

COVID-19: What's On The Other Side?

President Trump began by calling COVID-19 'The Chinese Virus' and had initially dismissed it as fake news. At the time of writing (the end of March 2020) the WHO is warning that the epicentre, having shifted from China to Europe, is now shifting from Europe to the US. The immediate effects of the virus are huge, and are hard to predict and hard to track, and the after-effects are likely to be equally impactful. As the dynamics of the disease ebb and flow, swell and recede, so, most likely, will the traditional dynamics of international balances and relationships. The media, globally, not just in the UK, are already asking penetrating (but not terribly helpful) questions about whether 'we were prepared enough' for a pandemic. Whatever the answer to those questions, I suspect that the experience will ensure that the one thing that we are ready for after COVID-19 will be another outbreak of something like COVID-19. History shows us that governments (and, indeed, militaries) have an excellent track record of preparing for the recurrence of the last crisis, but, perhaps, a less impressive record in preparing for the as-yet-unforeseen next crisis. For any government, and for any military, the backdrop of international events and relationships should form the context in which defence policy and development is conducted. And against which crisis-preparation plans are made. So, as the Coronavirus occupies our government and our military with the immediate demands of coping with an unprecedented national and global crisis, those with the capacity to pause for thought should do just that. This short article seeks to provide a quick horizon-scan giving some seeds of thought that may be worth germinating over the coming weeks and months.

China may be over the worst of it and be the first to start recovery (in every sense - health, economy, et al), and, with the ability to exercise draconian control over a large population, also have the governance tools to implement a range of measures that could limit the wider consequences of the virus that are likely to constrain others as they emerge and deal with the (non-medical) after-effects. At the same time,

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China has played a clever international engagement plan, including such things as sending teams of medics and advisors to Italy (after initially messing up by bare-faced blanket denials and a botched attempt to suppress and cover up), in order to lessen the effects of the likely post-COVID blame game. Despite the increasing number of voices asking how we should be able to hold to account those who unleash these plagues upon the world, by which most mean hold China to account (see for example, this US article: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/china-is-legally-responsible-for-covid-19-damage-and-claims-could-be-in-the-trillions/>), China is unlikely to sacrifice their own recovery in the interests of compensating (or even helping) others. Although there is plenty in terms of legislative structure, international law and protocol that deals with this, it seems unlikely that China will be held to account in any way that would hamstring her recovery. This, coupled with China's shrewd international engagement, (which contrasts with the US's immediately rather clumsy approach) may well help to position China well post-COVID-19. And if China's early recovery means that it leaves lockdown and returns to economic productivity ahead of the rest of the world, what does that mean for the trade wars and balances of the last ten years? Could the 'China Rising' school gain even more momentum as China gets ahead of the recovery curve?

Europe is currently the epicentre. Europe is struggling on a number of fronts as a result. First there are the obvious health and mortality issues. Italy has been devastated - with roughly 98,000 confirmed cases and over 10,000 deaths at the end of March, there's a raft of questions. Why, with such an advanced healthcare system, is Italy suffering a worse than 1 in 10 death rate (the average in those more effected countries being below half that, and in places like Germany - with around 60,000 cases and yet only about 450 deaths - achieving a less than 1 in 130 rate)? Can the difference be entirely down to the efficiency of the German testing apparatus that means that many more cases are accurately recorded than elsewhere, where milder cases are going untested and unreported, as media reports suggest? If that is so, then it might suggest that Germany has actually had many *less* cases than elsewhere in Europe, it's just been better at testing, despite the hard-to-read raw statistics. Why are there so many differences between the apparent effects in such similar states? Will the after-effects be as state-dependant as the effects? What will the national and the European economics of the other side of COVID-19 look like? Italy did not have a strong economy before COVID - so what next for them? And likewise for Spain (especially if tourism takes a heavy hit). And what for the 'Big Project' in Europe? What does this all mean for Schengen movement? Has this virus shown us that the ideal of free movement is, perhaps, not so ideal? What if the economic hits are so strong that inward-looking nationalism in Europe starts to take real root in the fertile ground of the last decade and countries become much more inward-looking and self-serving? What if the UK manages to extract itself effectively from the EU over the next nine months and, at the same time, manages to keep the effects of COVID below those of the rest of Europe and recover more rapidly by making decisions more swiftly than a Brussels super-national filtering regime would have allowed: what if that makes 'life outside the EU' look not only viable, but attractive to others? And what, articles across even the most pro-EU of European countries are beginning to ask, have Europeans had that is of any real value from the EU administration while this is going on? What, they ask, rather like the cast of Monty Python's

Life of Brian, in the face of the medical needs, the economic realities and the need for rapid decision-making, have the EU done for us? The early evidence seems to suggest very little, but rather that countries have swiftly returned to national emergency procedures and structures and taken every single major decision for themselves. Border closures were initially resisted by Brussels as 'anti-Schengen', but countries, with Germany and France to the fore, just went ahead anyway. What does all this mean for the EU once it's out the other side of COVID? More nationalism? More Euro-scepticism? Brussels authority weakened? A period of really profound self-reflection by Brussels (and/or Strasbourg)? A more divided Europe with a weaker Southern Europe and France and Germany able to recover quicker than their southern neighbours? Britain now firmly on the sidelines? The Schengen concept very much under question? We need to get ahead of all of these questions, rather than sit waiting to see what happens.

The Global South. It is perhaps remarkable that COVID has, so far, concentrated its effects upon the Northern Hemisphere (have a look at the Johns Hopkins data, which seems to be the daily global best source <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>). Either it simply hasn't reached those less globalised places yet with the same ferocity, or it's there but going unreported and untreated, or, just perhaps, there is a reason that it hasn't had, and won't have, the same effect in the Global South. Sadly, I suspect that it's one of the first two (or, more likely, a combination of both) than it is the latter. If that is so, then the BI in BRIC are about to take the hit. It's significant, perhaps, that India went into total lockdown ahead of the level of casualties experienced in the Global North, but, if media reports are to be believed, produced not the instantly deserted streets that have been seen elsewhere, but rather a mass and crowded migration of people around the Subcontinent. Sadly it seems that the Global South has yet to feel the full effects. What will it mean for world dynamics if the Global North is recovering or recovered, but dealing with rebuilding amidst the consequences to their own populations and economies, while the Global South is feeling the full force?

Russia. While everyone else in the Northern Hemisphere is being lashed by the Virus, Russia seems to be relatively unaffected. Why? What's going on? Russia tells us at the end of March, out of their population of 146 million, that they have had a total of only one and a half thousand cases and only 8 deaths. Are they ahead of everyone else in their measures (seemingly not: if you follow the reports of Russian media online, despite the bombast and the pictures of trucks disinfecting the streets of Moscow, very little seems to have been done across the nation in comparison to the wide-ranging measures taken by others)? Are they really that unaffected, or are they just not sharing the facts? Are they, for some reason, genuinely not in the same throes as the rest of the world and, if so a) why? and b) what will that mean for the current balance of power and influence as the world eventually emerges from the Virus? Is Putin's enigmatic approach to the truth going to be a help or a hindrance in Russia's reaction to COVID-19?

And then there's **the US**. The WHO has now announced that it considered that the epicentre was shifting towards the US, with around 145,000 confirmed cases. And the US is a country that is neither used to the imposition of draconian measures nor in possession of universal healthcare. And, no matter what you may think of President Trump, he is a leader who has succeeded by theatre and persuasion (and a

degree of self-persuasion) rather than by a consistent approach to steady, thoughtful and programmed governance. This may not be the right recipe for dealing with a Virus that simply couldn't care less if your self-assessment is "we're doing super well with this virus", nor that "it will be dealt with very quickly", nor whether or not one attends hospitals wearing a 'Keep America Great' campaigning baseball cap. Despite their new and unenviable world-leading status, America's COVID curve, the experts tell us, is only just starting to rise. What effects will all of this have on the politics and economics of the next twelve months? How will the US emerge from the other side of COVID? And, to return to the top of this article, what will China-US relationships look like when this is all over. "Much Respect"?

So - bottom line - there's still a lot of other things going on in the world (just ask the people of Aleppo how worried they are about COVID...), but the big muscle movements of Global balance may be about to get a good stretching and flexing. There has been contingency planning for a global pandemic in most right-thinking departments of state in most right-thinking nations across the globe for many, many years now, but, in the event, we have all been found wanting. We do not know what things will be like on the other side of COVID-19, but, to return to where this article started, national contingency planners need a start-point of global context. So we need to start thinking about these things now, while everyone else is, rightly, concentrating on dealing with the immediate problems of tackling the virus.