

Brace for Impact:

The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Brave New World to Come

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(Alex Pena - Anadolu Agency)

As the world continues to face the novel-Coronavirus pandemic, it is becoming increasingly clear that certain foundational aspects of our world are set to change. While we are still in the early stages, a new horizon is starting to come into focus, one that includes outlines of major changes in political and economic governance.

Introduction

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Crises such as what we are experiencing today provide us with the rare opportunity to look at society as a whole. In the past, global crises and plagues often dealt severe blows to the existing status quo. They caused tectonic shifts in the balance of power socially, politically and economically, provoking the downfall of ruling elites and nations, and leading to the emergence of new forces. Although we are still in the early phases of the Coronavirus pandemic, and its effects are yet to be assessed in toto, the fear it is causing in the four corners of the globe alongside its economic disruption is massive. Several experts have predicted that this crisis may accelerate the end of American global primacy.

For example, Stephen Walt stated: "covid-19 will also accelerate the shift in power and influence from West to East. South Korea and Singapore have responded best, and China has reacted well after its early mistakes. The response in Europe and America has been slow and haphazard by comparison, further tarnishing the aura of the Western "brand". This has led others, such as Josef Joffe, to warn of the potential 'totalitarian appeal' in the aftermath of the crisis.

The many factors at play caution against any kind of concrete predictions; however, certain key elements are becoming apparent. These include the re-emergence of the state as the primary social and political actor, the allure of authoritarianism and the concomitant potential for increased surveillance, as well as intensified challenges to the reigning international system, which are increasingly challenging our perhaps naïve conceptions of globalism and the level of strength we have often attributed to the 'global order'.

Of course, we have not arrived at this point overnight. There are systemic causes of the crisis that can be more concretely identified than the potential consequences, which not only allow us to see things more clearly in hindsight, but also lend themselves to the development of prescription solutions to mitigate future global crises of a similar nature. Cuts to public health structures all around the world, fuelled by a blind faith in neoliberal logic, the lack of leadership on global health issues demonstrated by the World Health Organisation – largely the result of political expediency – and the rise of political demagoguery and the resulting politicisation of the crisis have all contributed to making the pandemic worse than it may have been otherwise.



Healthcare workers are seen at the IFEMA Convention and Exhibition Center which has been turned into a temporary hospital with a capacity of 5,500 beds due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in Madrid, Spain on March 22, 2020. (Government of the Community of Madrid / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

Global Systemic Causes

Neoliberalism and the foreclosure of public health structures

Neoliberalism has been defined as an ideology and set of policies favouring a sharp "reduction of state interventions in economic and social activities and the deregulation of labour and financial markets, as well as of commerce and investments." The problem with neoliberalism is that many people mistake it with liberalism. The reality is that the "neo" variant strips the traditional forms of liberal market ideals from wealth-redistribution mechanisms and most welfare-state attributes, social policies, and other safety nets, which were introduced in the mid 20th century in many nations to protect and enhance human life and dignity. It was in this context that health care became considered as a critical component of social policy along with education and social programmes.

The neoliberal paradigm has been imposed structurally around the world. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), amongst other international organisations, as well as the US government, have spearheaded this endeavour. Through stringent conditions on delivery of loans or aid, states were encouraged to implement privatisation combined with substantial public sector cutbacks. As a result, numerous economic and social prerogatives were dropped in favour of multinational corporations. This paradigm shift is the primary cause behind the dismantling of global health structures, along with other social welfare and workforce protection measures.

In the US, the implementation of neoliberal policies was accelerated in the 1980s by the Reagan administration. These policies reduced the government's responsibility for the health of populations. For example, Medicare, Medicaid and other programs in the US were deeply affected. Emphasis changed from enhancing public health capacity and the accompanying prevention and care activities to pouring more taxpayers' money into the more lucrative biomedical, biotech, and pharmaceutical solutions to

disease. To make matters worse, the Clinton Administration removed the 'reasonable pricing' requirement for drugs made by big pharmaceutical companies that receive government funding. Such a decision has had a significant impact on both commercially developed Coronavirus test kits and vaccine development, both urgently needed at present.

Hence, Columbia University Professor Jeffrey Sachs questioned the American health care system's ability to respond effectively to a health crisis like the coronavirus pandemic, not just in terms of a lack of scientific research, but also by not having in place universal healthcare and allowing multinational corporations to dictate the availability and pricing of vaccines.

Spain, which has been badly hit by the covid-19 pandemic, has gone through this process. After the 2008 financial crisis, the governing elites accelerated the implementation of neoliberal policies. In 2012, soon after winning the elections, the Partido Popular (PP) passed a law that significantly cut spending on health care, with reductions of 13.7 per cent in 2012 and 16.2 per cent in 2013. These massive budget cuts are largely responsible for the dire situation that the Spanish health system is now facing. While Spain is one of the primary hotspots of the global pandemic, the Guardian observed "the country lacked essential equipment. Ventilators, protective clothing for doctors and coronavirus tests are still only just being sourced."

A similar phenomenon was observed in France. As the director of the Institut Rousseau, Nicolas Dufrene explains: "In 1981, there were 500,000 hospital beds in France. In 2006, there were 450,000 beds, whereas in 2020 there are less than 400,000." After decades of neo-liberal policies, the French people, who used to believe that they have one of the best health systems in the world, have discovered that, in terms of acute care hospital beds, they are lagging behind other European countries, such as Germany (11.6 vs. 29.2 per 100,000 people). This difference explains why hundreds of French covid-19 patients are currently being treated in Germany. It could also elucidate why, despite being the third-worst-affected country by covid-19 in Europe, Germany's death toll has thus far remained far lower than Italy, Spain, and France.

It is worthwhile noting that there have been multiple speeds in the adoption of neo-liberal policies and concomitant austerity measures with a direct impact on public health capacities. Within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the US has gone the farthest in this respect. It is the only OECD country without some form of universal health insurance. Healthcare coverage in the US is provided through a combination of private health insurance and public health coverage (e.g., Medicare, Medicaid). In 2014, nearly 32.9 million Americans had no health insurance in addition to millions of others who, in the words of Senator Bernie Sanders, are underinsured. Nor does the country have a universal

healthcare program. Therefore, it is expected that the US could have the highest fatality rate in the covid-19 pandemic, far worse than China, Italy, and Spain.

The WHO's Responsibility?

The global response to the covid-19 epidemic has been mixed. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has seen its actions amidst the rapid spread of the virus scrutinised. A series of failures in their strategy has drawn flak, including its perceived subservience to China and its lack of leadership.

The WHO's status has been on a slippery slope since the late 1980s, when many developing nations reduced their contributions to the organisation due to their rising debts. This situation was largely the result of World Bank and IMF structural adjustment policies, which reduced national budgets significantly. As a result, the World Bank stepped in on the WHO's turf, becoming the dominant international health player. Contributions from member states diminished significantly from 46% in 1990 to 21% in 2016–2017. In 2015, only 25% of the WHO's programme budget came from membership dues. Therefore, since the 1990s, the WHO has obtained most of its funds from public-private partnerships (PPPs), which entails that the WHO's agenda has become subject to the conditions of private donors and multinational corporations.

In the subsequent decades, while the organisation gained influence, it also lost sight of its priorities. Its 'corporate embrace' has epitomised its pivot towards neoliberalism in the last few decades, resulting in increased influence of private actors and their profit-making aims. Indeed, while the WHO has commendable attributes, its shortcomings have come to the front-front during this global pandemic.

With respect to covid-19 and China's role, the WHO displayed undue deference to an authoritarian state with a past of covering up deadly illnesses. As a key funder of the WHO, China minimised the gravity of the virus and applied pressure on the organisation to not adopt a contrary position. China first knew about covid-19 in late 2019, but did not acknowledge it officially and suppressed any damning information from doctors or whistle-blowers that wanted to raise the alarm. As China engaged in what amounts to a cover-up, they likewise did not admit to the human-to-human transmission capability of the virus until January 21, then already too late to stop or slow its spread around the world. The WHO finally called a 'public health emergency of international concern' on January 30, sitting on its hands until then as a result of excessive deference to China's government. This was a weighty failure by the world's pre-eminent international health institution, one that has had significant consequences. At the time of writing, there are over 800,000 active cases world-wide, doubling every few days, and the delayed reaction of the WHO in questioning the Chinese government's handling of affairs and failing to call a global emergency remain perplexing.

The lack of leadership shown by the WHO is another failure of its response. While China actively suppressed key information, WHO officials have claimed that the “[world owes China a great debt](#)” and have praised its efforts. They have chosen to instead focus on events after China alerted the world, with the cover-up and its significance overlooked by an organisation reliant on Chinese funding. A similar issue also surfaced during the SARS outbreak, when International Health Regulations (IHR) were then passed to allow the WHO to act on its own initiative, unilaterally declare outbreaks public health emergencies, and criticise nations that engage in bad faith handling of potential crises. Nevertheless, the IHR has proven to be toothless during this global pandemic with the WHO abdicating its leadership role and deferring to the inherently subjective decision-making of member states. Additionally, while the WHO labelled travel bans as ineffective, the many countries that flouted this recommendation by imposing widespread travel-bans were not criticised. It was a missed opportunity for the WHO to display leadership and not just be effectively reduced to handling the statistical aspects of the outbreak.

Furthermore, Tedros Adhanom's, the current WHO Director-General, questionable record as Ethiopia's Health Minister raises questions as to the extent to which the WHO's mandate has been politicised. In 2017, it was [reported](#) that the former Foreign and Health Minister of Ethiopia had employed a lobbying firm to shape his campaign for the position in the face of questions about his record. Perhaps most damning, during a 2008 cholera outbreak in Ethiopia's Oromia in which scores of people died, the Ethiopian government [failed to declare an outbreak](#) reportedly for fear of economic repercussions.

While the WHO has undertaken some positive actions during this pandemic, its failures have been laid bare. The WHO should have reacted sooner and not deferred excessively to one its major funders. China is indeed the [largest contributor](#) in terms of membership dues with \$16.5 million for the year 2018 (followed by Brazil and Russia). Moreover, China is strongly [advocating](#) for an increase in voluntary contributions and earmarked funding from Chinese state agencies and corporate firms. As the Wall Street Journal [put it](#), “China's importance to the WHO derives not so much as a current donor but as a future source of funds and a partner with which to tackle the biggest global health problems.” In this context, the WHO's lack of leadership has been consequential, particularly regarding its decision not to criticise China for its cover-up.

From an aspirational point of view, the mandate of the WHO is an admirable one; global health governance is better served with an international organisation that puts collective needs at the centre. However, the gravity of the WHO's series of failures in dealing with the covid-19 pandemic suggest strongly that a reform of the status and remit of this organisation should be high on the agenda.



US President Donald J. Trump declares a national emergency due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, in the Rose Garden of the White House, in Washington, DC, United States on March 13, 2020. (Yasin Öztürk - Anadolu Agency)

The Rise of Demagogues

The rise of demagogues in the global public sphere could not have come at a worse time. The global health pandemic caused by covid-19 has laid bare the inexperience and ineptitude of populist leaders for all to see. A common strategy has formed: First deny and delay, then obfuscate, then flip-flop and blame others. This is captured in the responses of various leaders, including US President Trump and Brazil President Bolsonaro.

Demagoguery has been in vogue ever since the surprise election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016. Ostensibly a move against the so-called establishment, voters elected a populist demagogue who thrives on misinformation and bullying. This sentiment has led to the rise of other leaders who also appeal to people's prejudices, such as Brazilian President Bolsonaro. He likewise undertook a divisive campaign with a strong nationalist and ethnic pitch, and his inexperience was glossed over by voters wanting a candidate that seemingly wanted to fight for the man on the street.

The negative impact of these leaders on the spread of the coronavirus is clear. In President Trump's case, he “[has likely failed to mitigate the...widespread outbreak in the US](#)” with a response that has ranged from the implausible to the surreal. He initially denied the scale of the global crisis, delaying the forming of a coordinated, government-wide response. He claimed that it was the Democrat's “[new hoax](#)” and that the measures in place were sufficient. He then began obfuscating the impact of the virus on US soil, choosing the low-lying and rotting fruit of closing borders rather than adopting recommendations of social distancing and shutting down non-essential businesses. In the end, President Trump flip-flopped and began recognising the severity of the crisis, now holding daily press conferences to inform the public of current efforts. While these have a rally-like tone most days, it is a far cry from the initial minimisation and claims from the administration of “[close to airtight](#)” domestic containment. The President is also engaging in a regular blame-game, a roulette of sorts where responsibility is placed on everyone but him. [China is blamed](#) for the

spread of the virus; governors are blamed for not treating the administration well; doctors are blamed for prioritising public health over the economy; the media is blamed for covering events; and Obama is blamed for the limited number of available hospital masks. Indeed, the covid-19 clear and present danger has exposed the rhetorical acrobatic games of the Trump administration.

Likewise, President Bolsonaro has had a tough time applying the populist rulebook in this crisis. He denied the significance of covid-19 and its rapid spread, initially referring to it as a “fantasy”. As a result, he delayed any measures that could have mitigated the impact of the virus in Brazil. He then began obfuscating vis-à-vis the extent of the danger the outbreak poses, accusing the media of fuelling up unnecessary hysteria. He put Italy’s death toll down to a colder climate and an elderly population, further neglecting the urgency of the situation. Finally, he also flip-flopped and is now encouraging people to be careful not to transmit the virus. Staying true to the Trumpist form, he has also blamed the media for its exaggerated reaction and blamed some Brazilian states for incorrectly adopting a “scorched earth” approach of closing down businesses and public transport.

While covid-19 is wreaking havoc on healthcare systems and the world economy, the chickens are coming home to roost for demagogues. They have been forced to handle the consequences of their inexperience, with the usual strategy of falsehoods and intimidation showing their futility in the face of an invisible enemy. The rise of populism does not bode well for the future of democracy, and the pandemic has exposed its many faults.

Towards an Uncertain Future

One of the most salient questions that experts of all stripes are grappling with is whether or not the covid-19 outbreak will mark the inauguration of a turbulent new political, economic, and social era. While there remain those whose faith in the apparent victory of the post-Cold War ‘theology of progress’ has yet to be shaken, even more liberal-minded observers seem to be coming around to what is increasingly a consensus that many aspects of the world are likely to change. Like global crises before, the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic is likely to see ideological and intellectual shifts with subsequent changes in approaches to policy making. What remains to be determined is what direction these shifts may take. We are still in the early days, therefore the temptation to forecast particulars should be avoided. We can, however, discern a number of broad outlines of questions and issues that we are likely going to have to face.

The re-emergence of the state

While reactions to the emergent pandemic have differed markedly, one thing that they all share in common is that



Soldiers patrol at streets after a curfew declared as a part of precautions against the coronavirus (COVID-19) in Belgrade, Serbia on March 23, 2020. (Milos Miskov - Anadolu Agency)

they have been state-led. This requires some clarification as it may seem like a self-evident fact that central governments would take the lead in a crisis. However, the trajectory of international interdependency and what has effectively been an orthodoxy of devolution of powers associated with neoliberalism, as discussed above, tells us that things may have been otherwise.

The situation in the European Union (EU) is perhaps most illustrative of this. Firstly, as the crisis has played out, it has become clear that the nation-state has reasserted itself as the primary actor, over and above any supranational organisation, the EU included. As things stand today, it would appear as though states have respectively closed ranks and returned to an approach that prioritises national interests. Germany and France, for example, blocked the export of medical supplies in a bid to ensure their own capacity as the crisis grows, a move which drew criticism from fellow EU members. Furthermore, Italy’s request for assistance in dealing with what has now become the epicentre of the pandemic was effectively denied by fellow EU-member states, leaving it to China to respond.

Hard hit countries have imposed harsh measures in an effort to stem the spread of the virus, leading to the shuttering of borders across the Schengen zone. EU officials have tried to demonstrate intra-European solidarity by banning the export of medical supplies outside of the Union, which as the German and French cases mentioned above demonstrate, were effectively superseded by national interests.

The same could be said about responses around the world in general. From China to Canada, the re-emergence of the state as the prime political actor is being observed in real time, bucking analytical trends that foresaw supranational structures and multilateral organisations as representing humanity’s socio-political future. All over the world, states

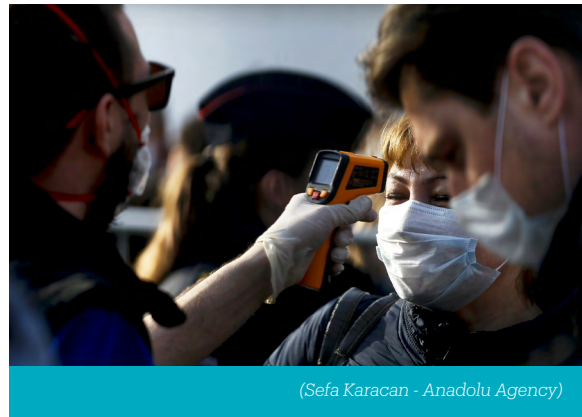
have been implementing and announcing social and economic measures that are largely unprecedented in the post-Cold War world that has been so thoroughly dominated by the laissez-faire logic of neo-liberalism.

In France, Germany, and Italy, Europe's three hardest hit countries, governments have announced unprecedented rescue packages worth hundreds of billions of Euros designed to mitigate the economic effects of the crisis for both industry and households. There has been talk of harnessing the European Stability Mechanism as an additional resource and Spain has recently called for a EU-wide approach akin to the post-World War II Marshall plan. However, it remains to be seen if EU initiatives, even if enacted, will be used to serve the bloc as a collective or merely to re-enforce the individual priorities of its member-states.

From North America - where the United States Senate has announced a 'bail-out' worth \$2.2 trillion, far outstripping the \$800 billion injection following the 2008 financial crisis, and Canada has announced the possibility of using a war-time production law to boost the manufacturing of medical equipment - to Asia, governments all around the world are announcing massive state-led economic interventions, the likes of which have not been seen since World War II.

The level of state penetration into social and economic affairs in response to the Covid-19 outbreak will in all likelihood endure. What we seem to be witnessing is the return of the state as the 'Leviathan', the supreme protector of public welfare. The post-Cold War orthodoxy of smaller government, privatisation and the elevation of the logic of 'technocratic management' to all things, public and private, may now begin to be rapidly unravelled. This is, of course, not wholly new. The 2008 financial crisis has had a lasting legacy, with the appropriateness of what can be termed hyper-capitalism increasingly questioned. The current crisis seems to have, in effect, burst the flood gates opened in the aftermath of 2008.

In this context, a number of interesting discussions have emerged, or re-emerged, to be more precise, regarding the state's role in ensuring public welfare. For example, the idea - in some form or another - of a universal basic income, or UBI, have been announced by the UK, Canada, and the United States, while states such as Indonesia and Malaysia and China are set to expand their flagship cash-transfer programs. In a recent article published by the Brookings Institute, World Bank official Ugo Gentilini states that one-off cash transfers could play a significant in fighting the economic and social consequences of the covid-19 pandemic. In the wake of what many experts say is likely to be a deep recession, the discussion is likely to expand to more permanent and universal forms of UBI, such as that proposed by Andrew Yang, the recent and unsuccessful candidate for the Democratic party nomination in the United States.



(Sefa Karacan - Anadolu Agency)

Towards a state of surveillance?

As the crisis has unfolded, governments around the world have imposed understandably harsh measures in an effort to stem the spread of the virus. These range from the above-mentioned closure of borders, travel bans, and mandated shutdowns. In some of the hardest-hit regions in Italy, Spain, and France, mandatory lockdowns have been imposed. In China's Wuhan, ground zero for the outbreak, a draconian 60-day lockdown seems to have had some measure of success in slowing down the spread of the virus. In the height of a crisis such as the world is witnessing today, the threshold for governments to implement what some have called 'draconian' measures is understandably reduced. At the same time, there are a number of interventions, which continue to raise some serious concerns and may provide a window into the future of surveillance.

China stands out almost archetypically in this regard. In addition to its strict lockdown of almost 50 million people in Hubei province, the Chinese state has introduced covid-19 specific surveillance mechanisms, adding to the already widespread use of mass surveillance in the country. Specifically, the authorities have introduced a QR code system consisting of three different codes to designate and inform authorities of the risk each individual poses for spreading the virus. Using data acquired from smartphones, the app categorises individuals as either being able to move freely, requires them to quarantine for seven days if they have travelled to a high-risk area, or mandates that a full quarantine is necessary.

In Hong Kong, ostensibly acting independently from the central government in Beijing, electronic bracelets have been fitted to travellers arriving at the territory's airport that are synced with their smartphones in order to allow authorities to keep track of their locations. Should they happen to leave their quarantine area, a message is sent to security and health authorities and the individual is apprehended.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu authorised the internal security service, the Shin Bet, to utilize the country's cyber monitoring mechanism normally deployed for tracking 'terrorism' suspects. In response to criticisms

from opposition politicians, Netanyahu effectively forced the authorisation through via emergency decree, saying that “we have no choice... we are now fighting a war that forces us to take special measures.”

Governments and corporations alike have deployed increasingly sophisticated technologies designed for mass surveillance, and what may be on the horizon is something right out of science fiction movie. What Yuval Noah Harari recently referred to as a transition from ‘over the skin’ to ‘under the skin surveillance’, in the wake of the pandemic governments may increasingly have recourse to record not only our locations, travel habits, preferences, and so forth, but perhaps also biometric data up to and including the physiological reactions produced by our emotional responses. Data collection of this sort undoubtedly represents a challenge to privacy, but also – more importantly – arguably threatens the very meaning of what it means to be human.

While it may be true that these represent the darker side of the slippery slope of surveillance, history reminds us that short-term emergency measures have a habit of outlasting the emergencies that conceived them. In this sense, the covid-19 pandemic may be remembered as a watershed moment in the history of surveillance as much as for the economic and human toll it wrought.

The allure of authoritarianism

The apparent ‘success’ of not just authoritarian states, but more importantly authoritarian-like measures, in stemming the flow of the outbreak has the potential to lead to what Josef Joffe referred to in a recent article for American Interest as the ‘temptation of authoritarianism’. He argued that the apparent successes of the Chinese government in combating the outbreak have made some romanticize the type of state power and capacity that China was able to deploy. His argument echoed the sentiments of a highly circulated piece in the Atlantic from Zeynep Tufekci, in which she argued that an authoritarian allergy to bad news, coupled with what can perhaps best be described as a sycophant syndrome that is characteristic of authoritarian regimes, resulted in meaningful action being significantly delayed. As Joffe points out, rather than locking up doctors, China could have closed Wuhan airport, which serves thirty-two cities around the world.

Other commentators, such as the Brookings Institute’s Shadi Hamid, have been keen to point out the difference in terms of reaction to the virus between authoritarian states and democracies, and even more keen to shoot down any attempts to make moral equivalencies between them. There has been an attempt to frame the post-pandemic world – whatever it turns out to be – as being characterised by an ideological battle between ‘autocracy’ and ‘democracy’. Yet, it seems in some ways as though this perspective is itself stuck in the very paradigm that many rightfully argue

may be under threat.

To posit the post covid-19 pandemic future as an ideological battle between ‘autocracy’ and ‘democracy’ misses the mark mainly because it obscures the totalitarian nature of the modern state itself. In other words, the modern state that emerged in earnest in the 19th century has, arguably by its nature, extended authority over human beings in fundamentally unprecedented ways. This tendency derives largely from what James C. Scott refers to as the ‘problem of legibility,’ in his book Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. By seeking to gain a ‘synoptic view’ of their respective peoples and societies, the modern state has been provided the capacity for large-scale social engineering projects by leaning on its ideologised faith in progress, science and rationality, and – more often than not – political authoritarianism. China’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ and Russian industrialisation offer two examples where projects ostensibly meant to improve the lives of people went disastrously wrong. We should not be so naïve, however, to think that a slide towards authoritarianism requires an authoritarian political system. Emergency situations have a tendency to foster conditions that can lead to increasingly authoritarian measures, which have the potential to become more permanent fixtures in the socio-political landscape.

Modern states, whether ‘authoritarian’, democratic, or – like much of the world – somewhere in between, have consistently extended their reach over their respective societies, and there is no reason to think that this will change. The shift towards massive surveillance was already taking place, whether through corporate or state power or some combination of the two. What the pandemic does is merely accelerate a historical process that has been underway since the 19th century. This does not entail inevitability. However, to avoid moving towards what may turn out to be a dystopian endpoint will require political will combined with intellectual rigour and a high level of civic engagement. Whether we count ourselves to be living in a democracy, an autocracy, or one of the many grey zones in between, all of us will likely be faced with similar challenges as our anxieties and fears drive us towards accepting previously unacceptable solutions in the short and medium-terms without necessarily thinking through the long-term implications.

In countries such as the UK and France, concerns have already been raised in this regard. Emergency measures in the UK have set up a potential clash between personal liberties, privacy, and public health measures. Under these measures, authorities will have the power to detain individuals they believe to be infectious and to take samples of their blood or saliva by force. In France, there have been reports of stricter enforcement of the lockdown rules in the poorer, socially marginalised districts of Paris.

None of this is inherently deterministic of course. South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have been lauded as models for

the world to follow in their approaches to combating the spread of covid-19. Measures taken by these countries have so far proven effective in 'flattening the curve'. From the beginning of the crisis, governments in these countries have communicated frequently and openly with their people. They have taken initiatives that have been strictly followed by their populations. The authorities in these countries seem to have maintained the trust of their populations; culturalist explanations aside, this appears to be a key factor here. Levels of trust in government in many Western countries – let alone countries with highly corrupt and oppressive political leadership – seems to be lacking. This is made increasingly difficult in societies, such as the United States, where conspiracy theories about the virus abound and where the highest authorities in the land have not only communicated ineffectively, but have also arguably spread misleading, if not down-right false, information.

Challenges to the world order

How the pandemic might shape geopolitics in the years to come remains an open question. In a more immediate time frame, one dynamic that we are currently witnessing, which will likely colour a significant part of the conversation in the near to medium-term future, is the issue of national isolation versus international solidarity. A pandemic is an example of a global emergency par excellence and requires a global strategy and a willingness to cooperate in order to facilitate an effective response. So far, these elements seem to be lacking on any kind of scale that would make such an approach effective, although these are still early days and there remains the possibility that this could emerge as the crisis evolves. A recent G20 meeting held by teleconference and hosted by Saudi Arabia – which chairs the G20 for 2020 – seemed to confirm that international diplomacy has been somewhat paralyzed by the pandemic. Despite what US President Trump rereferred to as a 'tremendous spirit' amongst G20 member-states, no actual pledges or coordinated plans were made.

Certain actors will no doubt seek to exploit the situation in order to further an agenda that necessitates increasing the level of doubt in the international system. In this effort, they have had unlimited help – ironically – by those who have benefited the most from the post-World War II world order. It would seem as though the pandemic itself has accelerated a process in which the foundations of the international order have increasingly come into question. This includes notions of democracy, progress, freedom, and all the other catchwords associated with a post-Cold War agenda advanced by the US and its allies. For better or worse – and in many cases in may be the latter option – the pandemic is likely to increase this sense of uneasiness, providing an even wider path for the rise of revisionist, right-wing nationalist movements throughout the world. As the Director of the Moscow Carnegie Center recently wrote, "the Kremlin believes the shortcomings of the international response have validated key aspects of its worldview."

While we cannot be certain at this stage of the fate of the international system and its balance of power, it seems likely that the covid-19 pandemic will only serve to accelerate the geopolitical shifts that have been taking shape in past years.

Conclusion

As the response to the pandemic unfolds in the next weeks and months, a clear picture of its aftermath will slowly begin to appear. If most of the reliable projections are correct, the spread of covid-19 – even if slowed down – is likely to result in millions of deaths across the world, in addition to the widespread severe economic hardship that is predicted. The pandemic has exposed the frailties of the global order and the neoliberal logic on which so much policymaking over the last decades has been based. A sub-microscopic microbe is all it took to knock billions of humans off their illusion of security.

It will take a truly insensate world to pretend that our current systems, dominated by neoliberal capitalism and plutocratic leadership, are not badly flawed. Accordingly, unless sensible, practical, and effective options are put forward, the grip of the plutocracy on the world will not be lessened, and may even be strengthened, as the allure of autocracy is allowed to dull our senses.

The prospects for demagoguery will likely be undimmed. Demagogues have few, if any, moral qualms about bending reality to suit their narrative. Today, the ability to control enough of the masses to sustain power is profoundly affected by the psychological power of social media and the technological ability to fool any of us through a manufactured "reality". Although social media will not be a prominent part of the covid-19 story, it will be a huge player in the writing of the history of the pandemic. It would be wise, for the moral health of the world, to find a way to keep the salutary benefits of unfettered communication free from the propaganda that often flows down the social-media pipeline. This may prove to be an insurmountable task, but the attempt to achieve it has not yet been made in earnest.

Interest in state-led measures as a means to alleviate economic insecurity, such as a universal basic income, will grow. That economic insecurity exists across much of the planet is now abundantly clear. States, one way or another, have responded to this pandemic by promising people money to stabilise their personal finances. Indeed, there is no other remedy. The benefits of having a safety net system in place at all times will not be immediately clear, but there will be more space than ever before to explore this concept. While questions abound, just as we look back today on the 1918 pandemic and grasp how it both damaged and improved the world, future historians will hopefully be able to say the same about this troubling time.