Is the virus wrecking democracy?
Privacy and liberal values lost in the lockdown

Expert advisers Politicians must show leadership, not hide behind scientists

Medical check-up Front-line health workers on battle to defeat coronavirus

Environment It’s time to put out the fire and start saving the planet

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“The Idler is better than drugs,”
Emma Thompson
From the Editor

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. So opens Charles Dickens’ novel of the French Revolution, *A Tale of two Cities*. At this stage it is hard to divine all the lasting effects of the coronavirus pandemic, but a number of revolutions are under way. As Marjorie Buchser writes, the mass adoption of digital technology has leapt ahead, with serious implications for privacy.

Meanwhile, the trade war between the Untied States and China has  warped into a global test of strength. The Chinese financier Weijian Shan tells us he is confident that the People’s Republic will recover, while Washington seems set on a course of nationalistic self-harm.

Vivian Hunt, our interviewee (page 20), sets out some alarming forecasts for the world of work. A quarter of the British workforce are at risk of declining income or losing their jobs, and the figure rises to one third in the United States. Huge numbers of staff need to be retrained.

So much for the bad news. If there is any upside it is the realization that we cannot simply return to the old model of reckless over-consumption. On page 24 Walt Patterson pleads for the world to use the crisis to stop burning oil, coal and gas and move to sustainably produced electricity.

Michael Keating (page 36) regrets that the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire has largely fallen on deaf ears. But he insists that now is the time to address conflict zones, if only national leaders can find the political will.

The pandemic has brought to the fore a neglected truth: our economies cannot function without ‘low-skilled’ workers, such as hospital cleaners and care home staff. Read on page 43 a refugee’s experience joining the ranks of cleaners in an NHS hospital during the pandemic.

Alan Philps
Contributors

**Marjorie Buchser** is the leader of Chatham House’s Digital Society Initiative which aims to bring together policy and technology communities to address the challenges caused by digital advances. In this issue, she sounds a note of caution for policymakers. ‘Technological innovation is not a silver bullet against the virus.’

**Ferenc Dalnoki-Veress** is a scientist at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California. He gives his views on where the United States has gone wrong in the COVID-19 crisis, and the lessons it could learn from South Korea. He says: ‘A pandemic is like small forest fires which can start up anywhere and spread.’

**Vivian Hunt** is managing partner for the UK and Ireland of McKinsey and Company, the consultancy. She has been recognized by the *Financial Times* as one of the 30 most influential people in the City of London and awarded a DBE for services to the economy and women in business. In our interview, she warns employees that, in a tight jobs market, qualifications will be less valuable than underlying skills.

**Salehya Ahsan** served as British Army officer in the Balkans before training as a doctor to work in emergency medicine. She also works as broadcaster covering medicine in conflict zones in Syria and Libya, experience that provides unnerving parallels with doctoring in the NHS during the pandemic.
The world in brief

Pandemic

Nordics react in different ways, but is Sweden right?

In the three months since the coronavirus outbreak reached Scandinavia, Sweden has become a country at odds with the rest. Through a public health stance based on cooperation and social responsibility rather than enforcement, the Swedes have set themselves apart during the pandemic.

Nordic countries reported their first confirmed cases of COVID-19 during February, and in mid-March governments put measures in place to limit the spread of the virus. All schools in Denmark, Finland and Norway were closed, as well as most shops and restaurants. Finland declared a state of emergency and put the capital under quarantine for two weeks.

As European countries compare coronavirus-related deaths per million, Denmark with 96, Finland with 55 and Norway with 43 have all been relatively effective in keeping the numbers down so far. Sweden by contrast has a toll of 379.

In charge of the Swedish policy are the current and former state epidemiologists Anders Tegnell and Johan Giesecke, with Tegnell, rather than government ministers, informing the public of the best course of action in daily media briefings. Their mantra is that there is no scientific basis to the strict lockdowns most other countries have opted for and, if anything, the lockdowns are purely political.

Giesecke was the chief scientist of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control for almost ten years and he now advises the World Health Organization. In a Chatham House briefing about the coronavirus pandemic he outlined why he thinks other governments aren’t taking the same evidence-based approach: ‘Politicians need to show strength, decisiveness, action, and they jump on it when they have an occasion.’

Sweden asserts it is too soon to measure who has successfully handled the outbreak and that when its Nordic neighbours open up again after the lockdown they will be starting from square one. ‘I don’t know of any single country in Europe that had any idea how they would get out of the lockdown. The exit strategy was never discussed,’ Giesecke said.

In fact, in late April, Mika Salminen, the Finnish public health chief, claimed that Finland had been so successful at containing the virus that he predicted the spread of infections was going so slow and that at this rate, Finland wouldn’t reach the peak of their epidemic until the autumn. While other governments are debating how to begin unlocking their countries there is no talk of exit strategies in Sweden.

The country has focused on sustainable restrictions that people can live with over long periods, and acknowledged from the start this was a long-term challenge. The majority of the people, about 70 per cent, supports a policy based on scientific advice and trust, but the government’s capacity to carry through the model has been questioned.

Sweden has tested fewer members of its population than any other Nordic country. Ninety per cent of those who have died from COVID-19 in Sweden were over 70. Of these, almost 75 per cent lived in care homes or had home carers.

While Sweden has seen fewer deaths than many of its locked down European neighbours – 379 deaths per million compared with countries such as Spain, with 596, France with 430 and Britain with 526 – this is a major failing for a strategy that set out to protect the elderly and most vulnerable.

Despite differing approaches, each Nordic country has high public support for how it is dealing with the epidemic but it will probably be a while before anyone can determine who achieved the most favourable outcome.

No two countries are the same, but the region, which is culturally, geographically, economically and politically similar, saw 17 million people assigned to lockdown, while the remaining 10 million Swedes were asked to simply keep their distance and stay at home if they felt sick.

From a scientific standpoint, the Nordic countries will offer a unique opportunity to compare the differing approaches and how successful they have been.
Jargonbuster

‘Ramping up’ goes rampant

If there has been one phrase that has transferred from the TV comedy series *The Office* to the government during the coronavirus crisis, it has been ‘ramp up’.

Every minister who has come to the socially-distanced lectern in No 10 to speak solemnly to the nation about government efforts – variously herculean, straining every sinew, moving heaven and earth and whatever it takes – has used the term.

The government was ramping up production of ventilators – until it turned out that they weren’t needed. Then they were ramping up tests and testing. They were ramping up the supplies of protective equipment. They were ramping up the recruitment of contact tracers. And then they were ramping up tests again.

To ‘ramp up’ is a bit more prosaic, because it simply means ‘to increase’, presumably because the graph looks like a slope going from a lower level to a higher one. It is possible, were one to speculate, that executives giving presentations like it because it evokes in some minds’ eye an image of a motorbike hitting a ramp at speed in order to jump over some obstacle.

In which case the origin and uses of the word ramp offer an ironic commentary. It is from the Old French *ramper*, meaning to creep or crawl upwards, often used of plants, before entering English, meaning rear up, and eventually a noun for a slope joining different levels. But its main metaphorical meaning, before the modern vogue, was a scheme to persuade people that a company’s shares are worth more than they are.

To ‘bankers’ ramp’ was a phrase in the 1930s for what the Oxford dictionary calls ‘a financial crisis perceived to have been engineered by bankers for political or financial ends’. Reason enough then for the government to ramp down the usage.

Send your jargon suggestions to letters@theworldtoday.org

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Five things

The split in Assad family ranks

The Syrian government has ordered the seizure of assets belonging to Syria’s wealthiest businessman, Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of President Bashar al-Assad, revealing a split among the family that has ruled the country since the 1970s. Here are five things to help explain the murky events in Damascus.

1 The split emerged when the government demanded $180 million in back taxes from Makhlouf’s mobile phone company, Syriatel, and began arresting its executives. This sum is peanuts for Makhlouf, whose wealth is estimated at $6 billion, but he posted complaints on Facebook of ‘unjust taxation’.

2 Makhlouf used his wealth to help crush the nine-year revolt against his cousin. Now that the revolt is all-but ended, the solidarity that held the cousins together has collapsed.

3 Makhlouf has suggested that the president’s wife, Asma – well connected to the old Sunni Muslim business elite who resent his dominance of the economy – is behind the shake down, perhaps in order to give her son Hafez a cut of the wealth enjoyed by Makhlouf’s sons.

4 A likely cause of the rift could be pressure from Moscow, where the media have been criticizing the corruption of the Assad regime, an indication that Russian business interests want a slice of the economy. The fall of the Makhlouf empire could be a sop to President Putin whose air force turned the tide of battle.

5 The Assad family, in power since a military coup by the president’s father, Hafez al-Assad, belongs to the Alawite sect of Islam which makes up only 11 per cent of the population. The family faced a similar split in 1983 when the old president’s brother, Rifaat, moved tanks into Damascus to try to take power. He failed and went into exile. The question is whether the current president has his father’s staying power.
White House watch

Trump swallows his words on disinfectant cure

Oil deal Under pressure from the White House, Saudi Arabia and Russia ended their oil price war on April 12, concluding a deal to make the biggest oil production cuts in history. Donald Trump said the deal would save ‘hundreds of thousands of energy jobs’ in the United States, but analysts questioned whether the cuts were deep enough to buoy the oil price.

Migration ban Trump tweeted on April 20 that he would suspend immigration into the US in response to what he called the ‘attack from the Invisible Enemy’. When details emerged, however, the measure was less far reaching. Issuing Green Cards, a step to citizenship, to people outside the US, would be suspended for 60 days, and there were many exceptions.

Disinfection The president withdrew from daily briefings on April 25 after his bizarre suggestion that injecting disinfectant could cure COVID-19 disease was greeted by experts and the media with a mixture of shock and ridicule. On May 19, he stunned reporters by revealing that he was taking the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine to ward off coronavirus, despite health officials warning it may be unsafe.

Obamagate Federal prosecutors on May 7 asked a judge to throw out the case against Trump’s former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, who had pleaded guilty to making false statements two years ago. Trump has repeatedly called for the general to be exonerated on the grounds that he was the victim of FBI agents acting on the orders of President Barack Obama – part of the so-called ‘Obamagate’ conspiracy promoted by Trump himself. The FBI twice investigated Flynn, first as part of its probe into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia, and later over a series of conversations he had with the Russian ambassador to Washington.

Open the economy Trump said on May 12 that it was possible some people might die from COVID-19 if workplaces reopened. But he added: ‘We have to get our country open, and we have to get it open soon’. A medical adviser, Anthony Fauci, warned of ‘really serious’ consequences if workplaces reopened prematurely. The US death toll from the virus passed 100,000 on May 24 and was projected to rise to 143,000 by August 4.

China escalation Trump stepped up his threats against the World Health Organization on May 18, saying he would permanently pull US funding if it did not ‘commit to major substantive improvements in the next 30 days’. In a letter to WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, he said the only way forward for the agency was to ‘actually demonstrate independence from China’.

Chatham House quotes

When Xi’s mask came off

Right now we are in an election period. If you look at US-China rhetoric over time in the six months before an election, it always gets much more hawkish.

You have a political action committee supporting President Trump running ads about ‘Beijing Joe’ – attacking Joe Biden for being too soft on China. There is a domestic political element for everyone to step up and be tough on China. But more fundamentally there was a shift around 2014, even in the second Obama term, when President Xi moved away from a hide-and-bide policy – on the lines of ‘we are just a developing country bringing our population out of poverty’. The mask came off and Xi started being much more assertive and aggressive. He started breaking promises that he had personally made to Obama. So across the US political spectrum you have this moment of reassessment about a much more muscular, ambitious China.


If we are to prevent a second and third and fourth wave of this virus coming into the countries that are now experiencing it, we have got to help the underdeveloped health systems of the world cope. We have got to help those countries that have got no social safety nets and can’t practice stay at home policies, social distancing, or even handwashing in some cases where water and sanitation is so poor. If we do not help these countries, they will be carriers of this disease back into our own countries … We have got a medical problem that is global and cannot be resolved without global action, and we have got an economic problem that is as big as in the 1930s.

Even if there is a $15 trillion stimulus, because there is a lack of global coordination, even when you add up this attempt at underpinning the world economy, it is not going to be enough and we face a decade, perhaps more, of secular stagnation.

Gordon Brown, UK Prime Minister 2007-10, ‘What Does the Path Through the Pandemic Look Like?’, April 27
The coronavirus is not just attacking our health, it is changing our world. It has allowed the digital revolution to fast-forward, while eroding traditional ideas of liberty and privacy and at the same time destabilizing economies around the globe. The tectonic plates of international politics are also moving as a modern-day clash of empires between the United States and China intensifies. In the following pages we look at the side effects of a pandemic that will shape our future.
Taking liberties to protect our health

Marjorie Buchser warns that privacy and democratic principles are being sacrificed in the fight against the pandemic

In April 2020, more than a third of the planet’s population was under varying forms of restriction. In the initial phases of national lockdowns, socially distancing citizens had no choice other than to connect with friends and family virtually. Food and vital deliveries shifted to e-commerce. Demand for digital tools enabling remote working and e-learning surged.

Within the space of a few months, the health crisis has forced countries to radically alter their social, political and economic dynamics, shifting many, if not most, activities online. It has fast-forwarded digitalization across all sectors of society and led to the mass adoption of digital technology at both institutional and individual levels.

In parallel, the pandemic has also deepened our dependence on the services and tools provided by technology companies, especially in developed countries. Early evidence suggests that digital and cloud-based enterprises will withstand the looming recession much better than most face-to-face businesses.

Take Amazon, for example. In the first quarter of 2020, the company announced that it would hire 175,000 extra staff to handle coronavirus-induced demand. This aggressive hiring strategy—which brought Amazon’s workforce to just under one million worldwide—stood in stark contrast to other parts of the retail sector which have had to furlough hundreds of thousands of staff members.

Beyond e-commerce, the surge in demand is also noticeable on most social platforms. ByteDance, the start-up behind the short video app TikTok, has hired 10,000 new employees since the beginning of the year. As the pandemic is forcing many young users in need of entertainment to stay indoors, the popularity of the app has soared.

Similarly, Facebook indicated that messaging activities on its platforms had increased by 50 per cent in the countries hit hardest by the virus. From a position of considerable relative strength, big tech is likely to tighten its grip on large areas of digital activity while accelerating its reach into new fields.

In the midst of this accelerated digitalization, public attitudes towards technology have also shifted. In a March 2020 article, Wired magazine candidly asked: ‘Has the coronavirus killed the techlash?’ While it is too early to announce a renewed sense of tech-optimism, our increased digital dependence has altered—at least temporarily—our relationship with technology.

Before the pandemic, most democratic nations saw big tech as a toxic force bringing more plagues—such as manipulation, disinformation, democratic deconsolidation and extremism—than benefits to societies. During the crisis however, the prevalent argument has crystallized around immediate needs and the necessity of technology. People are saying: ‘If technology helps me keep my job, I’ll use it’ or ‘If technology helps to save lives, I’ll endorse it’. Citizens are generally more willing to share their personal data and consent to the deployment of surveillance technologies in the public space, especially if they believe that these measures constitute a necessary step to fight the virus or to resume their ‘normal’ lives.

This change in attitude is evident in polling conducted in Britain by the Oliver Wyman Forum. Over six weeks between March and May this year, the proportion of respondents who were ready to share mobile location data rose from 33 to 47 per cent and the figure for biometric data in public settings increased from 37 to 49 per cent. Willingness to share data on health status rose more modestly, from 61 to 63 per cent.

Meanwhile, the speed and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced leaders to reorganize governments to focus on rapid crisis response. In this context, surveillance technologies for contact tracing, symptom monitoring or quarantine enforcement have often been portrayed as effective emergency measures towards a smart recovery.

However, as of May 2020, there is still no clear-cut evidence that technology alone can contain the virus or mitigate the impending economic recession.

Countries that appear to have successfully contained the virus, such as Taiwan, South Korea and to a certain extent Singapore, have done so by deploying a mix of measures, including enhanced levels of preparedness due in part to the legacy of the Sars outbreaks in 2002-4, well-developed health infrastructure, large-scale testing and rigid enforcement practices. Furthermore, as societies move to various stages of confinement and recovery, there is
a significant risk that temporary solutions, which often neglect standard checks and balances, are retained or repurposed even as infection curves flatten. As such, technology innovations during the epidemic might mark a historic watershed which normalized the deployment of invasive tools without any public debate.

While the crisis has fast-tracked the deployment of both consent-based and compulsory surveillance technology globally, it is important to remember that these applications have diverged greatly from country to country.

In European democracies especially, the deployment of technology has been predominantly led by public authorities and has — so far — complied with existing regulatory frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation. A simple comparison between European, Singaporean and Chinese approaches to contact tracing apps illustrates this point.

Unlike other contact-tracing systems, the Pan-European Privacy Preserving Proximity Tracing Initiative is the only multidisciplinary effort involving more than one state. This European consortium should soon release software code for the creation of apps to track transmission chains. These apps would inform European users, based on their phone’s Bluetooth signals, whether they have been in close proximity with individuals who tested positive for COVID-19.

According to the initiative’s manifesto, these applications will comply with all privacy-preserving principles as established by the European Union. Furthermore, at the national level, cyber-security and data protection agencies will also be in charge of ensuring the lawful deployment of the technology. More generally, the EU’s supervisory authorities have been consistent with their pre-coronavirus positions. While Europe’s regulators have supported the use of technology solutions by public entities they require these applications to meet the principles found in data protection laws.

Singapore’s TraceTogether app also uses Bluetooth connectivity and embeds a number of privacy-preserving features, such as data anonymization and the requirement of explicit user consent to data sharing.

However, unlike the European initiative, there are notable exceptions to these protections. For example, Singapore’s Health Ministry retains the right to use back door entry to decrypt and de-anonymize data logs. Moreover, despite the so-called opt-in approach, individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19 are required by law to assist the authorities in mapping out their movements and interactions.

China offers the most extreme example of the prompt and systematic implementation of most biometric technologies available today.

The crisis has offered a testing ground — namely the Hubei province — for Beijing to try out these tools in a more exhaustive and aggressive fashion than any other country. For example, in Wuhan, China’s COVID-19 epicentre, local authorities have installed CCTV cameras at the apartment door of those under quarantine. Drones equipped with facial recognition systems have been deployed to watch public spaces and identify individuals who fail to wear face masks. Compulsory digital health codes determine an individual’s health status, instruct them about the length of their quarantine and police the types of services and activities they are free to conduct.

While Chinese authorities have long had the ambition to use data and technology to regulate citizens’ lives, COVID-19 has provided them with an unprecedented opportunity to deploy intrusive technologies.

Outside this crisis, these changes would have met with a higher level of scrutiny and resistance. Before COVID-19, the computer scientist Wendy Hall had warned of the growing fragmentation of national digital infrastructures and competing governance visions which ‘were impairing efforts to regulate the digital space’. Post-COVID-19, this fracture — the so-called ‘splinternet’ — may be inevitable.

Second, the crisis is also likely to shift ethical standards on technology and the public’s understanding of the need for them. The pandemic has forced policymakers — in all parts of the world, Europe included — to reconsider essential trade-offs between safeguarding public health, restarting the economy and preserving certain civil liberties.

Against this background a dangerous debate has emerged on whether privacy-preserving regulations and other standards regarding the use of technology should be set aside during the pandemic to enable a more efficient response. While European countries are unlikely to deploy measures that violate the General Data Protection Regulation or reverse it, the crisis will force governments to reconsider some of principles and regulations in their 2020 policy pipeline. Undoubtedly, it will have a chilling effect on the European Commission’s ambitious digital strategy as well as its vision on ‘data sovereignty’.

More generally, the crisis has cast doubt on democracies’ resilience and ability to provide an adequate and timely response through technology or other means. The benefits of open, accountable and democratic systems are once more being re-examined in the light of repressive regimes’ relative successes against the virus.

As Hans Kundnani, of the Chatham House Europe Programme, has written, the crisis has shaken the foundation of democratic tenets and raises difficult questions about whether liberal democracies can sufficiently protect their citizens. ‘There has already been much discussion about whether authoritarian states will
emerge stronger from this crisis than democracies. In particular, although the virus originated in China [...] it was able to largely contain the outbreak in Hubei and deploy vast resources from the rest of the country to deal with it.’

In the absence of a clear narrative about the benefits of well-regulated digital applications, citizens – even in democracies – may feel that they do not have any other choice but to compromise on their basic rights to increase their sense of security or to support the economic recovery. As the historian and author Yuval Harari has noted, the increased pressure on policymakers and shift in public opinion may prompt the deployment of surveillance tools in democracies that had so far rejected them. Yet privacy and effective responses are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As previously mentioned, technological innovation is not a silver bullet against the virus and should not be deployed unquestioningly. Operating in a crisis does not remove the practical and moral obligations on leaders to act responsibly.

Whether or not contact tracing and other technology-driven measures will prove effective to mitigate the health and economic crisis in the future, it is essential for public authorities to adopt an evidence-based approach and impose systematic sunset clauses to avoid extraordinary crisis measures becoming the new normal.

Furthermore, it is critical for governments to remain transparent about what technology can or cannot achieve. Restrictions on privacy that do not prove essential to save lives, or allow the continuation of essential economic activity, are unlikely to be found necessary by the public.

Countries advocating an open, privacy-preserving and secure use of technology during the crisis should reinvigorate a democracy-affirming model – one that draws on human rights principles such as the rights to freedom of opinion, freedom of expression and privacy.

Marjorie Buchser leads the Digital Society Initiative at Chatham House

Digital Health Code

China’s digital health code, also called the Alipay Health Code, is a software that uses big data to generate automated decisions on an individual’s health status. People can sign up through the wallet app Alipay, China’s largest online payment company. As of October 2019, it claimed to have more than 1.2 billion unique users.

After people fill in their personal details, the software assigns them with a QR code in one of three colours: green enables the holder to move about unrestrictedly; yellow means that its user will need to self-isolate for few days; red dictates a two-week quarantine.

In the provinces where the system is enforced stringently, it has been reported that individuals without a green Alipay code were unable to move around, use services or enjoy recreational areas.

In Zhejiang province, for example, officials announced that more than 50 million people – almost 90 per cent of the province’s population – have signed up for the digital health code. Of these codes, nearly one million were yellow or red. According a New York Times investigation, this software does not only decide whether someone poses a contagion risk, it also shares information with law-enforcement authorities.

The software does not make clear to its users the criteria for being assigned a specific code, nor the type of information that is shared with the police.

Residents in Wuhan make an Alipay transaction, using an app that also gives them their health code status
COVID-19 Q&A

China will recover from this

Shan Weijian, a Hong Kong-based financier, tells Yu Jie that Beijing needs to speed up market reforms after the coronavirus crisis, and warns America it will pay a high price for decoupling its economy from China’s

In your recent Foreign Affairs article, you said that the Chinese economy has a sustainable level of resilience. Do you still think so amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

When I wrote that article, I didn’t anticipate a pandemic. I was referring to the 40-year continuous growth of the Chinese economy and the potential for further growth.

The Chinese economy has been severely hit by the lockdowns, as have other countries. China gradually went back to work in March after the outbreak had been brought under control. Not surprisingly, the economy shrank 6.8 per cent in the first quarter. While business has resumed, demand remains weak. It will take time to recover. There are some encouraging signs, though. During the five-day Labour Day holiday, the country recorded 115 million tourist trips, compared with 195 million last year. I think the economy will continue to recover, driven by domestic consumption, although the pace is unlikely to be rapid before the rest of the world comes out of the lockdowns.

You have proposed issuing consumer coupons to each household in China as a way to save the economy. Could you explain what these are?

If domestic consumption is now the main driver of Chinese economic growth and if domestic demand remains rather weak, the only way to pull the economy up is to boost consumption. Many European countries and the United States have adopted massive fiscal and monetary stimulus packages including ‘helicoptering’ cash to households. For China, giving cash to households will help but will not be very effective to stimulate consumption because much of the cash will go into savings. Consumption vouchers, if properly designed, will...
produce a bigger bang for the buck because, as the name suggests, they will have a direct boosting effect on consumption. I made the suggestion at the beginning of March. By now a number of cities in China have issued consumption coupons to be used in conjunction with discounts provided by stores to great effect. But it is all done by local governments. The central government remains tight-fisted with its fiscal policy.

Would you agree that COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to push the Chinese leadership towards the ‘reform’ President Xi Jinping outlined at the Fourth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in 2014?

China is faced with slowing economic growth and a deteriorating external environment. The pandemic has added frost upon snow, to use a Chinese saying, or made things more difficult. China has grown its economy in the past 40 years by moving away from a centrally planned system in the direction of the market, through economic reforms. To continue to grow, there is no other way than to further market-oriented reforms to let the market play a decisive role in resource allocation. Now that China has almost exhausted its so-called demographic dividends, such as migrant workers from the rural areas, it can’t expect to grow by more inputs. The only way to grow is to improve efficiencies, both in the allocation of resources and in productivity, which requires further and deeper reforms in the direction of the market.

Many western economists believe there is a permanent contradiction between market forces and Communist Party rule. What do you think? Ideologies don’t drive but often stand in the way of economic growth. The former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping famously said, it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice. The mice are economic growth and improved living standards. The country has done well by heeding his words.

In an interview with The Wire, an online magazine, you suggested that COVID-19 would slow down Sino-US decoupling. Do you still believe this?

Actually, the rhetoric or even actions for decoupling on the part of some American politicians are on the rise. There is talk about a ‘whole of government push’ on decoupling and about creating an ‘Economic Prosperity Network’ among countries to replicate supply chains away from China. If its purpose is to weaken China, it will be counterproductive because such efforts will be extremely costly if one moves away from the most efficient suppliers to less efficient ones. It is like abandoning your beautiful home in the best location in town to move to a less desirable location where you will pay to build a new house, pave the road, connect to power, and where you hope some others will move in to build shopping malls, hotels, restaurants and so on. How willing are you to do it without some strong cajoling and economic subsidies?

That, by the way, was how the Soviet Union and China messed up their economies in the days of central planning. If the purpose is to reduce the risk of another pandemic, we know from history a new virus can pop up anywhere, including in the United States where H1N1 (swine flu) was identified in 2009, so how do you know the next new virus won’t originate from within the Economic Prosperity Network? Besides, if another virus pops up in China, why wouldn’t it spread to other parts of the world?

So what is the real purpose of decoupling? Already, all businesses are strapped for cash because of the impact of the lockdowns. How many have the resources to relocate to less efficient locations where supply chains don’t already exist? Will they abandon China’s growing consumer market where General Motors sell more cars than in the US? Sure, manufacturing will continue to move out of China for lower-cost locations such as Southeast Asia. But that is due to market forces and it will only happen gradually, just as Japan found a few decades back.

China’s pandemic diplomacy caused a backlash around the world. If you were to advise Beijing, what would you recommend?

I am just an investor, so I am not in a position to advise anyone on diplomacy. We just hope that the world is peaceful enough so we can focus on making money for our investors. But your question presumes that the tensions are all created by China’s diplomacy or lack thereof. I don’t think so. As an observer, it seems to me that China can definitely do better. But it also seems some governments need to shift the blame to China to deflect criticism for their own failures in controlling the pandemic, regardless of what China does.

In western countries there is some resistance to contact-tracing apps to track those infected with COVID-19, as China has done. Must people in the West accept that containing the virus requires changing attitudes to privacy?

Again, I am just an investor. I don’t know the answers to questions outside the scope of my expertise which is in private equity investments. But from the point of view of economics, I think there is always a balance between private and public interests. Private interests should be maximized provided public interests aren’t harmed. It is like traffic lights which restrict our driving but are needed so we don’t kill each other. But too many traffic lights stop traffic. There needs to be a balance. Public health issues cannot be solved by private solutions or by expecting people to change their behaviour. There need to be some rules that all will follow for the common good. But if the rules are too draconian, people will resist. Policymakers will have to find the right balance or ask people to help make decisions. There are other tough choices facing governments, for example, how to balance between the need to contain the spread of a virus and the need to keep the economy alive.

You spent years in Inner Mongolia as one of millions of zhiqing (educated youth) sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Did your time as a labourer benefit you in your career in business? Or do you regard those years it as a harsh punishment?

I describe my experiences and those of my peers working as hard labourers in my book, Out of the Gobi: My Story of China and America. Since most of us never received any secondary education and were out of school for 10 years, I would have called us ‘uneducated youth’ at the time.

After that experience, you would think nothing can be worse, and whatever difficulties you encounter in life, eventually all will be well. So, you tend to look at the positive side of things. I am sure many people who have experienced hardships in life feel that way.

Shan Wei Jian, a Hong Kong-based economist and chief executive of the private equity firm PAG Group, is author of ‘Out of the Gobi: My Story of China and America’ (2019) and ‘Money Games’ (forthcoming). Yu Jie is a senior research fellow at the Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House.
COVID-19

Today’s imperial rivals

Samir Puri looks at the growing tension between China and the United States

Coronavirus has knocked the world for six. It has cost many lives while upending our assumptions about public health, security, society and commerce. Fixated as we have been on the grim day-to-day developments, it is still too early to say how it will change our world.

One thing is clear, however. Not even a pandemic can extinguish the ever smoldering embers of international rivalry. Quite the opposite, in fact, as certain rivalries intensify.

Liberal voices have called for nations to unite at this moment of need. Yuval Noah Harari, the Israeli historian and author of *Sapiens*, warned in March of the world facing a choice between ‘national isolation and global solidarity’, since ‘the epidemic itself and the resulting economic crisis can be solved effectively only by global cooperation.’

Cooperation is certainly the watchword for the epidemiologists and virologists, whose data-sharing and international collaboration will, one hopes, pave the way towards a vaccine.

In geopolitical terms, however, the pandemic is likely to intensify some of the deepest fissures that already criss-cross the globe. One battleground on which the rhetoric is rising pitches authoritarian states against liberal democracies, comparing how different systems have fared in containing the epidemic and, further down the line, in rebooting their economies.

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*Donald Trump and Xi Jinping shake hands during a meeting outside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 2017*
Perhaps the most significant cleavage caused by the pandemic is the suspicion it has cast on the veracity of China’s communist regime, and its credentials as a responsible global power with a growing stake in the economies of other nations.

Already, a cluster of British MPs have formed the China Research Group. The Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat explains its purpose as follows: ‘The coronavirus crisis underlines the urgent need for a better understanding of China’s place in the world, and our economic and diplomatic engagement with it.’ This is a far cry from the time of former prime minister David Cameron who celebrated a ‘golden era’ in ties with China.

In the United States, Donald Trump has been even more bellicose towards China. Trump’s clamour of suspicion has encompassed China’s alleged concealment of the origins of COVID-19, and its under-reporting of the severity of the initial outbreak in Wuhan. The impact has been dire on Sino-US relations, damaged already by the US-China trade war, rising concern over Huawei building global 5G infrastructure and America’s concerns over China’s naval ambitions in the Asia-Pacific.

For its part, the Chinese Communist Party has watched the US and Britain suffer the first and second highest declared overall death tolls from COVID-19 in the world (as of May 2020). The People’s Liberation Army has seen the humbling of the USS Roosevelt nuclear aircraft carrier, docked in Guam after its captain was relieved of his command by the Pentagon. The captain was deemed to have shown poor judgment by raising the alarm over a COVID-19 outbreak among his crew.

It may be an affront to our sense of humanity that nations are point-scoring at a time of global suffering but the notion of winners and losers is inevitable because the crisis is happening at a delicate moment in international affairs.

Well before the pandemic, scholars and practitioners were bracing themselves for an epoch of greater geopolitical competition. There was already a palpable sense of the world order slipping its moorings with the unchartered waters of China as an ascendant superpower, while navigating past increasingly assertive Turkey, Russia and Iran. Nations with proud histories were asserting themselves in ways unseen for decades or even generations.

Change is clearly afoot in the world order and, midway through 2020, there is evidence to suggest the pandemic will intensify aspects of global competition.

During the pandemic people have primarily relied on their national governments for help. Key multilateral organizations have fared poorly so far as rallying points for an international response. Ursula von der Leyen, the European Union Commission president, even offered a ‘heartfelt’ apology to Italy for not providing more support early on in the outbreak. At the same time Trump was lambasting the World Health Organization for colluding with the Chinese to cover up the severity of the Wuhan outbreak.

**Habits of empire**

Every global shock is different – just think back to the disorientation immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Pandemics and terrorism are clearly incomparable, since the former relate to an unseen enemy, and because analogies to ‘waging war’ against a disease are not especially enlightening.

Nevertheless, the comparison reminds us that all global shocks, including the coronavirus, unfold against the backdrop of historically rooted suspicions, rivalries and grievances, and tend to intensify them. One of the consequences of 9/11 was America going to war with Iraq, an old antagonist of Washington but with no responsibility for the terrorist attacks. Even amid the shock of COVID-19, the long arc of history remains a crucial reference point.

It has always been empires that clash, not civilizations. In an era of mutual suspicion between nations, of competitive geopolitics and of autocracy in some countries and populism in others, history matters.

The world’s many rivalries are clearly sui generis, but the path to understanding them lies in something experienced by the world during the past 100 years: the end of formal empires. These were empires of territorial conquest and occupation. They have gone. But we still have informal empires of influence, in which preferential rights are achieved by great powers over weaker nations, or by a multilateral body that allows some countries to exercise veto powers over its member states.

My book, *The Great Imperial Hangover*, charts the seismic shift to international affairs caused by the end of formal empires, which dominated almost all recorded history. We are still only just getting used to their absence.

In the 20th century, the contest between empires reached its apogee, and the end of the European colonial empires resulted in waves of decolonization. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it was the end — for now — of the last formal empire.

It is to the end of empires that we must credit the current existence of around 200 sovereign states. The book’s message is that our varied imperial pasts have contributed greatly to our seeing the world in such different ways. Whether the forebears in your nation were once conquerors, were once conquered, or experienced both fates at different times, a host of imperial legacies still influence present generations.

Even after empires have ended, they leave both physical and attitudinal legacies. The physical ones relate to the very shape of a nation’s borders on the map, the ethnic and religious makeup of its populace and its access to wealth.

Attitudinal legacies relate to the habits of empire, for example a sense of national grandeur nurtured by a country’s elites who remain inspired by their ancestors. Conversely, nations that were created out of decolonization will have inherited a very different set of legacies, of mental and material obstacles that need to be overcome.

I do not claim that imperial legacies are the sole or even the dominant influence on modern problems. Instead, I inquire into the extent that different imperial legacies have influenced current affairs — and how different post-imperial visions of world order collide. This returns us to
the intensifying mutual suspicion that is driving the US and China apart. Neither America nor China actively see themselves in an imperial light, but neither can be understood without recourse to their respective imperial legacies.

The US built its national story on repudiating British colonialism in the 1770s. After 1941, it has cultivated a self-image of pursuing a global role in the name of protecting the freedom of other nations. Orthodox US foreign policy thinkers do not see their nation as behaving imperially since it does not annex other countries. Instead it stations troops in military bases dotted around the world, from Afghanistan to Okinawa, always with the host government’s agreement, flexing its muscles from these bases to defend its conception of Pax Americana.

Modern China on the other hand has inherited two big post-imperial legacies: the first is its many centuries as the pre-eminent East Asian empire; the second, its ‘century of humiliation’, during which outside powers cannibalized its territory. The Communist Party cites the beginning of its rule in 1949 as the end of this era of humiliation. In recent decades, China has expanded its global reach via the Belt and Road Initiative, in which it invests in dozens of countries around the world, sending them scores of workers and buying their resources.

In other words, both the US and China maintain informal empires of different kinds, and each holds a different self-image to justify doing so. While Washington’s informal empire is now 75 years old, Beijing’s is only just being built.

Plagues and wars
Their bitterness over COVID-19 is just the latest manifestation of their competing visions for the post-imperial world. Only by understanding the historical roots of such divisions can we hope to moderate their worst tendencies, and perhaps overcome them, when a crisis looms.

A century ago, the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918-19 devastated the world in the aftermath of the First World War. Today’s pandemic involves a virus of an entirely different nature, and has spread in an era of globalization and technology unthinkable to our ancestors. The internet means that citizens from different parts of the world can gain real insights into each other’s lives. And yet, what divides our political systems and cultural perceptions remains just as important as what unites us.

Pestilence, famine, war and death ravage us in ways that differ from the past, and yet the long shadow of history remains an essential adjunct to our understanding of modern problems. ‘There have been as many plagues as wars in history, yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise,’ wrote Albert Camus in *The Plague*. More nasty surprises may yet befall our world after the demise of formal empires, but recourse to imperial history can help us to interpret what is happening, and understand why the world struggles to unite in the face of a seemingly shared crisis.

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A lot of people would like the world to ‘go back to normal’. How do you see the world of work changing as a result of the coronavirus?

COVID-19 is the most serious health crisis the world has experienced in a century, and it is one of the biggest shocks to employment. McKinsey’s latest analysis finds that nearly a quarter of the workforce in Britain — or 8 million people — are vulnerable to reduced income, furloughs or layoffs and nearly a third — or 57 million jobs — are at risk in the United States. The impact of this pandemic is shared across every country and economy in the world.

COVID-19 is accelerating the profound structural shifts in the workforce already underway. We have leapt five years in consumer and digital adoption in eight weeks. Our research tells us that British companies need to respond to these changes by moving up to a third of their workforce into new roles over the next decade.

If we fail to meet this challenge, we could find ourselves with even more acute shortages of talent than today. For instance, two-thirds of the British workforce could be lacking basic digital skills by 2030, while more than 10 million people could be under-skilled in leadership, communication and decision-making. The real test of leadership is now. All these changes are happening much faster than predicted.

People who work in offices have discovered that it is possible to work from home — and they don’t miss the daily commute. But surely there is an element in working life that is lost when the only connection is virtual?

It is a mixed blessing. I love spending more time with my family, but I miss the interaction with colleagues and clients.

Technology has enabled us to stay in touch, perhaps more than most of us imagined was possible, but it is not the same. Chairing a virtual meeting is a whole different ballgame from chairing a meeting where you are sitting across the table from your colleagues.

We have seen throughout the lockdown that swaths of the economy can function well remotely. McKinsey estimates that about 20 per cent of European workers are now working from home — four times the pre-crisis average.

But it is not possible to work remotely in roughly 60 per cent of occupations, because the place of work is fixed, such as for a sales assistant or waiter, or requires specialist equipment, such as for a laboratory technician.

Most UK company headquarters — including our own — are currently closed. I expect that, when we all reopen, we will initially allow only a small percentage of our workforce to come into the office on any given day, subject to stringent physical-distancing and hygiene measures and the investment in a common tracing platform.

A lot of businesses which provide significant employment may no longer be viable. Where will the less skilled who have worked in hospitality, retail and leisure find employment in the future?

Fifty per cent of all jobs at risk in Europe come from customer service and sales or food services. Our analysis provides stark confirmation that vulnerable jobs are concentrated in low-paid occupations. It is a moral imperative for both government and business to prioritize helping the most vulnerable.

Government and education providers can consider how to scale-up the retraining
and reskilling of both employed and unemployed people. Even if employment returns to previous levels within a year or two, the shape of the economy will have shifted significantly, requiring new skills from the workforce.

There is a big opportunity for the more agile reallocation of staff across traditional boundaries and the redeployment of employees who might otherwise become unemployed.

For example, our research shows that while robotic process automation and image-recognition technologies will reduce the need for data-entry and data-manipulation tasks in companies’ finance functions, the people in these roles already have skills in areas such as taxation and accountancy.

But many companies in Britain lag behind their peers when it comes to the rapid reallocation of financial and human resources. Companies will need to shift from assessing people based on their qualifications and career histories, to assessing their underlying skills.

After the most acute phase of the virus, countries will be keen at all costs to boost jobs and growth. Are the concerns for diversity and gender balance that you have championed going to be trampled in the rush for growth?

Inclusion and diversity are at risk in the crisis – but are critical for business recovery, resilience, and re-imagination. Our research repeatedly shows that organizations that invest in inclusion and diversity have a distinct performance advantage. Companies that pull back on these goals now will put themselves at greater risk in the long term. Not only will they face a possible backlash from customers and talent down the line, they will miss the opportunity to position strategically for growth.

Let us take customer insight and innovation as an example. Research shows that diverse teams are more innovative – stronger at anticipating shifts in consumer needs and consumption patterns that make new products and services possible, potentially generating a competitive edge.

So, leaders must not hesitate to continue in their commitment to inclusion and diversity because it will probably buy them a better chance at recovery.

Countries with female leaders – Germany, New Zealand and Taiwan for example – have been notably successful in restricting COVID-19’s spread. Is it logical to talk of ‘female leadership’ in a crisis?

We need to be careful about attributing success to individuals or one characteristic and certainly not gender. We believe in the power of diversity of thought and leadership.

Our research has found that women tend to demonstrate five of the nine types of leadership behaviour that improve organizational performance more often than men, including talent development.

Women also apply more frequently three of the four types of behaviour seen as most effective in addressing the global challenges of the future, namely intellectual stimulation, inspiration, and participative decision-making.

In times of crisis, organizations – and countries – require enhanced problem-solving and vision to rethink entire businesses, industries and regulatory environments. Our evidence has shown repeatedly that being able to draw on the full spectrum of talent and create an inclusive environment is the real differentiator for success.

Chatham House was founded after the First World War before the Great Depression and is celebrating its centenary as we head into what could be another depression. Do you draw any lessons for today from the past 100 years?

The 2008-9 financial crisis provides a sobering analogy. It began as a financial shock but soon spilled over into the real economy, putting millions of workers out of their jobs. The COVID-19 pandemic is a humanitarian crisis that has taken its toll in the real economy – primarily because the lockdown measures that were taken to protect lives have severe consequences for businesses and their employees. One lesson from history is that societies must do all in their power to avoid the significant rise in unemployment witnessed during previous crises.

In Europe, the unemployment rate rose by 27 per cent from 2008 to 2009, and youth unemployment reached staggering heights in some economies. Overall, it took almost 10 years for European markets to recover, and some countries had still not reached pre-2009 employment levels when COVID-19 struck.

As estimates of the expected economic shock created by the pandemic far outstrip that of the financial crisis, mastering this challenge will be even more important in the current context.

There is a strong case for governments and business to take swift and forceful action, and to improve the understanding of which jobs and groups are particularly vulnerable.

People from New Delhi to Los Angeles have enjoyed cleaner air and brighter skies. Can these environmental benefits give new impetus to the faltering climate change agenda?

Given the magnitude of this crisis, you might think that the world can no longer afford to address climate change. But we simply cannot afford to do otherwise. Climate action remains critical. Investment in climate-resilient infrastructure can drive significant near-term job creation while increasing economic and environmental resilience. With near-zero interest rates for the foreseeable future, there is no better time than the present for these investments.

It is perhaps also giving us an opportunity to see what is possible in how we can respond. Addressing pandemics and climate risk requires the same fundamental shift away from optimizing for shorter-term performance to ensuring their longer-term resilience. Healthcare systems, physical assets, infrastructure services, supply chains and cities have all been largely designed to function within a very narrow band of conditions and many are struggling to function within it.

The coronavirus pandemic and the responses that are being implemented – to the tune of several trillion dollars of government stimulus as of today – illustrate how expensive the failure to build resilience can ultimately prove. The bottom line is that the costs of a global crisis are bound to vastly exceed those of its prevention.
All at sea … and loving it

Megan Farr, a crew member on a cruise ship, tells of 53 days in quarantine

Like everyone else on the planet, we tuned in to news channels, followed tweets, commented on Facebook posts, read articles and shared opinions as we watched COVID-19 roll across the world.

I was working on a cruise ship in the Caribbean and so, at first, it all felt very far away. The crew were from all over the world so we began to hear stories from members of their families as the virus began to affect people’s day-to-day lives.

As countries began lockdown, we started to get fearful for our jobs and health. We turned around 2,000 guests each week, and while most were from the US, where the virus had yet to take hold, a handful were from more exposed places. The cruises continued, but rumours spread and we all knew something was about to happen.

It was a Friday afternoon at sea when an email landed stating that when the current guests disembarked next day, the ship would not be taking on any more passengers and would be heading out to sea. This was unheard of. Cruising without guests simply doesn’t happen.

On Saturday morning, there was a strangely joyous, if edgy, atmosphere as we began sailing out to the Great Bahama Bank – our new home for at least 40 days, something we didn’t know at the time.

Many of the crew, including myself, no longer had any work to do, which was quite liberating, although we had no idea if we would be paid or not.

Those who did have to work were busy doing the housekeeping, preparing food and drinks, keeping the ship moving and looking after the rest of the 800 crew. We sailed out into the ocean, dropped anchor and simply floated there. For weeks.

Over time, we were joined by other ships whose passengers had disembarked.

Crew members don’t normally get to share a cruise ship’s delights, but we were allowed to use the guest gym, the basketball court, the pools, Jacuzzis and more. Each day at 11.30am the captain would give updates, if there were any, over the Tannoy, read a daily joke and then the cruise director would outline any activities or entertainments for the day. As time went on everyone settled into their routine.

A temporary outdoor screen was put up so we could watch films at night under the stars. We were gradually moved to outside guest cabins and most of us enjoyed balconies.

As the days ticked on I started to identify constellations in the Bahamian sky and spot wildlife in the sea. I’m no expert, but we saw sharks, eels, rays and many other creatures we couldn’t name.

The seagulls became less shy and if you left a plate of food for a moment, they would dive bomb your dinner and fly off gulping down spaghetti carbonara.

The one thing that struck me was the silence. Standing on my balcony, with no engines running and no wind surrounded by sea was a silence like no other.

Eventually, my friends and I were transferred by tender to another cruise ship that had been cleared to go to Europe. On Day 53, I arrived in Southampton and walked down the gangway and on to dry land.

The reason why we and thousands of crew members were living on ships at sea is that governments were not letting ships dock. We know that the cruise lines are working really hard to repatriate crew in a very complex situation but the consensus among crew members is why not let everyone go home? If a ship is out at sea for 60 days and there has been no case of coronavirus, it must be safe to dock.

I was lucky. I was on a virus-free ship and our management team were wonderful. Friends on ships that did have the coronavirus say it is a whole different scenario. Understandably, they were quarantined to their cabins for two weeks with food left outside the door. Sometimes this happened before ships could transfer everyone to outside cabins, so some didn’t see daylight for 14 days.

This has been a time in my life that I will never forget. Relationships that developed surpassed friendship and many people have come out of this with new families. The experience has reinforced my belief in a positive mindset and being kind to others, helping where you can and taking things day by day.

Although, I wish this pandemic hadn’t happened, I will look back on those 53 days with great affection. I can’t wait to meet up with my friends again … on land.
We humans base our activities on the stories we tell ourselves. The story we have related for the past century has seen humanity slide into ever deeper trouble. We have created a world of acute inequality, where the opulence of the few contrasts sharply with the desperate poverty of the many. Our air and water have been poisoned, making city smog unbreathable, rivers and lakes toxic and oceans acidified and awash with plastic. What scientists call the sixth extinction is accelerating as thousands of species, from butterflies to rhinos, vanish from the Earth. Our way of life is overheating the planet, melting icecaps, triggering droughts and wildfires and making storms more frequent and destructive.

Now we face a pandemic whose origins lie in part in our failure to respect the environment. The toll is already grim and will get worse. No one with a trace of humanity would unleash a lethal pandemic as a way to a better future. Nevertheless, as we grapple with COVID-19 and the collapse of the global economy, we must also ask ourselves where human society goes from here.

The pandemic has shown that dramatic change can be brought about rapidly. Even as the death toll mounts, people are seeing clearer skies and cleaner waterways, and hearing birdsong instead of the din of traffic. Can we not preserve these benefits without destroying people’s livelihoods?

Many powerful people, governments and companies are eager to return to ‘normal life’ after COVID-19. Others, however, think we can do better. Much better. They want to write a new story about how human society works, that addresses the many threats our former way of life inflicted on the planet.

This former narrative which guided our activities was very old indeed. It even pre-dates our species, Homo sapiens. The story begins when one of our precursors, what we now call a Neanderthal, sees lightning strike a tree and start a fire. At first a terrifying spectacle, no doubt, it nevertheless had a surprising side effect. It produced warmth and light. Somehow our Neanderthal precursors found a way to sustain the fire, and even to ignite one, a skill passed on to their successors, Homo sapiens. No other living creature can start a fire. This was the spark that was to create our modern world. At the same time it was to divorce human society ever more widely from the natural systems on which all life depends. The cumulative consequences grow more alarming daily.

Until very recently, the use of fire was seen as an unqualified boon. It gave us light after sunset, warmth from the cold, allowed us to cook our food, glaze pottery, smelt metals and eventually power the engines that set us free to travel the globe.

But fire itself is always a destructive process. We have always known that fire is dangerous. It can destroy what you value — your crops, your home, your life. But now it is apparent the risks are far worse. The fumes from power stations and car engines are the reason you struggle to breathe in Delhi or Beijing. Fire, and the carbon dioxide it releases, is relentlessly raising the Earth’s temperature with dire consequences.

We accepted these dangers because we wanted the benefits fire offered. Arguably, the greatest of these was the ability to produce and control electricity. Now we can do with electricity most of what we used to do with fire. We can adjust temperatures with electric heaters and air-conditioning. We can make light and we can even produce electric cars. Perhaps most important of all, we can manage information, with electric sensors and computers. For most human activities, we can now replace brute force fire with elegant electricity.

One central problem nevertheless remains. We still make far too much of our electricity from fire. We don’t have to. We can make it with moving water and air, and even with sunlight, harvesting these natural processes with infrastructure. We are on the way to being able to store this fire-free electricity to use when we want to; and these processes are all becoming cheaper and more reliable. But too many powerful entities still want us to use fire. Large companies and entire countries get revenue from feeding fire. Within the past century we have created a global economy modelled on fire, a ‘consumer society’ in which natural processes are rapidly transformed into waste, frequently toxic or pernicious.

Our indifference to natural systems has now brought us COVID-19. If and when we get the pandemic under control, we shall need to tell ourselves a better story about the way we live. The rise of fire-free electricity offers us the key: a transition from a fire economy to an electric economy. But a fire-free electric economy will function very differently.

In financial terms, for fire-free generation you invest in a piece of infrastructure such as a wind farm or solar array, and it then delivers electricity throughout its working life, with no fuel cost or fuel price risk.
‘Governments, pension funds and other financial bodies need to get out of fire-based investments and transfer to support fire-free systems’

Commodity trading in fuels fades from the picture, and commodity trading in electricity disappears. Electricity becomes a service based on access to infrastructure and paid for like rent. Billing for kilowatt-hours disappears.

Traditional electricity suppliers fiercely oppose these developments and we are already caught up in a power struggle between fire and fire-free electricity which will intensify. The way through this is to evaluate policies by asking if they help or impede the move to cleaner energy.

The World Bank and other financial institutions have to stop funding fuels and fire, and all subsidies for burning fuel must cease. Governments, pension funds and other financial bodies need to get out of fire-based investments and transfer support to fire-free, infrastructure-based systems. Three overall policies and measures are interlinked. We need new businesses and business models based on minimizing waste, the so-called ‘circular economy’; we need to shift from fire to electricity; and we need to shift from fire-based to fire-free electricity. Company law, taxation and regulation need to support the shift.

For employment, an essential criterion is a ‘just transition’ for those whose fire-feeding jobs disappear. Many key skills are transferable; when they are not, retraining will be crucial. In financial jobs, the shift will be away from commodity trading to investment. System maintenance and upgrading must deliver the services people and society actually want. Moving to a circular economy will entail designing for repair, reuse and recycling. Minimizing waste and maximizing utility of resources will require appropriate skills, regulations and standards.

We need to anticipate the changing nature of ‘work’. Social transactions will move away from the ‘fire economy’, in which people are ‘consumers’, towards an ‘electric economy’ in which people interact by offering and accepting, selling and buying access to processes: access to comfort, to illumination, to motive power, to mobility, to information and communication – all delivered as equitably, cleanly and efficiently as possible.

The effect on political relations will be profound. Fire-feeders, both companies and countries, have long exerted leverage in favour of fire on policy at every level. Fortunately the electric economy has a growing constituency of influential players, including insurance and reinsurance companies, pension funds, manufacturers, installers and operators of fire-free generation and high-performance service technology, health maintenance institutions, climate scientists and institutions and a growing band of climate activists, especially among the young.

The effect on international relations would be dramatic. Throughout the past century the need to feed fire has been a key determinant of international affairs, especially cheap petroleum from the Middle East, but also coal from Australia and natural gas from Russia. The fire-feeders are still trying to derail intergovernmental efforts to reduce carbon emissions. How the power struggle evolves will have a profound impact on the future of humanity.

After COVID-19, no one yet knows how fast the use of fossil fuels will decline. But even before the pandemic, influential figures in the European Union and the US were advocating a Green New Deal. Analysts such as Amory Lovins, of the Rocky Mountain Institute, and Mark Jacobson, of Stanford University, put forward detailed programmes for 100 per cent renewable energy by 2050. Now politicians such as Frans Timmermans, the EU vice president, and Joe Biden, the Democrat presidential candidate, are calling for a ‘green recovery’. COVID-19 could accelerate the transition.

Moving from fire to electricity will change humanity’s narrative for the better. As Lovins has said, we know three ways to make a good building material out of limestone: you can cut it into blocks; you can calcine it at over 1,200°C, to make cement; or you can feed it to a chicken. Weight for weight, eggshell is a very strong material. But we don’t yet know how a chicken does it. And it does it at a chicken’s body temperature. Trees make wood. Animals make bones and teeth. Chickens make eggshells. For its constructive processes nature does not need or use the high temperatures. But we still have a lot to learn.

Over time, as the fire story gives way to the electric story, human activity could converge towards constructive natural activity, functioning entirely at low temperatures and without fire. We humans could at last reinstate our membership of a wholly interdependent nature. But time is short. Let’s change the story.

Walt Patterson is an associate fellow of the Energy, Environment and Resources programme at Chatham House
Russia

Problems in the pipeline for Putin

Pandemic will hit Russia harder, warn Philip Hanson and Michael Bradshaw

Russia, like other countries, faces a changed economic universe in the new world being shaped by the coronavirus. How will its own fortunes be changed and how might its trajectory be different from others?

The April 11 edition of The Economist suggests three ways in which the pandemic, and the response to it, are likely to alter the world’s business environment in the long term:

- The adoption of new technologies will be quicker;
- Supply chains will be modified to allow more flexibility and to be less dependent on foreign sources of supply;
- Corporate concentration and business-state cronyism may well increase.

These changes are envisaged, it would appear, with the developed West in mind. Does Russia face similar changes?

A starting point in assessing Russia’s prospects is to consider the state of the economy at the beginning of the new decade. On the verge of the pandemic, Russia’s economy was still struggling to recover from two economic challenges.

First, the annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine resulted in the imposition of sanctions by the West. Allegations of interference in the US presidential election and support for Venezuela have resulted in further sanctions. These served to isolate the Russian economy from global capital markets, reduced the levels of foreign investment, with the notable exception of China, and prompted government support for import substitution.

Second, the 2014–15 oil price crash that resulted in the Opec+ agreement between Opec and other major oil exporting countries that Russia played a major part in, though it never significantly reduced its production.

The success of Opec+ benefited Russia, but it also allowed a resurgence in US oil production such that in early 2020 Opec+ was looking for deeper cuts to sustain the oil price, something that Russia refused to accept. Russia used the time, and the higher prices, afforded by the Opec+ agreement to good effect, rebuilding its national wealth fund, which currently stands at about 10 per cent of GDP, and cutting government spending such that in early 2020 the budget balanced at an oil price of $42 a barrel, down from more than $100 a barrel in 2014–15. But this reduction in funding also slowed the rate of recovery.

Ironically, this relative economic

Oil storage tanks at the Rosneft refinery, in Tuapse on the Black Sea. The pandemic has seen oil demand fall by a third, a blow to Russia’s chances of economic recovery

BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES
isolation may provide some protection in the current context but, once again, Russia’s dependence on oil export revenue is revealed as a critical weakness.

For Russia the present crisis is a compound of the impact of the pandemic domestically and the oil-market crash. The global impact of the pandemic has seen oil demand fall by a third. It therefore takes out a larger share of Russian GDP in 2020 than the pandemic alone is expected to take out of global economic activity.

Proceeding on the common assumption that the pandemic recedes to some degree in the second half of 2020, both the International Monetary Fund and leading Russian economists foresee a larger fall for Russian GDP than for the global economy as a whole. But both project recovery for Russia in 2021: 3.5 per cent for the IMF and 1.3 per cent for economists from the Liberal Mission Foundation.

However, given the possibility of further waves of infection and economic shut down, the global economy may not recover for some time and, even then, oil demand is likely to be depressed with some suggesting that 2019 will have marked a peak in global oil demand. How distinctive will Russia’s economic inheritance from this crisis be?

The advent of a more rapid diffusion of new technologies is as plausible for Russia as it is for other countries. Similar conditions are providing a ‘crash-course’ in working and consuming online. Meanwhile, familiar impediments to Russian productivity growth — the large state presence, weak competition, low investment and sanctions — will probably remain unaffected. At the same time, the capacity of the state to invest may be damaged by the cost of mitigating the domestic impact of the pandemic.

So far, the Russian stimulus package is much smaller than the equivalent spending in most western countries: 2.8 per cent of GDP according to Finance Minister Anton Siluanov in late April, compared with open-ended commitments in several European countries that could exceed 10 per cent. If Russia comes through the crisis with comparatively low stimulus spending, it will reinforce the country’s low-debt position, shying away from anything that would provide leverage for the West.

Changes in supply chains will be less important for Russia, whose exports are still heavily concentrated in natural resources. So far as imports are concerned, car production is the clearest example of an industry, now mostly based on foreign investment, that depends heavily on imported component supplies. There are others.

According to the Ministry of Industry and Trade, 62 per cent of the components for civil aircraft are currently imported, and 69 per cent of the ‘components’ for pharmaceuticals. The aim of current policy is to reduce such percentages drastically.

It looks as though the developed West will be following Russia in import substitution. The difference is that in the West the process will be governed by companies. In Russia import substitution is state-led and seems to have compounded its reliance on the resource sectors rather than promoting meaningful diversification.

Corporate concentration, a large state economic presence and business-state cronyism are already conspicuous features of the Russian economy.

The policy response to the coronavirus crisis will tend to strengthen them. The emphasis of government crisis-support in Russia is on big business, while small firms are neglected. In practice, this may not be so very different from what is happening in several western countries.

However, any return to ‘normal’ after the crisis, so far as business-state relations are concerned, is complicated by the uncertainty surrounding Vladimir Putin’s position and the 2024 ‘succession’ question. President Putin has ducked responsibility for conducting Russia’s crisis policy, leaving most of the running to regional officials. Whether this promotes or diminishes his political support remains to be seen. It may be that others gain political capital from demonstrating capability in a crisis, which could undermine the view that Putin is the only leader for Russia.

Meanwhile uncertainty about the leadership, on top of uncertainty about domestic economic policy, sanctions and global trade, is likely to keep private investment in Russia low.

Russia has too diverse an economy to be characterized as a petro-state, but oil and gas remain central to its fortunes. This, too, will be important after the immediate pandemic crisis has abated. So far, Russia has continued to surprise industry analysts with its ability to sustain high levels of production, but a consensus is emerging that its Soviet-era fields are running out and may be damaged by the coming production cuts needed as part of the new Opec+ agreement. Equally, there are only so many times that Russia can play the devaluation trick to drive down the domestic costs of production.

Sooner rather than later, Russia will need access to technology it does not have, as well as significant investment, to develop new fields.

The problem is that many of those fields will be more expensive to develop than existing fields and a lasting consequence of COVID-19 is likely to be lower oil prices for some time to come, if not forever.

The situation in the gas industry is somewhat different as there is no shortage of gas, but prices were depressed even before the pandemic. Russia needs new markets, but Gazprom has invested heavily in pipelines to bypass Ukraine to support a stagnating European market and is equally unlikely to reap significant financial reward, at current prices, from its new pipeline to China.

The state has also heavily subsidized Novatek’s new liquefied natural gas ventures on the Yamal Peninsula. This calls into question the wisdom of Russia’s new energy strategy to 2035 that sees further expansion of oil and gas production. Such an approach presents significant opportunity costs to the Russian economy where money could be better spent on social investment, renewing infrastructure, education and real diversification.

Finally, should the new COVID-19 world determine to double down on climate change and pursue a global green recovery, Russia may find itself simply backing the wrong horse.

Philip Hanson is Emeritus Professor of the Political Economy of Russia and Eastern Europe, University of Birmingham, and Michael Bradshaw is Professor of Global Energy at Warwick Business School
‘Leaders for rent’ is no answer

Max Fras explains why Ukraine and Georgia need to nurture home-grown talent rather than import politicians

In May, Georgia’s ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili, who fled his homeland in 2013 while facing charges of abuse of power, was given an important job in Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelensky had proposed him as deputy prime minister, but opposition to the move in the president’s own party resulted in Saakashvili being made leader of the National Reform Council.

This post marked his second comeback in Ukraine. Only five years ago, he had been granted Ukrainian citizenship to become governor of the Odessa region.

He quit that job after a year and, having protested against the corruption schemes of then president Petro Poroshenko in the region, he was stripped of his citizenship and deported from Ukraine in 2017. He managed to get back into the country which had adopted and then rejected him, leading to a standoff in Kyiv between his supporters and police who tried to arrest him.

Saakashvili is the model of the ephemeral international politician who embodies the fascination with foreign expertise that persists in Ukraine and the wider eastern Europe. Some countries in the region crave reform and the electorate is inclined to look abroad for the right politician to provide an instant solution to long-standing problems.

Ukraine, re-embracing Europe and radical reform after the 2014 Euromaidan revolution, opted for bulk imports of foreigners for political office. Between 2014 and 2016, Ukraine had Georgian and Lithuanian cabinet members as well as an American-born finance minister. All three were granted Ukrainian citizenship on the same day, upon their nomination as ministers.

Soon after, Saakashvili was nominated as Odessa’s governor and received Ukrainian citizenship. The fashion for Georgian reformers did not stop there. In the same period, Ukraine embraced Georgians as deputy ministers, the head of the national police force, a deputy prosecutor-general and a deputy head of the anti-corruption agency. A number of Polish nationals also served the agendas of the real decision-makers, the billionaire businessman and politician Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia and presidents Poroshenko and Zelensky in Ukraine, who call the shots.

None of the international nominees has any political capital in their new homelands. A case in point is that of Salome Zourabichvili, a French diplomat of Georgian ancestry, named by Saakashvili as his first foreign minister in 2004. She lasted for just over a year, only to set up a political party which failed to attract voters.

Despite her lack of political standing, she won the presidency in 2018 by a slim margin, a success generally credited to the support of Ivanishvili, who helped put the entire state apparatus behind her campaign.

Among Ukraine’s many international politicians, only Saakashvili was an independent political player, and then only briefly. The political party he set up failed to get a single representative elected, and in the recent parliamentary elections, he endorsed another party.

In the absence of a local party base, international appointees are easy to dispose of. They provide their patrons with a buffer between them and voters who get tired at the lack of tangible progress on economic development and anti-corruption measures.

This fascination with international politicians is unlikely to benefit Georgia or Ukraine in the long run. In both countries, politicians and state institutions have low rankings for trust, and political parties have low membership.

Installing international politicians and categorizing them as technocratic experts aggravates this problem, distancing constituents and communities from government. Thirty years into their regained independence, Ukraine and Georgia would do better to put their faith in home-grown political talent and assure proper democratic accountability for their politicians. Growing a competent and independent civil service would allow them to rely on the expert knowledge of talented individuals without undermining democracy at home.
Don’t blame the scientists

Politicians should lead, not hide behind experts, writes Calum Inverarity

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, the British public have become familiar with the government repeatedly saying that its decisions are ‘led by the science’. Ministers have used these words to respond to media questions on a wide variety of issues: from the actions the government took — or failed to take — to contain the virus, to the country’s economic prospects.

A simple, reductive message is not unknown in British politics. The soundbite ‘Get Brexit done’ is credited with helping the current government secure its parliamentary majority last December. But it has become glaringly apparent that such simple messaging is of limited use when dealing with a public health crisis of the magnitude of COVID-19.

Contrary to reassuring the public, the repeated deference to ‘the science’ has served not only to highlight the failings in early preparedness for the pandemic, but to reignite tensions that exist at the boundary between policymaking and scientific expertise.

While politically expedient, the invocation of scientific expertise has led to some confusion among the public and drawn criticism from opposition MPs and most notably from the scientific community whose members have seen a sudden, and not necessarily welcome, rise in public visibility and liability.

Though this is not a new phenomenon, it comes at a time of heightened emotions

Prime minister Boris Johnson during his daily coronavirus briefing, with Professor Chris Whitty, his chief medical officer, left, and Patrick Vallance, his scientific adviser
when the public are in need of competent, reliable and transparent guidance. In delegating this responsibility so imprecisely to the scientific community, the government may have elevated those within it to a precarious position within the public’s perception.

Utilizing expertise for the purpose of policymaking is a fundamental component of democratic governance. It is, therefore, not uncommon to hear ministers justify policies based on economic forecasts, climate projections or other models. Most prominent in the COVID-19 case has been modelling from Imperial College London and Oxford University, the former being credited with changing the government’s mind on adopting a policy of social distancing.

The relationship between policymaking and expertise, particularly scientific expertise, has long been fraught, however. It is in acknowledgement of this interlinkage that science, technology and society (STS) emerged as a field of research during the second half of the 20th century.

STS considers the ways politics and science impact upon each other yet remain distinctly separate in order to maintain their respective authorities. Attention has focused on the ways boundaries between the two have become blurred as the scientific community has been encouraged to assume greater responsibility for the practical implications of action taken based on their predictions.

These tensions have been exacerbated as policymakers and scientific experts have been forced to contend with the disruptive impacts of the internet age, in which anyone can go online and access not always accurate answers to questions about anything, such as symptoms for a new illness, or how the virus is transmitted or what the possible cures are.

So, why does it matter that the government has justified its decisions primarily on ‘the science’?

For a start, many within the scientific community have taken issue with the government’s sweeping use of the term ‘the science’, which is inaccurate and misleading.

Casting the scientific advice chosen by the government as the only definitive ‘science’ has enabled it to regain control over the coronavirus narrative. This is not to say the expertise available to the government was insufficient, but rather to point out that statements like this prioritize political aims at the expense of constructive debate.

As I wrote recently with my colleague, Yasmin Afina, on the use of complex modelling, expertise can be loaded with assumptions and biases that, when left unchallenged, can result in advice that reflects the groupthink of any expert community.

In particular, it has emerged that the models used to guide the government’s thinking failed to consider the possibility of enacting early lockdown measures, as were deployed in some countries that gained swift control of the virus, because behavioural experts and modellers had assumed such restrictions were likely to be rejected by the British public.

This serves as a reminder that behind ‘the science’ remain humans who have their own, often competing, views that inevitably influence their advice.

In failing to allow for greater transparency and scrutiny or to encourage the different opinions that exist in the scientific community to be aired, the government effectively signalled its unwillingness to engage in debate, while abdicating responsibility for its decisions to advisers.

While many within the scientific community would probably prefer to avoid involvement in political controversy, others, such as the Britain’s former chief scientific adviser Sir David King, have made efforts to temper expectations by saying that science should inform, not necessarily lead.

**Impending loss of faith**

To avoid possible reputational damage to the scientific community as a result of the government’s actions, Sir David has established an alternative body to the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), which provides some of the primary scientific guidance to the government. This new body, made up of scientific experts, has been named Independent Sage, in contrast to the perceived politicized nature of the existing group of advisers.

In failing to appreciate the complexity of scientific modelling, the government has served to inflate expectations that ‘the science’ alone has the capacity to guide us out of the crisis, while playing down that this science is only one of a variety of approaches in a wider set of considerations.

One of the greatest concerns is that the scientists will shoulder the blame for any failings of the government’s decisions. However, a recent poll by Survation for the Open Knowledge Foundation may provide some pause for thought: 64 per cent of those polled said that they ‘are now more likely to listen to expert advice from qualified scientists and researchers’.

The poll also found that 67 per cent of all respondents ‘believe all COVID-19 related research and data should be made open for anyone to use freely’. This demand for openness no doubt reflects the revelation that Boris Johnson’s senior adviser, Dominic Cummings, attended meetings of Sage. As Cummings is a political strategist rather than a career civil servant, the revelation brought into question the transparency of what is meant to be an independent scientific advisory group, on whose deliberations the state of the economy and society may depend for a long time to come.

It is interesting, therefore, to note that public amenability towards scientific experts seems to have increased during the crisis. In addition to the Survation poll, a YouGov survey for Sky News found that public trust in the NHS and the UK’s chief medical officer, Chris Witty, outstrips that of public trust in the prime minister. These polls seem to indicate that public contempt lies with the government for obfuscating its decision-making process rather than the scientists.

While this offers some grounds for optimism that trust in the expertise of scientists may not have been substantially damaged during this crisis, it may not necessarily extend to trust in the direct use by governments of scientific expertise for policymaking. Ultimately, the coronavirus crisis may further compound distrust of science-backed recommendations and the policies that ensue from them. This distrust has accelerated apace in the internet age as misinformation has become a common feature that distorts politics.

While the British government continues to be criticized for its handling of the coronavirus crisis and its patchy messaging, it remains to be seen what lasting impacts its actions will have. What is apparent, however, is that it would be inadvisable for any government to rely solely on ‘the science’ to regain the public’s trust. Doing so would risk aggravating a tension that has been, and looks likely to remain, inflated for the near future. Just as the recovery from the pandemic appears likely to be protracted and uncertain, so too does the rehabilitation of public faith in science-based policy.

Calum Inverarity is a research analyst and coordinator with the International Security programme at Chatham House
Q&A Ferenc Dalnoki-Veress

Scientist explains what South Korea did right

You are a nuclear physicist and an expert in non-proliferation. What made you focus on public policy during the coronavirus pandemic?

I have always been interested in public health and worked on an exciting project during the Obama presidency which was looking at emergency responses to a radiological incident. Working in non-proliferation, you have to convince people that this is a really important issue and, even if incidents are very rare, that doesn’t make planning for a nuclear incident unnecessary. When the COVID-19 crisis happened in January, I knew that the people in power were not taking it as seriously as they should.

What do you mean, not taking it seriously?

I followed the South Korean response very carefully — my wife is Korean. Did you know that South Korea and the United States both discovered their first case of COVID-19 on the same day? The difference in response to the pandemic was incredible. I also noticed that there was a lot of othering — people were saying we can’t have mobile phone tracing like South Korea because we are different from Asians, we care more about our freedom. On the news, the way they talked about it seemed as if they were confusing South Korea with North Korea, which is a dictatorship. There was a lot of ugliness bubbling up.

How did this reflect on policy?

There is a lot that we didn’t know about the virus, but one thing that became clear early in February was that the disease could be spread by asymptomatic people. There was evidence from Asia, but there is a feeling in the US that everything that happens outside the country is irrelevant to the US. In South Korea, they didn’t lock everything down and they started testing aggressively with drive-through testing stations. I think the US could have handled things very differently, especially in terms of testing. The argument is always that South Korea is a much smaller country, and the US is so much bigger. That’s true, but there should have been a much more aggressive testing response early before the number of infections got out of hand.

Because of the exponential increase in infections, it is vastly more difficult to handle contact tracing when you have a high case load.

In East Asian countries it is normal to wear masks. Should we be doing that?

Clear evidence for the effectiveness of masks is low, but it is a simple thing that anyone can do. We saw from South Korea and other places that masks make a difference. It is not total protection against droplet infection, but if everyone wears a mask then a percentage of droplets are not going to enter the body. Even if it makes only a slight difference, that’s a lot of people spared when the overall number of dead is 100,000 in the US.

The death rate seems not to be rising in the US now. Is the virus contained?

There are significant hotspots in rural America where the cases are rapidly growing. Furthermore, pandemics happen in waves. Infections spread unabated in a location and then flare up exponentially such as those connected to meat-packing plants where social distancing was not implemented early on and surveillance was not adequate. States like New York and California have taken the threat very seriously, but many other states have not, and are in my view relaxing restrictions prematurely. I am very concerned about a second wave of the pandemic and we need to give health workers and public health officials as many weapons to fight this virus as possible and for many of us that is staying at home.

There are predictions that the COVID-19 infection curve could turn out to be self-flattening and will just burn itself out.

This happened with Sars, didn’t it?

It is possible that the virus will mutate in such a way that it becomes less dangerous, because the virus dies with the people who die. So with the worst virus strains dying with the people who die, you can imagine that it may become less deadly, but I know of no credible evidence for that.

There are some who argue that those who die from the disease were at high risk of dying within a year due to existing health problems. How do you react to that?

I heard this argument often at the beginning, and it is very convenient for those in charge. But we are finding out that young people are also dying because of a reaction where the immune system goes against the body itself called the cytokine storm. In addition, we are now learning about a rare condition called the Kawasaki disease in children which appears to be connected to COVID-19 which has been fatal for kids in US and Europe. It is true that older people are more likely to be affected in an adverse way. But there’s a lot we don’t know about this disease, and this idea that it is only older people who get infected doesn’t appear to be true.

What more can we learn from South Korea?

Because South Korea did random testing it was clear what proportion of the population had been infected. We don’t have that kind of information in the US. This leads to all kinds of speculation, which did not happen in South Korea. For a time, there were no new domestic cases, but a pandemic is like small forest fires which can start up anywhere and spread. There was one case where an infected person went to the Itaewon nightclub area of Seoul early in May and infected 237 people. As a result, South Korea tested as many as 65,000 people to determine who was likely to have been infected and chased up every one of them to ensure they were quarantined. The goal is that the virus has nowhere to hide. While people in the US are worried about loss of privacy in the use of technology for contact tracing, no names were revealed in South Korea, they didn’t lock everything down and they started testing aggressively with drive-through testing stations. I think the US could have handled things very differently, especially in terms of testing. The argument is always that South Korea is a much smaller country, and the US is so much bigger. That’s true, but there should have been a much more aggressive testing response early before the number of infections got out of hand.

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Conflict resolution

It probably should come as no surprise that COVID-19 is being used by power brokers to advance their partisan and personal agendas rather than as an opening to work together to tackle the common threat. But is it too late for this crisis to be turned to the advantage of people who are most vulnerable to violence and conflict?

On March 23, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, called for a global ceasefire. This generated widespread public support, particularly in conflict-affected countries. Among others, Saudi Arabia in Yemen and armed groups such as the Kurds in Syria declared their willingness to suspend military activity.

But lulls in hostilities and renewed willingness to talk turned out to be the exceptions. In many places, levels of violence have increased, with Afghanistan being the standout example. Instead, a combination of factors may be creating a more permissive environment for parties to conflict.

An overarching issue is the lack of global resolve and the egregious failure of the UN Security Council to issue a resolution to support the appeal by the Secretary-General. More mundane but equally debilitating are restrictions on movement, nominally to prevent the spread of the virus, that are affecting not just local people but peacekeepers and aid workers in places such as Sudan or South Sudan. Diplomats and businesspeople are thin on the ground.

Moreover, political leaders and the public in western countries are mightily distracted. The priority has been to contain the damage triggered by the virus and

A good time to talk peace

The pandemic could bring ‘unimaginable benefits’ if only there was the political will to seize them, writes Michael Keating
manage massive and rapid state interventions. Leaders are struggling to maintain their domestic authority, anxious about an eventual reckoning and their re-election prospects, spinning narratives to buttress their credibility.

Stopping violence and suffering in conflict zones is nowhere near the top of the list. US engagement around the world is more unilateral. The pandemic has not been used to refresh diplomatic efforts but to increase pressure on adversaries — such as in Iran and Venezuela. The Chinese are using the virus to extend their influence.

In Europe, the preoccupation has been solidarity, or lack of it, within the continent, not least the willingness of richer regions to bail out poorer ones. Some argue that the survival of the European project is at stake.

Despite the impressive sums pledged to support humanitarian action and debt relief, addressing the deteriorating situation in Europe’s larger neighbourhood, the Middle East and Africa, is not a priority. Yet helping fragile states to cope is in richer countries’ own fundamental interest.

The nature of the pandemic demands a global response. Lifting of lockdowns in some parts of the world while the virus gains momentum just a boat journey or a few hours’ flight away makes little sense.

Dystopian travel, trade and border restrictions based upon health status are unlikely to work, will spur corruption and criminal activity, play into the hands of xenophobes and nationalists, and are likely to polarize politics further. The hand of those who argue for militarized approaches to security will be strengthened, despite decades of evidence that these do not bring lasting solutions, and often make things worse.

Can the crisis be used to incentivize more deliberate approaches to peace and stability? Are sufficient funds available, and is there enough political coherence in the international community to that end?

No one yet knows what the impact of COVID-19 will be on the most vulnerable and conflict-affected states — a distressingly long list that includes many countries in the Middle East including Iraq, Syria and Yemen, in the Horn of Africa, Great Lakes and Sahel, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, South East Asia and Latin America, notably Colombia and Venezuela. Preliminary analysis suggests that a combination

‘There has been a Zoom boom among analysts on what a post-crisis landscape should look like. This is healthy’

of well-functioning institutions, trusted leadership and reliable information, plus relative social and economic equality that creates a sense of solidarity among people, are determinants to success in fighting the pandemic.

Unfortunately, these ingredients are missing most in conflict-affected societies. A combination of lack of preparedness and useful information, weak or non-existent health systems, chronic poverty and ongoing hostilities is likely to result in many deaths and widespread suffering.

The economic consequences are still being fathomed but will be profound. These countries are more integrated into global economic networks than was the case during the 2008/9 financial crash. Collapsing commodity prices and remittance flows, and disruptions in supply chains, trade and travel will hit them very hard, as will reduced development assistance as the GDP of donor states contracts.

The desperate need in many fragile states of elites for financial assistance and meeting the expectations of their citizens, whether embattled middle classes, frustrated young people or the urban poor, could be an opportunity to support reforms that result in more inclusive political arrangements and greater accountability.

From a conflict prevention perspective, the issue is whether urgently needed finance can be used to bring about policy changes that address some of the structural issues that contribute to insecurity. Key issues include the availability of funds to exercise leverage; and the reform agenda they could catalyse, focusing on economic inequality and gender inequality, lack of political inclusiveness and unaccountable security forces, illicit economic activity, land and resource abuse, and increasingly unpredictable climatic conditions.

But conflict-affected states are least able to absorb or use this. The World Bank has also moved fast to make a chunk of the $160 billion pledged by its shareholders available for countries defined as fragile and conflict affected. Grants and debt service relief will be used to build capacity to respond to COVID-19, maintain livelihoods and to help marginalized groups including the displaced.

It is a credit to the Bretton Woods institutions that they have been so forward leaning, given their traditional aversion to risk. Imposing conditions to achieve debt relief requires strong political support and international partnership, as was just demonstrated in Somalia. Doing this at scale at a time of crisis will be complex.

There has been a Zoom boom among analysts, development experts and the peacebuilding community on what a desirable post-crisis landscape should look like. This is healthy. But it is not the same as mobilizing politicians and decision makers in the most powerful countries, including in the Arab world and Far East, around a transformative agenda. For the moment, the focus of these policymakers has been on injecting cash and preventing a full-scale macro-economic collapse.

The G-20 and G-7 communiques were largely silent on job-creating investments in local infrastructure, clean energy, humane urbanization, land use, waste management and recycling, reforestation and biodiversity regeneration. These are needed both to encourage more sustainable, climate friendly and equitable economic models and to help address the structural factors contributing to and sustaining conflict.

As for context-specific conversations among the most powerful states and economic actors on how to propel inclusive political processes, accountable government, rule of law and dialogue among armed groups — these are few and far between.

An unlikely revolutionary, Kristalina Georgieva, the IMF’s managing director, has suggested that there could be ‘unimaginable benefits’ emerging from this crisis including, for example, changes in behaviour that benefits action on climate change.

The issue is whether there is the political will and imagination to seize this opportunity. If not now, when?

Michael Keating is Executive Director, European Institute of Peace and a former UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Somalia

Yemeni fighters loyal to southern separatists celebrate the re-opening of a highway in Abyan province during a ceasefire in May
CYCLONE AMPHAN STRIKES
A woman removes debris from the road in Midnapore, West Bengal, amid the wreckage left in the wake of Cyclone Amphan, the first super cyclonic storm to occur in the Bay of Bengal since 1999. It crashed into the Ganges Delta on May 20 at a time when mass evacuations in India and Bangladesh were hampered by efforts to contain the coronavirus. Picture Dibyangshu Sarkar/AFP Getty Images
Medical reports
Medical reports

The view from the front line

How doctors are coping in Germany and Zambia

Across the world, health systems have been put under extreme pressure due to the spread of COVID-19. Ben Horton sat down (remotely) with two doctors, working in Germany and Zambia. Johannes Wagner is a newly qualified paediatrician in the Bavarian town of Coburg. Mwape Chisonde is a diagnostician at a hospital in the Zambian capital Lusaka, where he processes coronavirus tests.

Tell me about the public mood towards the coronavirus response in your countries?

Mwape: Before this pandemic, Zambia had already been dealing with major public health challenges such as HIV, tuberculosis, malaria. The coming of COVID-19 has added a big burden to that list. Initial predictions were made that if Africa became the epicentre of the pandemic, many people would lose their lives. So the government had to be very alert. They had to heighten the levels of public surveillance, greatly increase laboratory capacity to carry out the required tests, and had to secure significant increases in health funding.

The one beauty of this time, I have realized, is that there is a spirit of togetherness I have never seen before in this country. People have to put their political and religious affiliations aside and come together to combat one common enemy. It is hard to live like this, but overall, the Zambian people have adopted a sense of responsibility; they want to play their part.

As time goes by, however, we see other factors coming into play. COVID-19 comes not only with public health challenges, but economic implications. In the end, people have to pay rent, which is causing some to go out and break one or two rules just to make a living.

Johannes, have you seen this reflected in Germany?

Johannes: At the beginning, people understood that it was necessary to stay at home, reduce social contact and shut down all shops but grocers and pharmacies. People were motivated to cooperate, and many started to produce their own face masks as there were none left to buy. As the virus is especially dangerous to the elderly population, they had to accept the strictest measures of isolation. In Germany, you have 800,000 people, roughly 1 per cent of the population, living in care homes for the elderly. They were not allowed to go outside and no one was allowed to visit them. People did accept all this for quite
Some time. But now, as patient numbers are going down in Germany, there are protests against these measures, even though we never had a total lockdown like in Spain or Italy. People have started to combine economic and health concerns, just as Mwape mentioned in Zambia. There is also a big concern that the measures are obliging women to stay at home to look after the kids and return to a family way of life we saw in earlier times while fathers go back to work sooner.

A big advantage for Germany is that it has a strong economy. As in Britain, the government is paying two-thirds of the wages of many workers so they can keep their jobs until the economy is up and running again. So we have not seen the major rise in unemployment that the United States has experienced. Moreover, health insurance in Germany has always been independent of your job, so everyone is covered and can be tested for free. And testing capacities are very high. Overall, people are a little tired but I think the mood is still okay. What does concern me is that conspiracy theories are on the rise, and some people are losing all trust in the government and turning aggressive.

As for the hospitals, I work in the paediatrics department and they stopped every elective intervention. Everything that could be cancelled was cancelled. Nevertheless, we had a lot of work with the COVID-19 patients, so the workload for us was the same more or less. Overall the healthcare system is still in good shape and there has been no triage situation. Everyone who needed ventilation or oxygen was able to get it.

**Do you worry about the future impact of cancelling these elective surgeries?**

**Johannes:** It’s very hard to put all this into numbers but the quality of life of many people who are waiting will have been reduced during this time. Certain conditions might get worse but since May electives have restarted because the COVID-19 patient numbers are declining and we have a lot of free intensive care beds. I hope that we can recover from this, but in other countries where maybe there is not such a highly resourced system it could take months to resume elective operations.

One big concern is that people are scared of visiting the hospital, fearing they might contract the virus. This fear has been exacerbated by government guidelines restricting the number of people allowed to visit. It has been very quiet since the start of the pandemic. I work the night shift, and we used to attend to more than 500 patients a night. It’s no longer anywhere close to that.

I think this pandemic reminds us that we really need to strengthen our public health system. In Zambia there is clearly a need for improvements in the capacity of laboratories such as the one I work in. COVID-19 has shown that we need to look at this.

**Mwape, you said that you are working on testing. Could you tell us what that involves?**

**Mwape:** So, in Zambia testing came in a little bit late. Given this is a novel virus, it has taken time to come up with the right testing method and equipment. But one thing we have been able to do is innovate. Before the pandemic, we had equipment that we used to test for tuberculosis. So we recalibrated these machines and started to use them to test for COVID-19.

In terms of the testing process, nurses collect samples from suspected patients out in their communities, and then these are transported to the laboratory, where the actual testing takes place. We have greatly increased the capacity in terms of the number of tests that we are able to do on a daily basis. We started on a limited basis of about 200 tests a day, but now we are able to reach 1,000 a day in our lab alone. As a result we have been able to identify more people carrying the virus. This is helping us deal with a situation in which many people are asymptomatic carriers.

Ultimately it is very time-consuming however, because it requires the health system to have the capacity to go out into the communities, do mass testing and in that way identify those people with the virus so they can be isolated and given the necessary treatment. Only three centres—one in the Copperbelt region and two in Lusaka—have been recommended by the government for testing. Only those facilities have the capacity and the manpower to do the job.

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**Mwape Chisonde and Johannes Wagner are members of the Common Futures Conversations community, which is facilitated by Chatham House and made possible by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.**
Now Britain has become hostile territory

Saleyha Ahsan, an A&E doctor, blames a lack of preparation for the ensuing crisis

A matter of days after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, I was standing in the hospital where I now work as an emergency doctor watching preparations for the crisis. Having served as an army officer before training in medicine, I was there that day in my third role, as a broadcast journalist.

We were filming a Channel 4 Dispatches special on the coronavirus outbreak and I was following Dr Christian Subbe, an acute medicine consultant. My working at the hospital had helped get the film crew in.

I was struck by a strange sense of déjà vu as I prepped for filming that day. There was the same level of risk assessment, anticipation and concern among the production team I experienced when preparing to film in hostile settings overseas such as Libya.

‘Stay safe, be careful, call us 24/7 for anything,’ I was told.

And yet I wasn’t heading to an airport, simply getting into my car and driving across the country. I wasn’t crossing any borders. It was Britain that had become hostile territory. And that was unnerving.

This feeling was reinforced when I realized I had missed several calls from Tripoli. A doctor I had filmed during the Libyan conflict in 2012 was calling to ask if I was safe. Over the past eight years it had been me who would ring him whenever news broke of another military clash in Libya. Now Britain had become the war zone.

So here we were with an invisible enemy and a confused central command that was getting it wrong in the crucial early stages of battle. As a result of my military training at Sandhurst, I looked for leaders in government and the civil service and found none. Instead, there was the scrambling of forces to create a new army, one that wore a blue uniform and was armed with knowledge, compassion and nothing more penetrating than a scalpel, cannula or needle.

And there would be casualties — the ones who ran in early. News started emerging of healthcare workers who had died. The first five were black or Asian healthcare workers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Immediately, medics started to ask why.

In the same way as all healthcare workers across the UK, we would meet each day to hear new instructions from the government, and we began to appreciate that leadership at that level would not save us or our patients. We had to find the way ourselves.

Instructions were at first baffling and then alarming. What constituted PPE — personal protective equipment — changed a number of times. What was deemed the minimum one day would then be downgraded to something that covered far less of the body.

From around the country’s hospitals there were reports of disciplinary action against those that spoke out against this downgrading. There were reported incidents where infection control managers had removed items of PPE such as FFP3 face masks from the ward to discourage the use of items not covered by the guidelines. But what happens when you fear that the guidelines are based less on safety and more on simply what is available?

One evening early on in the outbreak while I was working in A&E a call came through from the out-of-hours team saying they had been notified of a train heading to my town with people from Scotland who had been exposed to COVID-19 and were now symptomatic. The passengers intended coming to A&E. At that point the hospital had not had any coronavirus patients.

Naturally I thought my public health colleagues on call would need to know this. I imagined that they and the police, and perhaps medics, or at least transport staff would meet the train at the station and identify the suspected COVID-19 passengers. Others in the carriage would be swabbed and adequate isolation ensured: Test, track and trace.

I called the public health number to discover you couldn’t speak directly to anyone at that time. I left an urgent message but didn’t hear back until 24 hours later. By then the suspected COVID-19 passengers had gone home and disappeared.

That is when it dawned on me that this was not going to go well for our country.

After filming in a war zone you look forward to the sanctuary your homecoming provides. But Britain is no longer a sanctuary. We may be free of bombs and bullets, but we still have to hear the daily update of the number of lives lost to COVID-19.

Those working in the NHS are regularly lauded as heroes, but the words of Christian Subbe still echo from the Dispatches interview: ‘There’s no need for heroes if you are prepared. You only need heroes if you fail to prepare.’

It is that preparation, together with a clear mission statement and leadership, that the government failed to provide. And so, you ended up with heroes.

_Saleyha Ahsan is an emergency medicine doctor and broadcaster_
Hospitals’ unsung heroes

Hassan Akkad, 23, arrived in Britain as a Syrian refugee in 2015. Footage of his journey was broadcast by the BBC and won a Bafta. When the coronavirus struck, he began work as a hospital cleaner. This is his story

When the virus came to England, I literally typed into Google: ‘How can I help?’ I first started delivering groceries to people in isolation and then found out that five hospitals were urgently looking for cleaners. One was Whipps Cross, in north London, which is ten minutes from my home. The idea of working as a cleaner had already crossed my mind after I read that the virus was able to survive for up to two weeks on surfaces. It was clear that disinfecting would be critical to reduce the spread. The next day I was in a COVID-19 ward hard at work.

I am on duty from 7am to 3pm, five days a week. When I arrive, I put on my personal protection equipment, my gloves and apron, and I start preparing my gear. I begin cleaning the tables, chairs and bed frames. The most important thing is to thoroughly clean the hotspots, things you touch, such as soap dispensers, doors, sinks. I then clean the nurses’ area and mop the floor. We disinfect every inch – you have to be thorough. Cleaning is physical work but even more so when you are kitted out in PPE, which is really uncomfortable. It is a great workout, though. I’ve noticed my arms are stronger. Before, my fiancée was making fun of me for having a double chin, but now I’m much fitter.

I’ve got to know some of the patients and they give me a wave sometimes when I walk past. What I’ve learnt, though, is just how undervalued cleaners are. Sometimes people will walk past me as if I don’t exist. This really needs to change. If you look at this situation from a medical point of view, cleaners are as important as everyone else in the medical team. You have a consultant, you have the ward manager, the nurses, the ward host, each one working as an organ in a body, and each one as important as the other. If I were to liken cleaners to any organ, we would be the kidneys – we clean the body. Just like kidneys, you cannot live without cleaners.

Here is the sad truth, there is a visible hierarchy in British hospitals with cleaners and porters at the bottom. And 90 per cent of them are immigrants or refugees. This hierarchy is very visible. People on top need to meet the people on the bottom. I am already working on that, using my platform to make this happen through showing people just how much we need cleaners.

I am a photographer and filmmaker, so I have been putting photos of my colleagues up online. I want to make them visible. At the same time there are so many things happening at work that I want to show people.

I have seen the very worst of humanity before coming here, but now I am also seeing the best. Before I came to England, I lived in Syria where I was put in prison and tortured for taking part in peaceful protests. I was banned from working as an English teacher. Like many others I fled the country and filmed my journey to Britain and then I worked on a sequel. I know how important it is to tell human stories in order to share a message.

When I came to Britain, I was offered a spare room to stay in to get me back on my feet – I was treated very well by people and I wanted to give something back.

One of the best things about working as a cleaner has been meeting some incredible people at the hospital. There is a ward host who prepares all the food for the patients who has not taken a day off, and then there is my boss, Albert, who has been cleaning at Whipps Cross for more than ten years. He came from Ghana in 1996. Even when I call him boss, he says, ‘No don’t call me boss, call me Albert’. He is 52 and one of the kindest people I have ever met. Meeting people like him restores my faith in humanity.

Before this, I felt like a bit of a champagne socialist. I was in a bubble, going to Soho House with really cool people and talking about world issues. To create change, and I mean a real change, you have to get out of your comfort zone and see how people outside your circle live and work. I am trying to put a face on this crisis and the people who are crucial in dealing with it.

Obviously, it is not easy at the hospital. I have witnessed a lot of people dying which is hard, especially when they do not have their relatives around them. Social distancing is not new for me and other refugees as we have not been able to see our families for years. Seeing patients separated from their relatives around them. Social distancing is not new for me and other refugees as we have not been able to see our families for years. Seeing patients separated from their families has triggered something for me.

There are more than ten nationalities on my ward from four continents. Before the coronavirus they were undervalued and underpaid. It is sad that it took a pandemic to value key workers but I hope one of the good things to come out of this is an appreciation of these amazing people. I try to focus on the positive elements to keep my sanity and I’ll work at the hospital for as long as I am needed.

Hassan Akkad was interviewed for this article by Sarah Whitehead
@Hassan_Akkad
Time for a new Marshall Plan?

And could China pay for it rather than the US, asks Mariana Vieira

When the United States decided to inject a huge amount of cash to revive a war-ravaged Europe, President Harry Truman feared he would face a tough struggle convincing the Republican-dominated Congress to vote for it. ‘I’ve decided to give the whole thing to General Marshall,’ he said. ‘The worst Republican on the Hill can vote for it if we name it after the general’.

The soldier-statesman General George Marshall, then serving as US Secretary of State, lent his voice – and eventually his name – to the European Recovery Programme, which was passed by Congress on April 3, 1948. Spanning several years, the Marshall Plan authorized $13 billion to boost the European economy. In today’s money, total Marshall aid was worth $130 billion.

In the words of ‘Tony Judt, expert in European history: ‘The Marshall Plan was an economic programme, but the crisis averted was political.’ In 1947, the appeal of communism was rising in Germany, Italy and France. Not only that, with the USSR emerging victorious from the war, history seemed to be on Moscow’s side. In restoring the European economy, the Marshall Plan’s architects sought to give the continent’s leaders a chance to bolster their legitimacy with the voters.

Since then, the Marshall Plan has become shorthand for any financial magic wand to be waved at the world’s problems. In recent weeks, it has surfaced in headlines calling for European institutions to find the money to revive an economy devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, has declared the need for ‘a Marshall Plan for Europe’. In discussions for the next long-term EU budget, Charles Michel, president of the European Council, spoke of ‘a Marshall Plan-like stimulus strategy’. Pedro Sanchez, the Spanish prime minister, has echoed support for a ‘common Marshall Plan to recover from the coronavirus pandemic’.

These calls take place against an unpromising political background, however. The pandemic that should have brought Europeans together has left individual countries largely.funding for themselves. With the principle of solidarity among nation states eclipsed by overheated domestic debates, the EU’s ability to fund any Marshall Plan-like ambition may be limited.

If Europe cannot look in the mirror for a saviour, it might have to look outside the window for someone with deeper pockets. It is worth looking more closely at the reasons that prompted the Marshall Plan to see if history can be revived.

The strategy of massive conditional foreign aid emerged as a pillar of containment of the Soviet Union. Another was the formation of Nato. Leading up to the Marshall Plan, Henry Stimson, Truman’s Secretary of War, warned that victory over Germany and peace were not synonymous. ‘Close on the heels of victory has loomed a new world crisis,’ he said.

If a similar vein, a victory against COVID-19 might not be enough to avert another impending crisis should the coronavirus create a long-term schism between China and the US, with the Europeans caught in between.

If the rise of China is combined with increasing American hostility and distrust emerging from the COVID-19 blame game, it could provide ample material for a lasting rift. Historians will debate whether the current Chinese threat is real. What matters is the perception of a threat that the US needs to insulate itself and its strategic and trading partners against.

The Marshall Plan forced Europeans to choose between Washington and Moscow. As President Donald Trump seeks to redefine the terms of America’s international role, the provision of economic aid would be an opportunity to press Europe to choose between Washington and Beijing.

Nonetheless, given Trump’s belief that Europeans are freeloaders, and as COVID-19 engulfs an America on its way to a presidential election, it is hard to imagine that a ‘Pompeo Plan’ will materialize in response to a developing Sinocentric order.

Under President Xi Jinping, China is becoming more confident. Its Belt and Road Initiative now stretches from the borders of China to central Europe. Does that make China the modern-day equivalent of the USSR?

Rosemary Foot, Oxford professor of International Relations, argues that the Chinese Communist Party puts forward ‘an alternative, non-western, sustainable and successful political and economic model’.

In retrospect, the Marshall Plan embodied the first stage in building a community of ideas, economic links and security ties that came to be known as the West. If America is ultimately unwilling or unable to deploy a Marshall Plan 2.0, might China step into the vacuum? If that happens, Chinese funds pouring into Europe to support Beijing’s vision of a global ‘community of shared destiny’ could accelerate a post-western era of global governance.

Mariana Vieira,
World Today staff
Where does the US go now?

John Kampfner considers America’s future as China assumes a dominant role

The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory
Andrew Bacevich
Metropolitan Books, £20.00

History Has Begun:
The Birth of a New America
Bruno Macaes
Hurst, £16.99

America was once Europe’s imagined future. No longer. It has squandered goodwill and abandoned the Enlightenment tradition of the Old World. On these points, Bruno Macaes and Andrew Bacevich agree. They are not alone. A canon of books and studies has been produced denoting the demise of a country that we used to call the leader of the free world. Where writers and analysts tend to differ is on the cause of the malaise. Where they are often found wanting is on the identification of a solution.

Setting off on his demolition course of US foreign policy, Bacevich cites, as so many do, Francis Fukuyama and his much misquoted (and oft misinterpreted) End of History thesis. This academic hubris begat the Neo-Conservatives and saw George W Bush telling West Point cadets on the eve of the Iraq War: ‘The 20th century ended with a single surviving model of human progress, based on non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women and private property and free speech and equal justice and religious tolerance.’

But for the author the rot set in earlier, even before the end of the Cold War. The removal of an external enemy with the collapse of Communism did, he argues, exacerbate the distortions that have disfigured policymaking in the subsequent three decades. But they did not create them.

Bacevich presents a checklist of woes. By breaking down national borders, globalization was meant to create wealth; instead it produced cheap labour and insecurity. The decades of supposed contentment, the 1990s and 2000s — until the financial crash — and the pursuit of individual fulfilment led to an atomized, selfish and consumerist society shorn of communal ties or a sense of duty. He labels this the ‘narcissistic inclinations of American culture’. The export of American values, by force where necessary, did not confirm the primacy of the American way. It unleashed a series of never-ending wars and fomented resentment and terrorism. And it culminated in the nadir that is Donald Trump.

These arguments are surely unarguable. But they are not new either. That is the main problem with this polemic. Bacevich served in the US Army for more than two decades and he wants people to know it. His withering contempt for the charlatan political class becomes just a little tiresome. Lurking in the text, however, is a more compelling proposition. He opens his account with a rhetorical question posed by Harry Angstrom, the protagonist of John Updike’s Rabbit novels. ‘Without the Cold War, what’s the point of being an American?’

If the US began as a revolution against old thinking, it sustained itself by projecting a new and potentially better way to the world — epitomized by Hollywood and other brand icons. The Soviet Union ‘lost’ because it could not match the American dream. But what happens when others catch up or grow tired of the juxtaposition? Or when they realize that the dream was a myth? Angstrom’s question was deeply threatening. Too much was riding on the belief in American supremacy, the author argues, that few people challenged the underlying assumptions. ‘Ambitious youngsters keen to make their mark in Washington knew better than to suggest that the times might be ripe for curbing the nation’s appetite for remaking the world in its own image.’ What they should have done was to see American Exceptionalism for what it was — nothing more than ‘unvarnished militarism, missionary zealotry and extreme nationalism’. Such sweeping statements suggest that Bacevich is perhaps guilty of the same confirmation bias that he accuses others of.

By contrast, Macaes’ account is Tiggerishly optimistic. Rather being on the verge of institutional collapse, ‘perhaps the United States is only just entering its highest period, where its individual possibilities will be realized’. He derives his optimism from an unlikely analysis. His central argument is that faced with a new rival in China, America will — and should — become less western.

The United States may be largely responsible for Europe’s strategic defence, but it no longer has much in common with countries with whom it has long been allied. ‘In the post-war decades it appealed to European intellectuals such as Sartre on account of its deracinated life. The music, the literature, the architecture of those years were an extravaganza of countercultural passion, breaking with every convention.’

America continues to be a ‘society of stories’, in terms of its business tycoons, film stars and, of course, politicians. He puts into that category not just the inevitable Trump but also Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Democrat Representative who has helped galvanize a more unashamed left-wing politics. ‘What contemporary America exhibits is a world of worlds where the high-tech utopia of San Francisco exists side by side with those parts of the country where many more people believe in heaven, hell and angels than in the theory of evolution.’ He adds: ‘The difference between Europeans and Americans is that the former see the great narratives of nation, religion or money as fictions to be abandoned while the latter embrace them.'
Where does the US go now?
John Kampfner considers America’s future as China assumes a dominant role

Review

Macaes draws on constitutional rights to make his point – America’s gun culture speaks to an entirely different set of conclusions about personal freedom as does its approach to religion.

‘What is no doubt remarkable is that on many counts the United States has a lot more in common with Asian societies than with Europe,’ he states. Yet he does not develop the contention, nor does he introduce facts that may help convince the sceptics. Instead he seeks to reinforce his argument by the use of grand statements. ‘The United States is no longer a European nation.’ So far, so defensible. But then: ‘In fundamental respects it now looks more similar to countries such as India or Russia or even the Islamic Republic of Iran.’ Really?

Yes, we know of the like minds of Trump and Vladimir Putin. One could make a case for adding to this school of charismatic nationalists the likes of Narendra Modi. But Iran? In any case, generalizations such as these don’t really take forward the foreign policy debate. Nor does the phrase describing Silicon Valley as ‘feudalism with better marketing’ add much to the vexed discussions about the role of the tech giants in public life.

It is an entertaining read replete with a number of surprises and provocations. I just wish these were further developed. Indeed, that is the problem with so much of the discourse on the China-rising, America-falling matrix. I think of Kishore Mahbubani’s consistent argument of a West fading away under the weight of its hubris and of an Asia ploughing ahead. Each such work seems to add to the parts but does not produce a whole. Perhaps that it is because policymakers have yet to find one, have yet to identify what the arrival of China as a ‘first among equals’ superpower means not just for foreign policy but also for societal trends in the United States and in Europe.

Bacevich, in his conclusion, calls on American politicians to turn their now dormant moral mission towards fighting the climate emergency. Some governors in some states are doing that. Others are not. We know Trump’s position. Intriguingly, Macaes suggests that America will find a different role, as an arbiter of competing forces. As China and Europe fight it out for economic power and strategic influence, the US refuses to take a side. It does not behave like, nor does it empathize with either bloc. It is distinctive in its culture and its interests. To some degree that is already happening. I call that a nightmare vision. I still believe in Enlightenment values. But perhaps I’m old fashioned.

George W Bush attends a graduation at West Point, the US military academy

How to avoid extinction

Thomas Raines on one man’s calculation of humanity’s survival chances

The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity
Toby Ord
Bloomsbury, £25.00

Lockdown is either a very good or a very bad time to read this work by the philosopher Toby Ord. It explores a very simple question: how do we avoid human extinction?

Its title comes from Ord’s name for the era we are now living through, an era that began on July 16, 1945, with the Trinity test, the first detonation of an atomic bomb in the New Mexico desert.

This was the moment humans gained the power to destroy themselves. At that point we entered ‘the Precipice’, a period of unique vulnerability in human evolution, where the gap between the power of our species and its wisdom has become dangerously wide.

For the first time, humanity was exposed not just to the natural existential risks of our planetary environment and interstellar location, but to human generated ones as well. Understanding the nature of the threat to humanity’s survival, what is at stake, mapping the risks and how we should respond is the book’s central task.

Ord defines existential risks as things which destroy humanity’s long-term potential, either through full species extinction, an unrecoverable collapse or an unrecoverable dystopia.

This loss of potential drives the book’s sense of urgency. He insists we have a moral responsibility to future humans. At stake is every possible future life, every possible future human achievement. For Ord, the task of those alive today is to navigate through this period of acute risk, to ensure the full flourishing of Homo sapiens and whatever we may evolve into.

The book’s central section is a tour of the perils faced: natural risks such as asteroids, supervolcanoes or stellar explosions; anthropogenic risks such as nuclear weapons and climate change; and future risks such as pandemics or uncontrolled artificial intelligence.

The focus on true existential risks means that optimism arrives from unexpected places. Ord believes New Zealand will ‘probably’ survive a nuclear winter, and its population has a ‘good chance’ of rebuilding a technologically advanced civilization. More good news: climate change has a very small chance of wiping us out, leaving us with just an unparalleled human and environmental tragedy.

Ord believes it is important to try to estimate probabilities to provide useful comparisons, even if only in orders of magnitude, to prioritize responses. On some questions, there are strong scientific grounds to do so. Take the odds of a large asteroid strike this century, which appear pleasingly low – 1 in 150 million.

The author admits the limitations of applying this to non-natural dangers, such as the risk of nuclear war or an advanced AI creating a dystopia for humans, but does so anyway. That he somehow believes war between great powers is ‘almost unthinkable’ at present, which converts to a risk of an existential nuclear war of 1 in 1,000, shows just how arbitrary this is.

His purpose is to reach an estimate of cumulative existential risk humanity faces this century. His unnerving best guess is that there is a one in six chance of an existential catastrophe. The role of a dice.

From this you might assume the book is pessimistic, but it is not. Ord’s passion to address existential risk is driven in part by his conviction of humanity’s extraordinary potential.

His short account of history is a whistle-stop Whiggish tale of human progress. While he acknowledges the many challenges of collective action and our past failures to spot risks, he doesn’t see any of this as insurmountable. If we can just get through this period of vulnerability, he expects our collective wisdom to grow to match our collective power, at which point humanity becomes master of its own destiny.

This he hopes will prompt a period of ‘Long Reflection’, which would allow humanity ‘to achieve a final answer to the question of which is the best kind of future for humanity’. He foresees a bringing together of the world’s intellectuals for ‘robust and rigorous’ discourse to find out what the answer is and, somewhat terrifyingly, ‘deliver a verdict that stands the test of eternity’. Such a process would seem to contain dangers as significant as many of the risks he identifies.

The book’s final section is a dizzying exploration of humanity’s long-term potential. Ord believes we are at the beginning of the human story, which can stretch across millions of star systems and billions of years.

It reads like a written form of Douglas Adams’s total perspective vortex, in which people are shown the size of the universe alongside a microscopic dot, saying ‘You are here’. While Adams’s vortex was a torture devices, Ord sees only potential in the infinity of space.

Such optimism informs the book’s

‘His purpose is to reach an estimate of the existential risk humanity faces this century. His unnerving best guess is that there is a one in six chance of catastrophe’
attitudes to technology. Despite rating the risk of AI destroying humanity this century at 1 in 10 — the shortest odds of any existential risk — Ord clearly believes technological advancement is essential to human progress.

Perhaps a more interesting idea is whether there will come a point when we arrive at the opposite conclusion: when humanity willingly forgoes further research in areas that could threaten the human condition.

Ord generally disagrees, and his bias towards a techno-flourishing future is clear: a ‘well-meaning regime locked in a permanent freeze on technology … that would probably itself be an existential catastrophe, preventing humanity from ever fulfilling its potential’.

The writing is simple and accessible — sometimes too much so, though there are appendices which add depth to his judgments and assertions. The book is strongest in the exploration and categorization of risk, and in trying to combine moral and scientific considerations of humanity across geological time scales.

One does not need to share his view of human progress or interstellar destiny to accept his central thesis: that humanity faces unprecedented existential risks, that we pay insufficient attention to reducing them, and that we should prioritize resources to understanding and combating them.

At one point, in discussing categories of risk he observes that some, like pandemics, will likely arrive as a smaller catastrophe before a total one. We may receive a ‘warning shot’.

In a matter of weeks, a virus has gone from a market in China to kill hundreds of thousands and caused the sharpest economic shock of modern times. We have had a warning shot. What will we learn from it?

Thomas Raines leads the Europe Programme at Chatham House

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**Superpower rivalry**

**Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy**  
*Kishore Mahbubani*  
*Ingram Publisher Services, £25.00*

The most recent instalment in a string of questions, following *Can Asians Think?* (1998) and *Has the West Lost It?* (2018). At times provocative, the veteran Singaporean diplomat appraises the strengths and weaknesses of Sino-American relations and warns of US ‘delusions of its own exceptionalism’ that inform its ‘with us or against us’ approach to China.

**Interesting Times: China, America and the Shifting Balance of Prestige**  
*Chas W Freeman*  
*Just World Books, £13.99*

With a 30-year career in the US foreign service under his belt, Freeman reminisces about his role as President Nixon’s principle interpreter in the 1972 meetings with Chairman Mao. Comprised of a collection of his speeches, the book zeroes in on strategic misperceptions, such as the Taiwan question, the impact of Chinese domestic reforms and China’s international role.

**Ping-Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History behind the Game that Changed the World**  
*Nicholas Griffin*  
*Skyhorse Publishing, £12.00*

Griffin explores the intersection of sports and society at a time when, in China, all culture was political. The history of table tennis — and the 1971 visit by a US team — is then unpacked as a bizarre tale of espionage, revenge and exquisite diplomacy. The book boasts a cast of eccentric characters, from spies to Ping Pong-obsessed generals, including a vivid account of Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, who ‘never gambled without four aces’.

**Out of the Gobi: My Story of China and America**  
*Weijian Shan*  
*Wiley, £22.99*

Shan, a successful financier who in his youth was banished to the countryside to do hard labour, gives a raw account of his improbable journey of success against all odds. The memoir spans from Shan’s time at a work camp in the Gobi desert to his education in the United States. Told with a splash of humour, Shan’s story provides a rare view of America through the eyes of a keen foreign observer.

**The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power**  
*Thomas J Christensen*  
*WW Norton, £18.99*

Drawing on decades of scholarship and diplomatic experience, Christensen analyses US policy towards China since the end of the Cold War. He articulates a delicate mix of strength and willingness to listen, aiming to shape — not contain — China, channelling its ambitions ‘into cooperation rather than coercion’.

**The Practice of Power: US Relations with China since 1949**  
*Rosemary Foot*  
*Oxford University Press, £30.00*

In this highly readable account of US-China relations, Foot examines the defining moments of the relationship, tracing the reversal from hostility to rapprochement.

The book thoughtfully examines the evolving US perceptions of Chinese capabilities, highlighting the importance of domestic opinion in accounting for the centrality of the Korean War, Chinese association with the Soviet Union and possession of nuclear weapons.

*Selected by Mariana Vieira*
COVID-19 has given rise to an interesting piece of political performance in our democracies: the daily briefing.

Like most traditions, the briefings emerged half-formed. At the beginning, as the wave of infection spread and grew, they took the form of emergency broadcasts. Over time, they adapted to the situation and incorporated the appropriate experts. But across the world the variable geometry of the briefing set-up was revealing of the place granted to science, and most of all of the place leaders were granting themselves.

In Greece, incredibly successful in its management of the virus, politicians knew better than to take centre-stage — the health minister is a retired professional basketball player. In his place was the soft-spoken expert on infectious diseases, Sotiris Tsiodras, who became the nation’s favourite doctor.

In France, science was referred to and consulted but remained largely invisible. The message was political decisions guided by science.

Britain went for a different approach. After a series of blunders, the only solution was to shore up any pronouncement by flanking politicians with an expert on either side. The fact that science had to make such a bombastic entrance to be heard is testimony to what the government’s first reflexes were.

As the prime minister fell ill with the virus and then left hospital to recuperate, it marked the resurrection of politics in the midst of a barely controlled maelstrom of scientific expertise and political tragedy.

These contexts offer different lenses through which to view the relationship between experts and politicians. Some of it has to do with the variable geometry of institutions — in Germany and Canada, for instance, health is devolved respectively to Länder and provinces. As is the management of health emergencies.

Those circumstances both curtail the role of national politicians but also amplify the role of scientific experts, who become central in this form of decentralized management and decision-making. The main point however is that regardless of how the optics have been engineered, the return of science and of experts has been widely noted. The phrases ‘guided by the science’, or ‘following the science’ have defined this pandemic moment. For politicians it has been seen as a guarantee of competence — whatever cynical distancing from decisions it might also have provided.

The sharing of the podium among politicians and experts has brought a number of uncomfortable truths into sharp relief. Above all, and somewhat paradoxically, as politics sought to cosy up to science — and as science duly obliged — the size of the gap between the imperatives that drive each of these activities shattered some long-held truths about what evidence is, and how policymakers can use it.

As the crisis evolved, and despite the claims of many a technocratic government over the past 30 years, it became increasingly clear that evidence is not necessarily about certainty. And, perhaps even more usefully, that neither is science, which is based on the very opposite of certainty — doubt. Good science is always about testing your hypothesis, testing your results, it is about remaining humble in the face of evidence that can evolve and be debunked by new theories and the testing of those theories. Evidence, in other words, can change — hence the difficulty of basing final decisions on something that is by definition, potentially provisional.

These dynamics were laid bare as scientists sought to understand a new virus and its behaviour. As was the centrality of disagreement and divergence in the culture of science — disagreement is the lifeblood of progress. This has hopefully become far clearer to the lay public.

Politics, on the other hand, is about decisions — so even though politics must look to science, it cannot look to science for certainty.

As politicians and policymakers struggled to enact policy and define new parameters for the management of a health emergency that threatened to engulf our people and our economies, it became increasingly clear that science can only advise on the basis of what it knows — and sometimes it doesn’t know for sure.

There are a number of lessons here. The first is that by turning evidence into the holy grail of policymaking without bothering to define evidence, the policymaking of the past 30 years was good at passing the buck — think of Margaret Thatcher’s mantra ‘there is no alternative’ — but it set itself up for hard times when a crisis such as this one revealed the dynamics of good science and the limits of evidence.

The second lesson should be that good democratic politics needs to be about uncertainty and doubt ... and give priority to judgment, what Aristotle called ‘prudence’ — the capacity to interpret, the courage to decide, in difficult moments.

And politics is, well, an art.

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