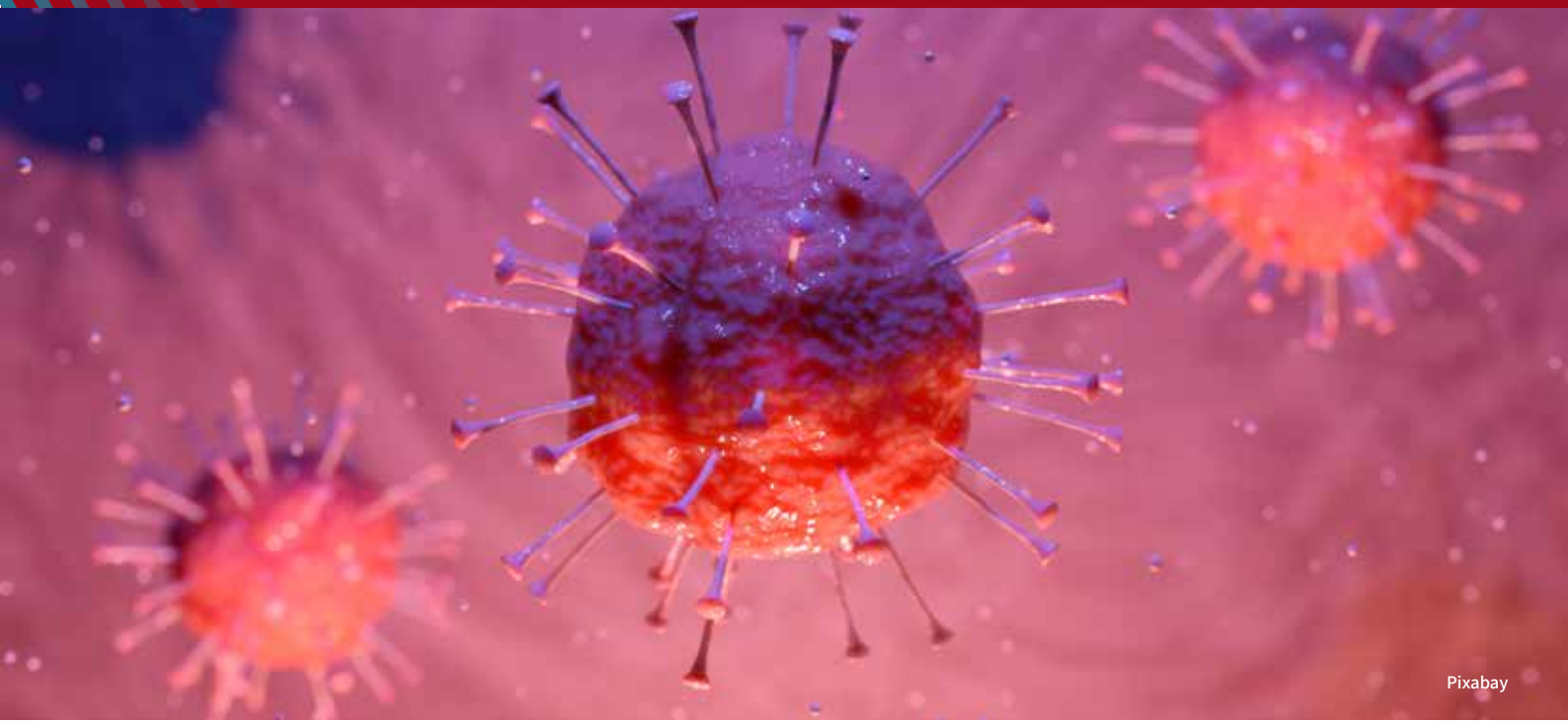

The Geopolitical Effects of the Coronavirus Crisis

Benjamin Miller

This essay focuses on evaluating the geopolitical effects of the coronavirus crisis on the key conflicts in contemporary world politics. In liberal eyes, the outbreak of the coronavirus seems to justify the liberal arguments about the global and trans-national nature of threats to all of humankind. Such threats should compel large scale international cooperation among states and the construction of powerful international institutions. At the same time, there are some grounds for concern that the post-coronavirus world might be less liberal and pursue less international cooperation—even if it is not fully rational in light of the need for greater international cooperation in order to cope effectively with epidemics. At this stage, it is quite worrisome that it looks as authoritarianism, nationalism, and unilateralism have accumulated some advantages and that this outcome will aggravate the struggles inside and among states and also great-power competition, notably the rivalry between China and the US.

Keywords: coronavirus, great power competition, liberalism, nationalism, United States, China

The 21st century, especially its second decade, has witnessed growing domestic and international conflicts. On the international level, observers have noted the rising great power competition, led by the rivalry between the West and Russia, and even more so, between the US and China. At the same time, following the Arab Spring, failed states flourished in the Middle East (Syria, Yemen, Libya), as well as in other regions as a result of state collapse (Somalia, Afghanistan, and quite a few others).

Joining the geopolitical component of the rising great power rivalry is an ideological competition between the democratic versus the authoritarian model. This dimension was strengthened following the 2008 financial crisis in the West, while China argued that its "state capitalism" was more effective than the Western liberal free market model.

Inside the democratic world, a rising conflict emerged between liberals and nationalists-populists with regard to economic globalization, immigration, the checks and balances on elected officials, and the partly related role of the so-called "deep state" (which in the populist view includes the professional civil service, experts, academics, the mainstream media, and the judiciary). Especially in recent years, the nationalist-populist camp has scored unprecedented accomplishments, with the UK's exit (Brexit) from the European Union (EU), the election of Donald Trump, the rise of far-right parties in Europe, and elections results in Brazil and India.

This short article argues that the coronavirus crisis is likely to aggravate all these major disputes.

Liberalism, it could be claimed, has much to offer following the crisis. A traditional liberal argument, strengthened especially after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, is that the real security threats are not the classical inter-state national security threats over power, dominance, borders, control of territory, and raw materials. Rather, the relevant security threats in the 21st century are trans-national, namely, common threats to the whole of humanity, such as climate change and pandemics. Such threats should lead to high levels of international collaboration among states and the rise of effective global institutions, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) with regard to diseases. Such institutions should have growing authority vis-à-vis sovereign states even if it leads to some erosion of national sovereignty (probably quite limited in the initial stages).

In liberal eyes, the outbreak of the coronavirus seems to justify the liberal arguments about the global nature of threats to all of humankind. A disease that erupts in a Chinese city rapidly crosses international borders and reaches Italy and then the rest of the world. The problem was aggravated since the WHO is powerless to lead an effective international response and does not dare to stand against powerful countries such as China.

Moreover, an authoritarian state such as China suppresses early warning signs of the outbreak and punishes those who warn of an upcoming medical disaster. Such a suppression of information is not supposed to take place in liberal democracies, which thus have an advantage over authoritarian states in the early exposition of threats such as the coronavirus.

In sum, these are powerful and meaningful liberal arguments.

At the same time, there are some grounds for concern that the post-coronavirus world might be less liberal and pursue less international cooperation—even if it is not fully rational in light of the need for greater international cooperation in order to cope effectively with epidemics.

The first liberal victim might be economic globalization, which has become a prominent attribute of world politics after the end of the Cold War. The coronavirus crisis demonstrates that there might be critical situations that would compel states to have high degrees of economic independence despite the substantial economic costs of disengagement from globalization and from economic interdependence. Such high

degrees of independence might be necessary in vital fields such as medical and food supplies, among others. Countries might not want to depend on others when there is an almost universal closure of borders and international flights are drastically curtailed.

The closure of borders contradicts the liberal spirit of open borders in every respect (such as goods, services, investments, people, ideas). So far international cooperation has been very limited, even if there has recently been some rhetoric and limited action in this direction. Tensions between the two most powerful countries—the US and China—have increased since the outset of the crisis, with mutually vocal allegations that the other side is responsible for the spread of the pandemic.

President Trump talked about the "Chinese virus," while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referred to the "Wuhan virus." At the same time, official Chinese spokespersons raised their own conspiracy theory that the disease allegedly originated with the US military. While the *New York Times* reported in early April that the US and China settled "on a tentative, uneasy truce," this truce might not last for a very long time in light of the growing US-Chinese rivalry in many domains: the trade war, technological competition, the maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas, and disputes with regard to Taiwan. The coronavirus crisis might just become another manifestation of the rising great-power competition.

An even more dramatic example of lack of cooperation during the pandemic is Italy and the European Union. The EU is the most remarkable example of post-World War II international cooperation in the liberal spirit of open borders and member state concessions on some elements of national sovereignty. But when the coronavirus crisis struck in Italy, the other member states closed their borders and focused on their own problems. Who then came to help the Italians? China!!

Indeed, China has accumulated much knowledge and medical resources by addressing the pandemic successfully before other states—even if with a high price tag, including tight coercive means. The accumulation of expertise and tools reflects China's position as the focus of the outbreak, as well as the discipline, efficiency, and hard work of the Chinese people.

In contrast to China's activism, the United States of Donald Trump has conceded its traditional role of leading major multilateral moves and its provision of collective goods in the international arena. One reason during the corona crisis might be related to the spread of the pandemic in the US itself, in contrast to the Ebola crisis, for example. But a more fundamental source of Washington's global inaction is Trump's "America First" orientation, namely that the US should focus narrowly only on its own national interests and problems rather than leading global efforts to address world or regional challenges.

China acts along two strategic avenues following its successful coping with the pandemic. One avenue is a moderate one of what might be called soft power: China ostensibly demonstrates the advantages of an authoritarian power in dealing with a pandemic or epidemic—its power of social control over citizens as supposedly an attractive model for imitation. This is in contrast to the seeming helplessness of Western democracies, committed to individual freedom, which have a difficult time imposing a full lockdown on all their citizens even when it is needed to fight the spread of the pandemic. This is probably also designed to undermine the global criticism of the Chinese initial mishandling of the crisis, which led to the eruption of the pandemic in the first place.

Another Chinese strategic avenue is based more on coercive diplomacy. China works hard to strengthen its influence on other states, particularly weak ones, by leveraging its provision of pandemic-related assistance for the purpose of increasing states' dependence

on China. One example is Serbia, but there might be quite a few other weak states (such as Cambodia, Iran, and Pakistan) that depend on Chinese aid and are thus potentially prone to become Chinese clients.

The struggle between liberalism and its ideological rivals will continue after the coronavirus. Yet at this stage, it is quite worrisome that it looks as authoritarianism, nationalism, and unilateralism have supposedly accumulated some advantages and that this outcome will aggravate the struggles inside and among states and also great-power competition, notably the rivalry between China and the US. Globalization—and immigration—will at any rate be challenged to one degree or another.

In contrast to China's activism, the United States of Donald Trump has conceded its traditional role of leading major multilateral moves and its provision of collective goods in the international arena. One reason during the corona crisis might be related to the spread of the pandemic in the US itself, in contrast to the Ebola crisis, for example. But a more fundamental source of Washington's global inaction is Trump's "America First" orientation, namely that the US should focus narrowly only on its own national interests and problems rather than leading global efforts to address world or regional challenges.

Liberals, for their part, always argued that in a globalized world such unilateralism and disengagement are too costly and might be impossible to sustain in the long run. Yet the coronavirus crisis might generate growing tendencies to focus on domestic American issues rather than a leading role in addressing global problems. Such domestic issues might include the problematic American health care system, a debate on the role of experts in the decision making process in key policy areas, and the need for lessening the dependence on foreign sources in critical domains such as health-related equipment and re-building the domestic industry more broadly. This tendency might be especially powerful if the US suffers heavy casualties during the pandemic and enormous economic costs in its aftermath, as now looks quite likely.

At any rate, either by soft power or by coercion, the authoritarian model might be viewed more attractive to numerous states despite the initial major failure by China to address the outbreak. More generally, the closure from the external world and the focus on protecting the state and its citizens might further increase the nationalist/unilateralist and illiberal/authoritarian tendencies of the last few years. At the same time, the initially incompetent treatment of the pandemic by nationalist-populist leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro of Brazil, and Boris Johnson of the UK demonstrates the potentially great problems when leaders tend to downgrade expertise and institutions. One major reason is the tendency of the populists to overlook the advice of the "deep state," which includes experts and civil servants in different domains, notably the public health field (and also climate change).

In contrast, the relatively successful coping with the pandemic by the Asian liberal democracies—Taiwan and South Korea—is noteworthy. This might suggest that such regimes can cope well with crises of this sort even if this is not the impression one necessarily gets when looking at the European and the American cases.

The perception that liberal democracy might pose an obstacle to the struggle against a pandemic indeed led quite a few countries to adopt laws or various measures that limit individual rights and curtail political freedom. These measures inter alia infringe on the freedoms of expression and assembly, permit the detention of citizens indefinitely, and expand state surveillance. Hungary's Viktor Orban, who already in the last few years transformed his country from a post-Cold War liberal democracy into an "illiberal democracy," is again leading the way of making democracies into semi-

authoritarian regimes in grabbing almost unlimited authority following the outbreak of the coronavirus.

This turn to increasingly more autocratic means is not limited to weak democracies such as Hungary. Thus, even such an old-time and well-established democracy as the UK has adopted what critics call almost "draconian" non-democratic measures. While that might supposedly make sense for coping with pandemics, the problem is that in many cases, such limitations might stay in place even in the aftermath of the crisis. An example is the Patriot Act, which was legislated in the US following 9/11 and gave the US government wide authorities over surveillance of its own citizens, while simultaneously reducing checks and balances on those powers. The Patriot Act has remained in place even though almost 20 years have passed since the seminal terrorist attacks. Moreover, some politicians might promote such illiberal measures because of their self-serving political interests to take advantage of the crisis in order to maximize their own power at the expense of their political rivals and the opposition.

In sum, the struggle between liberalism and its ideological rivals will continue after the coronavirus. Yet at this stage, it is quite worrisome that it looks as authoritarianism, nationalism, and unilateralism have supposedly accumulated some advantages and that this outcome will aggravate the struggles inside and among states and also great-power competition, notably the rivalry between China and the US. Globalization—and immigration—will at any rate be challenged to one degree or another.

Such gains by the authoritarians will be temporary if democracies recover and cooperate—in multilateral inter-state frameworks or through international institutions—in an effective struggle against such rising challenges to humanity, while preserving individual liberty and human rights.

An additional area of grave concern refers to the failed states. In these states, institutions malfunction even in normal times. The crisis might produce greater levels of domestic instability, which might lead to regional instability, notably in the Middle East, but also in Africa and South Asia. There is a great danger that these failed states will be forgotten when the rest of the world faces a major crisis. Yet in recent years, Middle East instability notably had major effects on the developed world through its "export" of terrorism and illegal migration. Thus, the more affluent countries have a strong self-interest to help the weak states cope with the coronavirus crisis in order to avoid another round of "instability export" on top of the major humanitarian crisis in the developing world itself.

Prof. Benjamin Miller is Professor of International Relations at the School of Political Science and the head of the Center for National Security at the University of Haifa. For many years he was the President of the Israeli Association for International Studies. Among his many publications: *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming, with Ziv Rubinovitz).

Further resources and reading

1. On the emergence of great-power competition, see:

Wright, T. J. (2017). *All measures short of war: The contest for the 21st century & the future of American power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

2. On the re-emergence of Russian-Western rivalry, see:

Legvold, R. (2016). *Return to Cold War*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

McFaul, M. (2018). *From Cold War to hot peace: An American ambassador in Putin's Russia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

3. On the rise of US-China competition, see:

Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Montgomery, E. B. (2014). Contested primacy in the Western Pacific: China's rise and the future of US power projection. *International Security*, *38*(4), 115-149.

Rachman, G. (2016). *Easternization: Asia's rise and America's decline from Obama to Trump and beyond*. New York: Other Press.

Ross, R. S., & Oystein T. (2017). *Strategic adjustment and the rise of China.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Sanger, D. E. (2013). *Confront and conceal* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks).

4. On the Arab Spring and failed states in the Middle East, see:

Haas, M. L., & Lesch, D. W. (2017). *The Arab Spring* (2nd ed.). Boulder: Westview.

Lynch, M. (2016). *The new Arab wars*. New York: Public Affairs.

5. On the rise of nationalist-populism in the West in recent years, see:

Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Judis, J. B. (2018). *The nationalist revival: Trade, immigration, and the revolt against* globalization. New York: Columbia Global Reports.

Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sides, J., Tesler, M., & Vavreck, L. (2018). *Identity crisis: The 2016 presidential campaign and the battle for the meaning of America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

6. On international liberalism, see:

Doyle, M. (1986). Liberalism and world politics. *The American Political Science Review*, *80*(4), 1151-1169.

Doyle, M. W. (1997). *Ways of war and peace*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Ikenberry, G. J. (2011). *Liberal Leviathan: The origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ikenberry, G. J. (2011). The Future of the Liberal World Order. *Foreign Affairs, 90*(3), 56-68.

Ikenberry, G. J. (2014). The illusion of geopolitics: The enduring power of the liberal order. *Foreign Affairs, 93*(3), 80-90.

Ikenberry, G. J. (2017). The plot against American foreign policy: Can the liberal order survive? *Foreign Affairs, 96*(3).

Maoz, Z., & Russett, B. (1993). Normative and structural causes of democratic peace, 1946-1986. *American Political Science Review, 87*(3), 624-638.

Rosecrance, R. N. (1986). *The rise of the trading state: Commerce and conquest in the modern world*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Russett, B. (1993). *Grasping the democratic peace: Principles for a post-Cold War world*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Russett, B., & Oneal, J. R. (2001). *Triangulating peace: Democracy, interdependence, and international organizations*. New York: W. W. Norton.