 1990s but greatly accelerated after 2014 and the onset of the Second Cold War. There is no chance of Trump achieving a Kissingerian manoeuvre in reverse, and winning Russia (rather than China) over to the US side.

There is no reason to expect a new 'reset' in relations between Russia and the US. The long-term deterioration in relations was interspersed by periods of co-operation, as after the September 2001 attack on the US. The crisis provided an opportunity to reset ties. Trump is a transactional president who favours great power deals and personal relations, so the Great Pandemic provided scope for a new opening. There were more telephone calls between Putin and Trump in spring 2020 than in the whole previous period of his presidency. However, Trump's room for manoeuvre to strike a 'grand bargain' is extremely limited. The Democrats in Congress are resolutely opposed to any concessions to Russia, and a large part of the traditional Republican Party does not share Trump's view that Russia is a potential ally in the struggle against China.

This means nothing less than the division of the world into two opposing poles. However, the new version of bipolarity has little in common with the one that predominated in the First Cold War between 1945 and 1990. The international system is far more integrated and has created a single global multilateral governance regime. There is also now a single global market economy and extensive supply chain economic interdependence. Today the two poles are deeply entwined. However, rather than diminishing conflict, this may well only provide new terrain in which the struggle can be waged – through sanctions, financial pressure and the like.

The crisis proved a stress test for the deepening Sino-Russian relationship. As the outbreak in Wuhan spiralled into a global pandemic, Russia closed the border on 31 January. Later, Russia became one of the main sources of renewed infection as Chinese citizens returned home. However, Russia is one of the few countries which stand firmly with China. The foreign minister Sergei Lavrov argues that calls for China to pay compensation were 'unacceptable and shocking'. In a call with Xi Jinping on 16 April Vladimir Putin condemned as 'counterproductive' criticism that China did not act fast enough to contain the pandemic. He argued that the crisis served as 'further evidence of the special nature of the Russian-Chinese comprehensive strategic partnership'. China came to Russia's rescue as oil prices plunged and producers looked to dump surplus output. China's imports of Russian crude increased and threw a lifeline to Russian companies hit by falling demand in a Europe. The Great Pandemic demonstrated to both Moscow and Beijing the strategic importance of a common front in the face of shared challenges.

The Great Pandemic highlighted the need for multilateral cooperation and the strengthening of the international organisations dealing with its consequences, but the trend was towards the 'renationalisation' of international politics. While there were cooperative initiatives, above all centred on the EU, the crisis exacerbated and deepened existing tensions. There is little sign of the pandemic bringing nations together.

The Great Pandemic reinforced the weakness of international governance, the primacy of state action, the entrenched character of great power rivalries, and the overall impasse in post-Cold War international politics. However enormous the social and economic effects of the Great Pandemic, in terms of international politics all that it has done is demonstrate the problems rather than opening a path towards their resolution.