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The Future of Global Great Power Competition after the Coronavirus*

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ABSTRACT *Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the domestic and foreign policy agendas of all countries have been turned upside down. The pandemic has brought new problems and competition areas to states and to the international system. While the pandemic politically calls to mind the post-World War II era, it can also be compared with the 2008 crisis due to its economic effects such as unemployment and the disruption of global supply chains. A debate immediately began for a new international system; however, it seems that the current international system will be affected, but will not experience a radical change. That is, a new international order is not expected, while disorder is most likely in the post-pandemic period. In an atmosphere of global instability where debates on the U.S.-led international system have been worn for a while, in the post-pandemic period states will invest in self-sufficiency and redefine their strategic areas, especially in health security. The decline of U.S. leadership, the challenging policies of China, the effects of Chinese policies on the U.S.-China relations and the EU's deepening crisis are going to be the main discussion topics that will determine the future of the international system.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Great Power Competition, International Order, United States, China

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Introduction

The year 2019 set the stage for major developments in world politics and in Turkey's domestic affairs. Although the year kicked off with a heated public debate on U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria, domestic politics soon became the center of attention in Turkey due to the March 31 municipal elections and a repeat election for İstanbul's local government on June 23. Ahead of the municipal elections, public debate revolved around the question of national survival, with references to the various parties' views on counter-terrorism, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's call for a 'Turkey Alliance,' whereas the main opposition Republican People's Party's (CHP) victories in İstanbul and Ankara emerged as a popular topic in the election's aftermath. At the same time, the conflict in neighboring Syria remained the centerpiece of Turkey's foreign policy agenda. That crisis played out in multiple dimensions that include Turkey's bilateral cooperation and tensions with the United States and Russia, leader-to-leader diplomacy and a series of agreements. Tensions over Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400 air defense system from Russia, the threat of economic sanctions and removal from the F-35 joint fighter program, speculations about the sanctions as a result of Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) against Turkey, the Turkish-American agreement on a safe zone in northern Syria, and Operation Peace Spring made their mark on Turkey-U.S. relations. Other important items on Turkey's diplomatic agenda included the G20, United Nations and NATO summits as well as agreements with Libya in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the final days of December 2019, however, the COVID-19 virus emerged in Wuhan, China to spread globally and cause a global pandemic. The coronavirus outbreak, which hit China, Iran, Europe, and the United States, triggered a global economic crisis whose impact could potentially extend beyond 2020 –making it one of the 21st century's most influential developments along with the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and the 2008 financial crisis. In this regard, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic will go down in history as the greatest calamity of the 21st century. The initial assessment about the pandemic, which forced all of humanity into social distancing, is that it changed our lives permanently.¹ Indeed, the distinction between pre- and post-COVID-19 periods has already replaced the idea of pre- and post-9/11 years. After all, the pandemic, which originated in China, struck some of the world's wealthiest nations within a short period of time. The United States, Italy, Spain, and France experienced a higher number of fatalities than other parts of the world.

The popular comparison between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Spanish Flu of 1918-1919, which claimed some 50 million victims, makes sense due

to the former's negative impact on daily life, national economies, and international institutions.² That the world's leading economies were compelled to unveil multi-trillion-dollar bailout packages in the first months of 2019 alone attests to the gravity of the ongoing/anticipated economic crisis. The

International politics became 're-nationalized' and the state assumed a more prominent role, since humanity's response to the pandemic occurred at the national level

COVID-19 pandemic's estimated economic impact is more serious than that of the 2008 financial crisis and even the Great Depression. Another important point is that non-economic expectations, too, are quite negative: the creation of alternative supply chains, political upheaval, the collapse of fragile states, the deepening of human tragedy in conflict zones, fresh waves of irregular migration, the rise of populist nationalism, the emergence of new blocs, the spread of digital technologies, and the rise of authoritarianism at the expense of democracy.

International politics became 're-nationalized' and the state assumed a more prominent role, since humanity's response to the pandemic occurred at the national level. After all, states alone have the administrative capacity necessary to provide desperately-needed assistance to their citizens.³ Although the pandemic has been managed at the national level, its negative impact around the world has led to its description as a 'historic milestone' between the first and second stages of globalization. In this new phase, which Robert D. Kaplan calls "globalization 2.0," COVID-19 will be considered a "political, economic, and psychological phenomenon" that gives direction to most geopolitical tensions.⁴ The pandemic will result in the questioning of 'mutual dependence' to encourage nations to become self-sufficient in strategic sectors. This does not, however, mean that globalization is coming to an end. Instead, progress toward a "new, different and more limited globalization" will be accelerated.⁵ Again, the perceived parallels between the post-pandemic era and the interwar period relates to the expectation that long-term, multi-dimensional uncertainties will occur. Keeping in mind that the interwar period fueled nationalism and racism leading to the Great Depression and, eventually, World War II, the predicted 'disorder' has already reached an alarming level for great power competition and global peace.

It should be noted that the post-pandemic world order will not be same. However, this does not necessarily mean that a new world after the coronavirus will emerge. Rather, as this paper argues, the international order will enter a new period in which the global distribution of power under the shadow of the global-scale rivalry between the U.S. and China, the process and structure of global governance will reshape the international order.

A New World (Dis)order?

Attempts at grasping the COVID-19 pandemic's potential impact immediately lead to the question whether it will replace the liberal world order, which emerged after the Cold War and has been allegedly in decline in recent years. In terms of the distribution of power, the existing world order is a state of multipolarity rooted in U.S. superiority. That China will emerge as a superpower to replace the United States after the COVID-19 pandemic in the short- or medium term does not seem realistic. Again, although the United States has been eroding the 'liberal norms' that it formulated in the first place, through its own policies, it is not possible to argue that China has the capacity to establish a new order in terms of global political economy and the international norms upon which the current international order is based.⁶ Meanwhile, the European Union can be said to suffer from a shortage of politics and leadership due to its unending dependence on the United States when it comes to upholding the liberal order. Finally, Russia seems to lack the capacity to establish order as a great power that preys on disorder.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., too, maintains that the idea of the COVID-19 pandemic bringing about a "new world order" is exaggerated. He does not believe that globalization, which began under American leadership after 1945, will end or that China will replace the United States as a global power. According to Nye, China cannot strip the United States of its leadership in terms of hard or soft power, and claims that the pandemic could lead to a better world if the U.S. president were to promote cooperation and resort to soft power. Otherwise, he warns, nationalist populism and authoritarianism will become stronger.⁷

That the COVID-19 pandemic's geopolitical impact will be to "accelerate" rather than "reshape history," as Richard Haass posits, is reasonable. According to Haass, the pandemic should be expected to usher in an era of uncertainty, per the interwar period, rather than post-World War II cooperation.⁸ That means the continued decline of U.S. leadership, a further weakening of global cooperation, the transformation of many polities into failed states and a deepening of great power competition. At the same time, the United States and China, as the two players with the greatest influence over the international system's future, would engage in a multidimensional and fierce competition, instead of cooperation, after the pandemic –launching a 'virus war' in addition to the ongoing trade wars. Although a new world order may not be in the cards, it would appear that disorder, rooted in great power competition, or, in other words, 'turbulence' will further intensify.

The pandemic entailed a transformative surge in security concerns, encouraging nations to protect their strategic sectors in order to become self-sufficient. To be clear, this policy won't be limited to fresh investments in the healthcare sector

to avoid having to beg other countries for surgical masks or ventilators in future pandemics. In a broad range of sectors, including telecommunications and high-tech industries, all national governments will be compelled to maximize their efforts to secure their national institutions' capabilities. This security surge extends great power competition to new domains, including the "model debate." Indeed, Robert D. Kaplan notes that the pandemic has revealed the fragile nature of the Western world and argues that authoritarian regimes in China and Russia have forced their bureaucracies and companies to operate as arms of their national governments.⁹ According to Kaplan, those two countries have redefined great power competition and the classical/Western meaning of war, making the West's, i.e. the United States' response all the more important. Recalling that the pandemic has created a global consciousness, he recommends that the West respond by strengthening its alliances. That recommendation is also intended to serve as a safeguard against authoritarian regimes, which could grow stronger, in defense of Western democracies.



That China will emerge as a superpower to replace the United States after the COVID-19 pandemic in the short- or medium term does not seem realistic

Does alliance-based polarization lie ahead, as Kaplan says? Or will competition continue, as each great power builds bilateral relationships around itself? It is difficult to say. What is clear, however, is that the expectation for international cooperation is far weaker than an intensification of power struggle. This is directly related to the decline of U.S. leadership, the escalation of a cold war between the United States and China, and continued problems for the European Union.

The Decline of U.S. Leadership

The question of how Donald Trump, who abdicated U.S. global leadership based on his campaign motto, 'America First,' impacted the international order and predictions about the pandemic's potential influence are interrelated. Indeed, the decline of U.S. leadership is directly responsible for the efforts by national governments to fend for themselves in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. President Trump's failure to lead the fight against the coronavirus and to make any diplomatic moves, except to blame China, emerged as fresh signs of the claim that the liberal world order was collapsing, which has been popular in recent years.

The Trump Administration's response to the pandemic came under criticism for two reasons. First, critics accused President Trump of initially downplaying

Competition over which country performed better against the coronavirus pandemic has already turned into an ideological dispute over leadership and the more successful model

the crisis and argued that the U.S. health-care system performed poorly during the pandemic. Second, they maintained that the United States had failed to lead the world against the coronavirus – a much deeper issue. Critics recall that former U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama were able to coordinate the international response to the 2008 financial crisis by mobilizing the G20, despite Washington’s waning global influ-

ence. They argue that the Trump Administration’s foreign policy, guided by the principle of ‘America First,’ inflicted severe damage to the country during the pandemic and will continue to harm U.S. interests in the post-pandemic period. According to these critics, the way out of the current crisis is for the United States to realize that global cooperation is the key to winning the war against the coronavirus and to lead that effort.¹⁰ Analysts, including Henry A. Kissinger, Colin H. Kahl, and Ariana Beengaut, believe that the option of “building international institutions, norms and alliances” is available to the United States today, as it was after World War II. Calling on the United States to assume global leadership against the pandemic, American experts are concerned that China stands to gain the upper hand in the global power struggle. Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi¹¹ warn that Beijing is making a move for global leadership and argue that the United States will experience its “Suez moment” unless it responds to the current crisis by mobilizing the G7 and G20 nations. In other words, they believe that the United States faces a challenge that could deprive it of its global leadership, akin to the Suez crisis that the United Kingdom encountered in 1956.

The Future of U.S.-China Rivalry

The COVID-19 pandemic poured fuel on the fire of the debate over competition between the United States and China. That China, under Xi Jinping’s leadership, has grown more ambitious as a potential leader and believes in the superiority of its model of state capitalism, which it has combined with digital authoritarianism, had been a popular argument in recent years. The same argument fuels fears in Washington that President Trump’s domestic and international shortcomings against the backdrop of the pandemic will result in China taking the lead in the competition. As a matter of fact, an opinion essay that appeared in *The Washington Post* on April 8, 2020¹² indicates that reaction against Beijing was not limited to Trump and his supporters. According to an opinion poll, cited in that article, there is a gap between partisan politics in Washington and the American people’s perception of China. In this sense,



Italians feeling abandoned by the EU in their fight against the coronavirus pandemic are filmed burning an EU flag in videos posted on social media, March 29, 2020.

AA / Photo

Republicans and Democrats alike appeared to have overcome their differences to blame the coronavirus outbreak on Beijing. Moreover, supporters of both major political parties agreed that the United States needed a “stronger and realist China policy.” It is clear that President Trump insisted on referring to the coronavirus as the ‘Wuhan virus’ to lay the groundwork for a confrontation with China, with an eye to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and that his opponents did not wish to play into his hand by condemning him as racist. Leaving aside party politics, however, it would be unrealistic to expect the American people to stop blaming China –which recently claimed that U.S. soldiers had brought the virus to Wuhan. The pandemic’s potential impact on the American economy, too, could irreversibly transform the American public opinion regarding China. If China (or the Chinese Communist Party) turns into a ‘common other’ for ordinary Americans, the idea of a “fresh cold war between two great powers,” which predates the pandemic, could be rooted in more solid ground. Even if a Democrat were to become the next U.S. president, it would appear that the competition between the United States and China over global leadership and hegemony will be quite fierce.

Competition over which country performed better against the coronavirus pandemic has already turned into an ideological dispute over leadership and the more successful model. The conflict, which started with a disagreement over the proper description of the virus, has since become a competition between democratic and authoritarian regimes in terms of performance and leadership. U.S. media outlets have competed against each other to hold China and its communist government ‘responsible’ for the pandemic and to declare it ‘unfit for global leadership.’ Beijing was promptly declared the ‘sick man of

Asia' and the pandemic was blamed on the 'lack of transparency of an authoritarian government.' China, in turn, responded to the crisis by constructing large hospitals and imposing quarantine on Wuhan to contain the virus. At a time when the European Union's heavyweights turned their back on pandemic-stricken Italy, the Chinese government delivered medical supplies to Iran, Italy, Belgium, and Serbia. Consequently, Beijing transformed its international image, turning itself into a country that helped the world deal with the coronavirus –instead of the pandemic's origin. In response to the U.S. administration's description of the biological agent as the 'China virus,' Beijing made the case that a group of U.S. military personnel who visited Wuhan in October 2019 had brought the virus to China. By stressing the importance of solidarity in the fight against the coronavirus, the Chinese government attributed its 'success' to the superiority of its authoritarian regime.

Despite China's humanitarian efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, the country continues to face criticism in the United States and Europe. Its critics underline that the pandemic originated in Wuhan and argue that Beijing kept the international community in the dark, citing the World Health Organization's (WHO) initial statement that an infected person could not infect others.¹³ As a matter of fact, the claim that China intends to play a more prominent role in world politics after the COVID-19 pandemic is increasingly popular. Undoubtedly, President Trump leads that charge and develops his administration's policy around that accusation. Trump, who accused the WHO of pro-Chinese bias and failing to properly investigate how the virus spread in Wuhan, suspended Washington's financial contributions to that organization.¹⁴

In addition to the U.S. and the United Kingdom, France has emerged as a Western critic of China's government. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, French President Emmanuel Macron stressed that he was not naïve enough to think that China was managing the crisis more successfully than others, warning that the international community did not know everything that was happening in China.¹⁵ It is possible to argue, however, that Macron found himself between a rock and a hard place due to his country's dependence on Chinese factories for test kits and surgical masks. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to expect the French president to criticize Beijing as strongly as Donald Trump. Indeed, Macron endorsed China's Belt and Road Project by telling reporters after his March 26, 2019 meeting with Xi Jinping that Europe's partnership with China was an example of multilateralism. The reason behind France's actions is southern European nations' need for Chinese investments to overcome the economic crisis.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable uptick in the number of U.S. commentaries claiming that China has an ambition to

impose a new world order on the international community. Most observers seem to agree that China has emerged as a serious strategic adversary and exploited the coronavirus as an opportunity. A case in point is the view that Beijing seized control of United Nations agencies, including the World Health Organization, to undermine the UN system from within.¹⁶ Still, it is im-

portant to note that more than a few experts maintain that the competition between the United States and China does not necessarily lead to an inevitable confrontation – a new cold war. Joseph Nye, among others, acknowledges that China ought to be punished for cyber theft and unfair trade practices, yet calls for cooperation against future waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with climate change, between the United States and China despite the traditional power struggle. He also urges both countries to de-escalate the propaganda war, make generous contributions to the UN’s COVID-19 fund and exchange information to combat the virus.¹⁷ To be clear, there is no reason to assume that Nye’s call will still be meaningful if Donald Trump clinches re-election in November 2020. If the Democratic contender were to win the election, however, the U.S. will still find it difficult to overcome structural challenges, starting with the state of its economy, in order to reverse the decline of its global leadership.

The European Union will experience something akin to the Holy Roman Empire’s final years if it fails to overcome its crisis of solidarity

The European Union’s Deepening Crisis

Although the future of great power competition is difficult to foresee, it is relatively easy to make the case that the European Union, which was affected negatively by the 2008 financial crisis, Brexit, and the refugee crisis, cannot move forward without undergoing certain changes after the pandemic. The crisis within the Union first appeared when EU members refused to send medical supplies to Italy and Spain, where COVID-19 claimed more lives than elsewhere.¹⁸ The organization’s problems, however, are not limited to the ongoing healthcare crisis. The question of post-pandemic economic recovery, which represents the second dimension of the European crisis, fuels more serious concerns in southern Europe. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte called on Germany and the Netherlands to part ways with their old ways of thinking and called on the European Union to deliver a “strong and unitary response [to the COVID-19 pandemic] using extraordinary tools.”¹⁹ Stressing that the coronavirus crisis amounts to a historic challenge for Europe, Conte maintained that a “strong spirit of Europeanism” was key to overcoming pressing problems. Failure to take action, the Italian prime minister warned, would result in a total loss of confidence among his country’s citizens in the European



A United States aircraft carrier, USS Carl Vinson, marking the biggest U.S. military presence in Vietnam since the end of the war in 1975, made a historic visit to Vietnam on March 5, 2018.
Getty Images

Union and further empower far-right movements in Europe.²⁰ In other words, the real question is who will foot the bill for the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. Likewise, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez argued that Europe itself was under threat, warning that “our union will collapse” in the absence of solidarity.²¹ French President Emmanuel Macron, too, stressed that populists would emerge victorious in Italy, Spain and possibly France if the European Union’s wealthier members failed to support the rest. Noting that the European Union’s rich had greater responsibilities than others in the management of the COVID-19 crisis, he argued that the time had come for the organization to decide whether it was a political project or a common market: “I believe that it is a political project. If we cannot move the European Union forward, the Euro group and the idea of Europe will be at risk of collapse.”²²

Mediterranean countries like Italy and Spain, whose national economies were not performing well prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and even France look to northern European nations, starting with Germany and the Netherlands, for a solution. If those two countries prove unwilling to address the pandemic’s economic impact on Europe, a serious division is likely to occur between the continent’s northern and southern nations. Although an April 7, 2020 decision by the EU’s finance ministers to approve a €500 billion rescue package was a positive step, more solidarity is clearly needed. Witnessing the EU’s deepening crisis, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, argued that member states needed to allocate more resources to economic recovery and called for “a Marshall Plan for Europe.”²³

There can be no new order in the international arena without a fresh distribution of power, a new political economy and norms

Although that idea sounds great on paper, it remains unclear who will pay for a new Marshall Plan. There are three obvious candidates: the United States, China, and Germany. If Donald Trump wins the 2020 U.S. presidential election, he should be expected to promote nationalism and isolationism instead of shouldering that heavy burden. If the Democrats win, they could launch a renewed effort at U.S. global leadership. However, it seems unlikely that the American economy, which is expected to suffer some 47 million job losses by the end of the pandemic, will have enough power to get the job done.

If the second candidate, China, attempts to help southern European economies get back on their feet, that move would amount to a challenge to U.S. global leadership. To be clear, China, suffering from low growth and facing a problem of job creation, is unlikely to develop an audacious plan. Finally, Germany might volunteer to shoulder the European Union altogether if it implements a Marshall Plan as a European power. Germany's government seems unlikely to handle a purely financial burden without the prospect of political leadership.

According to some analysts, the European Union will experience something akin to the Holy Roman Empire's final years if it fails to overcome its crisis of solidarity.²⁴ As the 'European project' crumbles, far-right movements will come to power in many member states. One of the potential scenarios would involve a shrinking of the European Union along the north-south axis –which means that northern and western Europeans would emerge as the new Union under German leadership, while Southern and Eastern Europe would move closer to China. In any scenario that does not involve stronger solidarity, Europe will turn into a region more vulnerable to Russia's influence.

Conclusion

Whether or not the COVID-19 pandemic will change the world in many ways remains the subject of heated debate. One of the most important features of the post-pandemic world will involve the perception of security. In this regard, the rise of the security paradigm as discourse and practice alongside digitalization could pose fresh risks to freedom. As part of new security paradigm, control, and surveillance will become a greater source of concern. This is not limited to the risk of the rise of security. Another serious risk would be the consideration of authoritarian regimes, including China and Russia, as a model. Some

observers argue that democracies could embrace the disciplinary capabilities of digital surveillance and stomach novel restrictions in the name of security.²⁵ Others are worried about the future, since many Western democracies have taken harsh measures that infringe on human rights and liberties to contain the pandemic.

In addition to the impact of the coronavirus on the perception of security on a global scale, the economy and everyday life will be also reshaped in post-corona world politics. It can be safely argued that COVID-19 will reshape the global economic accumulation in which it will ultimately change the way of economic life and thinking. The new paradigm, which will be articulated around the idea of economic structure, will also accelerate the history itself. More importantly, global cooperation will be under fundamental challenge, since a national response to the pandemic was the dominant idea and a world without global cooperation will be shaped by global power competition.

Instead of the birth of a new world order, disorder is expected to spread in the post-pandemic period. There can be no new order in the international arena without a fresh distribution of power, a new political economy and norms. Individual countries will not engage in radical re-assessments unless they are desperate enough to form new alliances. When this article went to press, the pandemic had not yet been contained. However, the resulting economic crisis was already the top priority of political leaders around the world. Although scientists warned against second and third waves of infections, politicians were afraid that economic collapse would fuel fresh uncertainty. At a time when the coronavirus was claiming some 5,000 American victims on a daily basis, U.S. President Donald Trump declared that his country was optimistic about the estimated death toll and that the curve had been flattened. Noting that shutting down the American economy for an extended period of time was an unsustainable course of action, Trump unveiled a three-step plan to ease precautions.²⁶ There has been a similar inclination in European countries, including Germany, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that her government would gradually ease precautions, which had been in place since March 21, 2020.²⁷ Those steps suggest that national leaders were seriously concerned about the post-pandemic period and were willing to tighten and ease precautions periodically to fight the coronavirus without crippling their economies. It is clear that the economy will be the first battleground of great power competition, which stands to further intensify after the COVID-19 pandemic. ■

Endnotes

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