

Deepening the Divide: Global Politics and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Photo by Syaiful Redzuan - Anadolu Agency

This policy outlook explores the main dynamics of world politics by looking at the behaviour of states during the Covid-19 pandemic and aims at outlining how states behave during a global crisis. Regarding the post-Covid-19 world, it appears that the world will face an intensification of problems that were already in motion. As such, the post-Covid-19 world might be marked by an increased role for the state, more nationalism and protectionism, less globalisation and multilateralism and intensifying great power competition.

Pandemics as National Security Threats

Since pandemics do not respect international borders, they have the potential to [pose security threats to nations](#), undermining their economies, political systems and social fabrics. Although the World Health Organisation (WHO) has already related pandemics with national security and adopted [International Health Regulations \(IHR\)](#) in order to provide a legal framework for efficient individual and collective actions ranging from capacity building to risk communication, it appears that the intended progress has not been achieved. The coronavirus pandemic has shown that many countries are still far from building necessary public health capacities. Additionally, despite countries' seeming concern for security aspects of pandemics, it arguably does not go beyond political rhetoric.

In his famous [Atlantic article](#) in 1994, Robert Kaplan warned against issues that could pose existential threats to humanity by citing poverty, scarcity, overpopulation and diseases, among others, as the primary sources of disorder. Although the world has long been witnessing the adverse effects of climate change, refugee flows and other existential threats to humanity, governments have continued dragging their feet on prioritising these issues, only perfunctorily addressing them. These are in addition to [the recent pandemics](#) such as SARS in 2002, MERS-CoV in 2012 and Ebola in 2016 which were limited in their consequences, yet still could be taken as warnings of what was to come. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed that states are not well prepared to fight with this new enemy and lack appropriate tools and strategy. As such, it has become evident that the traditional understanding of national security has fallen short of providing their citizens with protection as military capabilities and strategies based on the use of force have seem less relevant in dealing with the current threat.

During the Cold War, intense rivalry and competition between the US and Soviet blocs shaped threat perceptions and appropriate strategy to deal with the specified threat. As such, viewing other states' malign intentions and capabilities as the primary threat to national security, governments paid utmost attention to the balance of military ca-

pabilities by investing primarily in military build-ups and engaging in arms races while prioritising the preservation of their autonomy over other issues.

With the end of the Cold War, [some scholars and policy-makers heralded](#) the coming of a new era where liberal political and economic ideology would spread all around the world, ultimately bringing about global peace, prosperity and security. This optimism was strengthened by the [decline in the number of interstate wars](#). As conquest became less of a possibility, governments would not worry about sovereignty and instead focus on improving their prosperity through cooperation. However, ensuing developments have demonstrated that the world remains far away from realising this ideal, particularly with the eruption of ethnic conflicts and civil wars in the 1990s, evoking increased concern for the failed states as they started to export insecurity and instability across regions. This was followed by another global security challenge in the 2000s - [this time in the form of terrorism](#) - which has fundamentally transformed states' national security priorities, particularly in the West. The international community put great efforts in developing decisive counter-terror strategies, which were primarily based on the effective use of force and multilateral groupings as in the case of formation of the [Global Coalition against Daesh](#). This required taking extraordinary surveillance measures, the transformation of intelligence services and the formation of special ops units for asymmetrical warfare together with increased military budgets.

Yet, with the far-reaching implications of Covid-19 pandemic, it appears that the main threat to national security does not come from terrorists or other states having malign intentions, but from an insidious virus. Lacking appropriate strategies and mindsets to fight a pandemic, many states have failed to respond swiftly and effectively. Hence, given the growing effects of new global problems such as pandemics, climate change, access to clean water and maintenance of food supply, which have barely found places in security agendas, [it is argued that](#) traditional understanding of national security should be replaced by a comprehensive framework that enables addressing new issues with new [methods and strategies](#). As such, it is [claimed](#) that pandemics should receive more attention in national security understandings.

It should be noted that making pandemics a national security concern runs the risks of leading governments taking advantage of the new situation. Since [securitisation paves the ways](#) for the implementation of extraordinary measures, which can hardly be seen acceptable in normal conditions, governments might want to maintain their exclusive rights after the threat is eliminated. This is in fact

what happened when the [US government adopted the Patriot Act](#) after the 9/11 attacks, allowing expanded surveillance measures and decreased privacy. Draconian measures have now become commonplace across the world as people show a willingness to exchange their liberties for protection from the disease. However, the extent to which these measures might become normalised in the pandemic's aftermath is a critical issue. Some countries such as China, South Korea and Israel have already [made use of technology](#) to monitor people and contain the spread of the virus using methods that infringe on personal privacy, raising legitimate questions regarding how they may be used in the future.



Military officers patrol the deserted Heroes' Square as the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in Budapest, Hungary, April 6, 2020. Arpad Kurucz - Anadolu Agency

As a reflection of the conventional understanding of national security, governments have been quick to declare war on the Covid-19 pandemic, disregarding the fact that existing strategies and operational procedures might be inappropriate. For instance, [French President Macron stated](#) that "We are at war ... the enemy is there - invisible, elusive - and it is advancing". [US President Trump also stated](#) that "It's a medical war. We have to win this war. It's very important." Although using the war metaphor might seem to be a good strategy to unite people around the planned actions and acquire public consent for extraordinary measures, [it also comes with](#) certain costs and risks, as well as contradictions. While war - both limited and total - entails killing people to become the victor, combating a pandemic requires saving lives. Additionally, using war rhetoric might also lead to [deepening of existing social cleavages or creating new ones](#). As war rhetoric entails solidarity from people and demands their consent for use of necessary means to win the battle, those who do not share similar viewpoints with respective governments or those who hold a minority status might face scapegoating. This is what happened to Muslims in India as they have been [blamed for the spread of the Covid-19 by Hindu nationalists](#).

The State Reinstates its Authority

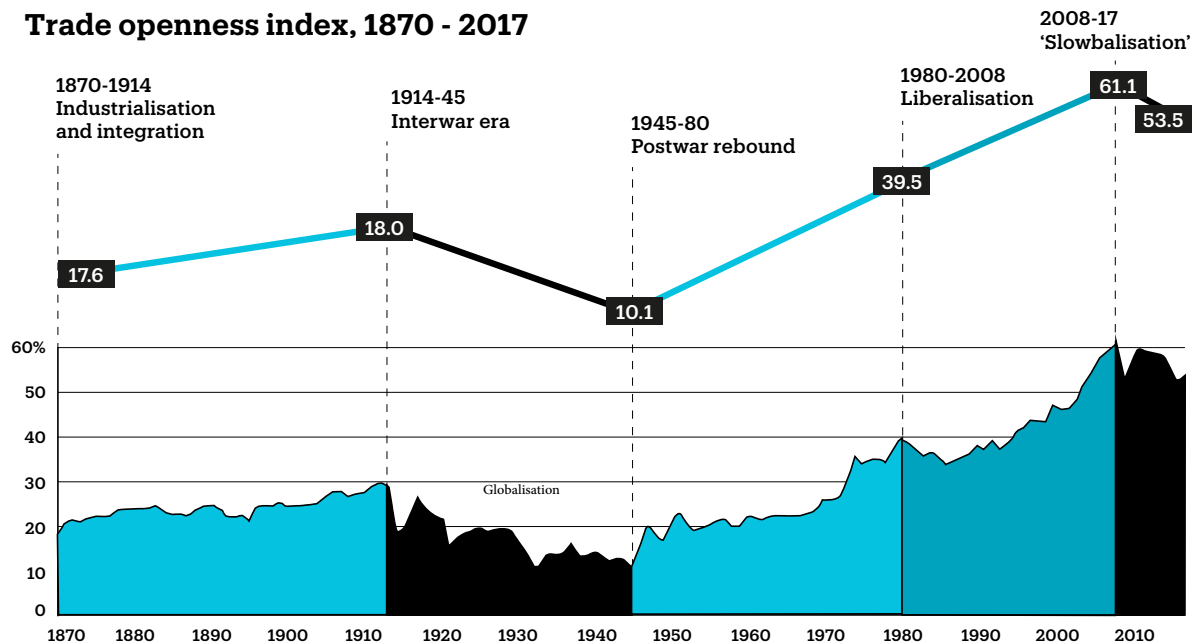
Despite the arguments for the erosion of state sovereignty and declining relevance of states for international affairs, the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed that states still maintain their positions as primary actors. The last years have witnessed [a lively debate around the erosion of state sovereignty](#). With the increasing impacts of interdependence and globalisation as well as the emergence of new actors, it has been argued that the state has become less relevant in performing its traditional functions and its power and responsibilities have [been transformed to other actors and organisations](#). However, as citizens have turned to their national governments as the final authority in the face of a pandemic threat, states have clearly reinstated their authority. With the adoption of inward-looking policies in response to the pandemic by closing their borders, restricting travels, shutting down businesses, and declaring emergency measures, [states have further strengthened](#) their autonomy from other actors.

Additionally, measures taken by states have also demonstrated that they are concerned with their self-sufficiency, particularly in the face of existential threats. As the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerabilities of [global supply chains and 'just-in-time' inventory](#), governments across the world have set out to produce critical medical equipment including ventilators, swabs and testing kits, masks and gloves with their own capacity. For example, US President Trump [has invoked the Defense Production Act](#), which has allowed him to direct private firms into manufacturing strategic productions including ventilators and N95 face masks. Moreover, as national economies have faced serious crisis thanks to anti-coronavirus measures that have resulted in the closing down of businesses, dramatic reduction of economic interactions and tourism revenues, [governments have announced financial aid packages](#) to protect vulnerable sectors and to ease the adverse effect of the pandemic on ordinary people. These measures have furthered the status of the state and its credibility on the eyes of people as long as governments show the capability to effectively resolve growing health and economic problems.

Based on these observations, one of the immediate implications of the increasing role of states in domestic and international politics might be reflected in [growing protectionism in economic policies and decreasing globalisation](#). As states become concerned with the self-sufficiency of their domestic economies in times of crisis and witness that the current [global supply chain system creates vulnerabilities](#), they might consider applying nation-first economic policies in order to reduce their fragility. Additionally, as states become more and more active and lead the national response to the pandemic, [this might increase](#)

Globalisation is in retreat for the first time since the Second World War

Trade openness index, 1870 - 2017



Source: Peterson Institute for International Economics

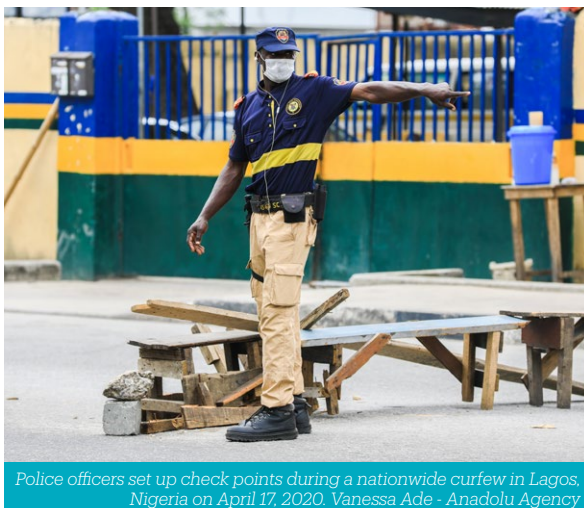
[nationalism](#) as each country fights their own battle with their own resources and builds their respective narratives on nationalistic language. This suggests that xenophobia and far-right discourse might become more appealing.

It is also important to note that not every government has sufficient resources and capabilities to fight the pandemic and to meet the basic needs of their population. [Underdeveloped countries are expected to be hit harder](#) compared to developed countries thanks to their lack of functioning state structures, poor health care infrastructures and limited access to clean water. Hence, in addition to humanitarian costs, the Covid-19 pandemic poses threats to the [eco-](#)

[nomic, social and political fabric of these countries](#). Failing to address economic and social upheavals, the legitimacy of states and political systems might get damaged as people get frustrated because of their government's incompetency and inabilities, raising the spectre of social upheaval. As has been pointed out by twenty prominent health and economic experts in [a letter to G-20 leaders](#), if developed countries fail to support these countries, the implications of socio-economic devastation might produce spillover effects and create a new wave of global migration and global public health emergency.

Multilateralism in Decline

The pandemic has also revealed that states are not keen to show respect to the [institution of multilateralism](#) when faced with an existential threat. Although the Covid-19 pandemic is a global problem knowing no borders, thereby requiring global responses, collective global action has so far been insufficient. Multilateralism is regarded as [one of the defining features](#) of the current global order. Given the increasing intensity of multilateral networks established after the end of the Cold War, some claimed that the world was moving toward a [global governance model](#). As countries become more connected and interdependent with one another as a result of increased movement of goods, people, capital and services, they are expected to



Police officers set up check points during a nationwide curfew in Lagos, Nigeria on April 17, 2020. Vanessa Ade - Anadolu Agency

establish shared understandings upon which they would build upon [cooperation for mutual benefits and common problems](#). However, the recent pandemic has just demonstrated that in times of crisis, cooperation becomes harder and states are inclined to focus on their own survival. [The US's reported attempt](#) to obtain exclusive rights to a German medical firm CureVac's project to develop a coronavirus vaccine is a good indicator of this predisposition.

Lack of cooperation among countries has been the most evident in the context of the European Union where member-states have [failed to develop a union-wide respond](#) and have shown reluctance to assist other member-states lacking basic medical equipment. Illustrative of lack of solidarity among member states, [Italy's call for help](#) in the initial phase of the pandemic was left unanswered, while France and Germany put bans on the export of critical medical equipment. Although the EU has been struggling to overcome its internal problems for some time, it is one of the responsibilities of member states to stand in solidarity with other members in case of public health emergencies. Additionally, viewing the EU as a [security community](#), it is assumed that [collective identification between the member states](#) would allow them to put aside their short-sighted interests and focus on the interests of the collectivity. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has indicated that this does not apply in times of crises.

It is important to note that cooperation among states is not an easy task. [For some scholars](#), cooperation can be possible even among self-interested actors with the help of international institutions. By providing information and resolving commitment problems, institutions can alleviate problems of short-sightedness. Additionally, thanks to the [growing interdependencies and increased interactions](#), states might find common ground for cooperation by developing mutual understandings. However, [the current debate](#) around the failure of the WHO – the UN's multilateral agency responsible for global public health emergencies – in tackling the pandemic have only demonstrated that cooperation remains difficult, even via well-established institutions. The WHO has [mainly been criticised](#) for failing to exercise global leadership and becoming biased in favour of China. Based on these accusations, US President [Trump announced that](#) he would stop funding to the WHO, further undermining the possibility of collective action. These developments have indicated that [international institutions mirror the interests](#) of their members and they are attributed more than what they could achieve. Since international organisations do not have efficient enforcement and sanctioning mechanisms, their success is contingent upon the willingness of their members to cooperate. Additionally, international organisations are not bereft of [pathologies](#) rendering them ineffective, biased and sometimes irrational in their operations. Moreover, increased interconnectedness does not necessarily bring about cooperation, rather, [growing closeness might inflame the possibilities of conflict](#) of interests and discord as parties become predisposed to prioritise their distinctiveness and autonomy in

their interactions. Hence, global crises like the latest pandemic serves as a litmus test for states to cooperate given the prevailing structural constraints.

The Return of Great Power Competition

The Covid-19 pandemic has also revealed that great powers continue to be concerned with their relative gains even during a global crisis. The US-China competition in the context of the pandemic – demonstrated through blame-shifting, information warfare and aid diplomacy – appear to be one of the obstacles preventing more rigorous global cooperation. [The term 'great power competition'](#) had already been in use to describe the current state of affairs between the US and China before the pandemic. The Trump administration's [National Security Strategy document](#) released in 2017 and [National Defense Strategy](#) released in 2018 pointed out the increasingly competitive security environment for the US and underlined great power competition as the national security priority, replacing the previous concern for terrorism. Before that, [with the coming of Xi Jinping to power in 2012](#), China had already embarked upon a new foreign policy ambition by attempting to increase its influence not only in its neighbourhood, but also across the world, including Europe. This is an addition to [China's ambitious One Belt One Road](#) Initiative and its establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. For Russia's part, its invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea had already demonstrated Russia's growing foreign policy assertiveness. As the centre of political and economic power has started shifting from the west to the east, great power competition has once again come to dominate international politics. A such, great power competition has been taking place not [only in the military arena](#) but also in areas ranging from economy, technology, artificial intelli-



Chinese medical staff and equipment arrived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on April 16, 2020. Minasse Wondimu Hailu - Anadolu Agency

gence, cyberspace, information and health. The Covid-19 pandemic has just offered another playing field for great powers to compete.

As part of the competition, the US and China have engaged in blame-shifting in an attempt to damage each other's global reputation. [Washington has accused China](#) of deliberately concealing the outbreak of the virus in the initial period, consequently delaying the opportunity for other countries to take precautionary measures. Additionally, [President Trump has called](#) Covid-19 the 'Chinese virus', implying China's responsibility for the pandemic. In response, China blamed the US as the real source of the virus. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, [Zhao Lijian stated](#) in a tweet that "it might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan". The conspiracy theory has been subsequently put into circulation through the Chinese media networks. Moreover, in an attempt to counter criticisms and repair its image, [China has sought to present](#) its responses to the pandemic as a success story while criticising what they see as the US government's incompetency.

The two have also engaged in competition for the global leadership role. As the US attitude towards the pandemic has demonstrated its unwillingness and inability to take on a global leadership role in fighting the pandemic, [China has stepped in](#) and filled the vacuum by initiating aid campaigns to countries desperately in need of basic equipment as well as sharing its expertise on the pandemic. This has provided China with a good opportunity to present itself as the superpower coming to the help of others and capable of responding to a global problem. Through a very public [sending of vital medical supplies and experts](#) to countries around the world, China has attempted to repair its image, which has been damaged due to accusations of information suppression. [China's help to Italy](#) at a time when EU countries refused to respond and China's medical and expert [assistance to Serbia](#) have served important functions for Chinese soft power.

Prospects for the post-Covid-19 World Order

Although the wider implications of the coronavirus are yet to be seen, it is still possible to extrapolate regarding

prospects of the post-corona world based on the immediate implications. Although [it is still possible](#) that the international community might take lessons from their missteps and understand the importance of multilateralism and cooperation in addressing global problems, the current trends reveal that the post-Covid-19 world will be characterised by a deepening of existing problems that have marked the pre-pandemic period. The pandemic will only serve to exacerbate [the crises of the liberal world order](#).

The world had already been in disarray before the outbreak of the pandemic. The foundations of the liberal order – multilateralism, ideals of democracy and economic interdependence – had already been in trouble due to internal and external challenges. Democracies in the west have recently faced the rise of populist leaders and far-right parties leading to [democratic backsliding](#). Additionally, the liberal economic model has failed to produce prosperity and wealth on an equal basis within democracies. Hence, the idea of the west and liberal democratic model have started to be questioned widely. During the pandemic, the apparent [incompetency of democracies](#) in giving decisive responses to the spread of the virus and failing to protect their citizens, particularly in its early stages, have further undermined the idea of the West. As of now, the first [five countries](#) that suffered the most Covid-19 deaths are democracies. As countries in the East such as Taiwan, Singapore and allegedly China have demonstrated remarkable success in containing the virus, this further hits the idea of the West. Additionally, [the pandemic might accelerate democratic backsliding](#) if populist leaders and far-right parties take advantage of the situation and refuse to relinquish extraordinary executive powers even after things become normalised. Additionally, US inability to carry out a global leadership role and the EU's lack of solidarity among its members has further cast doubts about the idea of the West.

Globalisation was already in retreat thanks to its adverse effects, particularly in the form of [economic and cultural backlashes](#). Culturally, globalisation has created a cosmopolitan culture which has been considered as a threat to local ones, subsequently giving rise to nationalism as well as far-right and xenophobic ideologies. Economically, [globalisation has created losers](#) who have suffered from the transformation of the global production system, which consequently led to the call for economic protectionism. During the pandemic, as economies become depressed thanks to the harsh measures to contain the virus, governments' role in determining economic policies have increased. Hence, in the post-corona era, governments

are likely to put into effect protectionist policies to reduce their future vulnerabilities and have domestic reserves in strategic industries. One implication might be companies bringing their supply chains closer to their homelands and dismissing the 'just-in-time' production model.

Finally, the world was already been witnessing a shift in the balance of power from the West to East prior to the pandemic. China's economic and political ascendancy, as well as Russia's military assertiveness, had already sparked renewed great power competition, to which the US responded in a similar manner. The pandemic has provided a new space for competition as great powers engage in competition in information, foreign aid and global leadership. The pandemic is only accelerating what has already been in motion - the transition of economic and political power from the West to the East and the post-corona period might be marked with increased great power competition in strategic areas.