
The Song Remains the Same: International Relations After COVID-19

Daniel W. Drezner 

Abstract Since the onset of COVID-19, there has been a surfeit of commentary arguing that 2020 will have transformative effects on world politics. This paper asks whether, decades from now, the pandemic will be viewed as an inflection point. Critical junctures occur when an event triggers a discontinuous shift in key variables or forces a rapid acceleration of preexisting trends. Pandemics have undeniably had this effect in the far past. A welter of economic and medical developments, however, have strongly muted the geopolitical impact of pandemics in recent centuries. A review of how the novel coronavirus has affected the distribution of power and interest in its first six months suggests that COVID-19 will not have transformative effects on world politics. Absent a profound *ex post* shift in hegemonic ideas, 2020 is unlikely to be an inflection point.

Periodization—using key dates to bracket distinct eras of world politics—is a common conceptual device in international relations scholarship.¹ The years 1648, 1815, 1914, 1945, and 2008 carry shared meaning for international relations scholars. They conjure up the notion of “critical junctures” in which multiple aspects of international relations change in a dramatically short period of time.² The primary question I ask in this paper is whether, decades from now, 2020 will be viewed as another inflection point due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than the September 11 terrorist attacks, more than the 2008 financial crisis, the current pandemic has disrupted daily life across the globe. The effects of the disease itself combined with social distancing, quarantines, lockdowns, and travel bans have been significant. COVID-19 has killed more than half a million people and has significantly constricted the activities of national leaders. In 2020 the global economy is projected to shrink at a scale not seen since the Great Depression, contributing to a concomitant falloff in global trade. No event since World War II has triggered such pronounced worldwide effects on human behavior in such a short span of time.

Editor’s note: This article is part of an online supplemental issue on COVID-19 and international relations. The authors were invited by *IO*’s editorial team and guest editor Michael C. Horowitz. The manuscript was reviewed based on written non-anonymous reviewer comments and during an online workshop. The revised manuscript was evaluated by the *IO* editorial team. We appreciate the support of Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania for making this possible.

1. See, for example, Krasner 1976 or Ikenberry 2000.
2. On critical junctures, see Capocchia and Kelemen 2007.

Little wonder, then, that the pandemic has triggered a surfeit of analyses arguing that world politics will be transformed. Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi caution that the United States could face a “Suez moment” because of its failure to meet the challenge.³ Colin Kahl and Ariana Berengaut warn that “even after the virus recedes, the geopolitical wreckage it leaves in its wake could be profound.”⁴ According to Robert D. Kaplan, “Coronavirus is the historical marker between the first phase of globalization and the second.”⁵ Lawrence Summers believes the effect will be even more sweeping:

The COVID-19 crisis is the third major shock to the global system in the 21st century, following the 2001 terror attacks and the 2008 financial crisis. I suspect it is by far the most significant ... If the 21st century turns out to be an Asian century as the 20th was an American one, the pandemic may well be remembered as the turning point. We are living through not just dramatic events but what may well be a hinge in history.⁶

As the other papers in this online special issue observe, COVID-19 will have pronounced effects on world politics. For it to be an inflection point, however, fundamental factors like the distribution of power, calculation of interest, or social constitution of actors must be transformed. These are the core concepts that define world politics. I argue that despite its pronounced short-term impact, COVID-19 is unlikely to have the transformative effects on international relations that so many are confidently predicting. Indeed, there are reasons to believe a more counter-intuitive claim—that the distribution of power and interest will remain largely unperturbed after COVID-19 ceases to be prevalent. The pre-pandemic status quo was a slow shift toward bipolarity as well as a slow trend in great-power domestic interests toward more closure. These factors help explain the low levels of pandemic cooperation in 2020. The first six months of the pandemic, however, give little indication that COVID-19 will in turn cause dramatic shifts in those factors. The lack of perturbation in key independent variables will leave most scholars with little to say about COVID-19’s macro effects on world politics. Compared to past pandemics, COVID-19 is likely to be relegated to a footnote in international relations scholarship.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section defines the criteria for “transformative change” in world politics. The second section surveys the history of pandemics prior to COVID-19, how they have affected world politics, and why COVID-19 might be different. The third and fourth sections look at how the novel coronavirus has affected the distribution of power and the distribution of interest, with a special focus on China and the United States. The final section concludes

3. Campbell and Doshi 2020.

4. Kahl and Berengaut 2020.

5. Kaplan 2020.

6. Summers 2020.

with a discussion of the ways in which the pandemic could be recognized *ex post* as having significant effects on international relations.

Conceptualizing Transformative Change

Pandemics and politics are inherently intertwined. Initial policy decisions can have pronounced effects on the spread of disease. Even a cursory examination of the 1918 Great Influenza pandemic reveals wildly varying mortality rates depending on the initial decisions of political leaders.⁷ The same dynamic has played out with COVID-19. Some countries, such as Vietnam, South Korea, and New Zealand, have been extremely effective in containing the spread. Other countries, such as Brazil, Russia, and the United States, have fared less well.

COVID-19's effects will matter for any analysis of events in world politics over the next few years. Much of the international relations discipline, however, is concerned about patterns and regularities that persist for longer than a few years. This is particularly true for systemic approaches to international relations. Kenneth Waltz famously observed that "the texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly. The relations that prevail internationally seldom shift rapidly in type or in quality."⁸ A great deal of international relations theory explicitly or implicitly accepts Waltz's premise. To be sure, systemic theorists, including neorealists, also study how these patterns change.⁹ But even theories that account for the evolving social construction of world politics acknowledge that such processes can take decades or even centuries to unfold.¹⁰ Inflection points capture attention precisely because of their rarity.

What constitutes "transformative change" in world politics? For the purposes of this paper, transformative change means a shift in the patterns of world politics that would have been unlikely to transpire in a counterfactual universe in which COVID-19 did not spread to humans.¹¹ The key to this claim is that there is no equifinality to outcomes.¹² Even if one can process-trace the effect of a pandemic on outcomes in world politics, one must rule out the existence of substitutable processes that would have led to the same basic outcome.

For example, some scholars argue that the instability of the interwar era can be traced back to Woodrow Wilson's contraction of influenza.¹³ The precise historical claim is that the influenza itself changed Wilson's behavior, leading him to acquiesce to French prime minister Georges Clemenceau's more *realpolitik* concerns at the

7. See Barry 2004; Spinney 2017.

8. Waltz 1979, 66.

9. Gunitsky 2013.

10. See Cox 1981; Wendt 1999; Guzzini 2005.

11. This definition does not include instances, as discussed in McNamara and Newman's article in this issue, in which the pandemic reveals pre-existing trends worthy of further research.

12. George and Bennett 2005.

13. See Barry 2004, chapter thirty-two; Barro, Ursúa and Weng 2020.

Paris Peace Conference. Whether this causal process affected the future contours of world politics, however, is less certain. Influenza did not affect Wilson's antecedent decision to block Senate Republicans from attending the peace conference as part of the US delegation, nor did it affect the GOP's reluctance to accede to Wilson's vision of a League of Nations. Even a completely healthy Wilson would likely have proved obdurate in negotiations with his domestic political opponents, a predisposition consistent with his past political practices.¹⁴ Absent US participation in the postwar global order, it is unlikely that more generous terms at Versailles would have been honored anyway. While the Great Influenza might have acted as an intervening variable in the precise causal mechanism leading to the failure of Versailles, it would not be accurate to state that it was responsible for the instability of the interwar period.

There are multiple ways in which transformative change could be triggered in world politics. The first and more intuitive way would be if the shock generated a discontinuous shift in key causal variables, which in turn would lead to different international outcomes than would have been expected *ex ante*. Scholarship on the effect of the distribution of power and the distribution of ideas both suggest that such discontinuities have powerful effects in world politics. G. John Ikenberry's research into ordering moments suggests that they are most likely to occur in the wake of great-power wars that redefine the balance of power.¹⁵ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink similarly note the ways in which the development of norms can generate rapid cascade effects during the critical phase of norm diffusion.¹⁶ Shocks that lead to the widespread acceptance of powerful new norms count as an example of transformational change.

A second way in which transformational change could take place is if the pandemic triggers a rapid acceleration of pre-existing trends to the point where actors in the system cannot escape a path-dependent outcome. In this category of outcomes, actions in the present impose significantly greater constraints on possible future actions. Scholars have debated the prevalence of such recursive phenomena in world politics.¹⁷ Paul Pierson argues that such junctures are critical because they place political arrangements on trajectories that become increasingly difficult to alter.¹⁸ Even skeptics of path-dependent arguments would acknowledge the possibility that a shock could accelerate a pre-existing trend past the point of no return. If the pandemic eliminated the ability of countervailing forces to reverse or retard an underlying trend, that would have long-lasting effects.

Pandemics and World Politics

A brief survey of the historical relationship between pandemics and international relations reveals three insights. First, diseases have transformed world politics for

14. George and George 1956.

15. Ikenberry 2000.

16. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

17. See Drezner 2010; Fioretos 2011. Page 2006; Pierson 2004;

18. Pierson 2004, 135.

millennia. Second, the relationship between pandemics and politics is reciprocal; changes in the international system affect the spread of disease. Third, a series of economic and ideational advances over the past two centuries have muted—though not eliminated—the effects of pandemics on world politics.

For most of human history, plagues and pandemics did have transformational effects. A key juncture in the Peloponnesian War is the 430 BC spread of a plague from Ethiopia to Athens. Thucydides's discussion of the societal effects of that plague demonstrates its political import. It forced rural Athenians to migrate into the city itself, leading to social turmoil. It killed the Athenian leader Pericles, who Thucydides recounts counseling prudence in the funeral oration that immediately precedes the onset of the plague in his narrative. Most significantly, the virulence and contagious nature of the disease shattered norms within Athenian society: "Men, not knowing what was to come of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane ... Men now did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner ... Fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them."¹⁹ Thucydides's clear implication is that the plague altered the character of Athenian grand strategy from one of prudence to reckless ambition, triggering its decline. As one classicist observes, "The subsequent Athenian defeat at Syracuse is prefigured in [the] contrast between Pericles and the plague."²⁰

Pandemics also played a pivotal role in the decline of the Roman empire. The commercial expansion of Rome enabled microbes to spread easily within the confines of the empire. What had been localized epidemics during the days of the Roman Republic became pandemics that affected the balance of power. The Antonine Plague that began in 165 AD ended the "escalation dominance" of Roman forces in Europe, putting a halt to any further geographic expansion.²¹ A century later, the Plague of Cyprian caused the empire's boundaries to shrink yet again, depopulating Roman cities and threatening the imperial capital itself. The first appearance of the bubonic plague in the sixth century altered the path of the Byzantine Empire from a rising great power to a falling one.²²

During the Napoleonic Age there were critical moments in which pathogens tipped the scales of world politics. Yellow fever in Haiti dramatically altered France's plans for expansion in the Western hemisphere.²³ Napoleon initially envisaged Haiti as the key embarkation point to expand the French empire in North America. After a revolution in which former slaves declared Haiti's independence, in 1801 the French leader sent an armada of sixty ships and 30,000 soldiers to retake control of the colony, supported by both the United Kingdom and United States. Haitian guerilla tactics frustrated French forces. Far more important, however, was that the French, in contrast to the Haitian resistance, had no immunity to endemic yellow fever. As

19. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 2, paragraphs 52–53.

20. Nielsen 1996, 402.

21. Harper 2017, 117.

22. *Ibid*, chapter 6.

23. Snowden 2019, chapter 8.

the disease spread, the case fatality rate for French troops in Haiti exceeded 70 percent. Napoleon conceded defeat, gave up his North American dream, and sold Louisiana to the fledgling United States a year later.

Similarly, epidemic disease felled Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia as much as the Russian army did. Russia's strategic response to the invasion was to avoid a decisive engagement, retreat further into the Russian heartland, and deny the French any ability to live off captured territory. The effect on the Grande Armée was devastating, as the French army "lived in an environment that it systematically befouled."²⁴ Typhus and dysentery overwhelmed French forces; Napoleon lost 120,000 troops to disease just in the weeks leading up to the seizure of Moscow. In both the Russian and Haitian campaigns, disease profoundly affected the trajectory of war, weakening the actor perceived to have the greater capabilities.

The larger historical trend, however, has been for disease to trigger change by radically reinforcing the position of more powerful actors. This comes through most clearly in Europe's rapid, brutal colonization of the Americas. Despite the relative sophistication of the Aztec and Inca civilizations, the Spanish were able to subdue them because of a lethal combination of firearms, smallpox, and measles. William McNeill estimates that the Amerindian population in Mexico and Peru declined by an astonishing 90 percent in the first 120 years of Spanish control, a massive demographic change.²⁵ Furthermore, the "virgin soil epidemics" in the new world had a powerful ideational effect on Amerindians who survived. The relative health of the Spanish conquistadors—because of their immunity to diseases that felled the indigenous population—convinced Amerindian survivors that the Europeans were god-like. This facilitated the spread of Catholicism throughout Latin America.

In the most significant pandemics in world history, political factors played a key role in their spread and virulence. Globalization, whether through conquest or commerce, facilitates the spread of disease. As previously noted, the expansion of the Roman Empire also expanded the reach of Roman diseases. The Black Death transformed world politics, but those effects were intertwined with what McNeill labeled the "macroparasitic elements" of human endeavor.²⁶ The rapid Mongol conquests in the late thirteenth century facilitated the rapid spread of the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century. Multiple scholars observe that Western Europe was already stretched by overpopulation and famine prior to the beginning of the plague.²⁷ The terror caused by the Black Death was so great that in many jurisdictions foreigners and Jews were persecuted, because they were believed to be the cause of the pandemic.

Similarly, the 1918 influenza pandemic was so virulent because of political and technological factors. The rapid development of transport technology, particularly

24. *Ibid.*, 149

25. McNeill 1976, 214; See also Diamond 1998, chapter three, and Snowden 2019, chapter seven.

26. McNeill 1976.

27. See McNeill 1976; North and Thomas 1973; Snowden 2019.

the railroad and steamship, guaranteed the globalized spread of influenza. The countries fighting World War I repressed public information about the virus, further facilitating its spread.²⁸ The result was the deadliest pandemic in world history in terms of the absolute loss of life, estimated to be between 50 and 100 million people.²⁹ The influenza pandemic induced a societal terror akin to that of the Black Plague because of its demographic effects. Unlike ordinary influenza, in which only 10 percent of the fatalities are from those aged sixteen to forty, more than half of those who died between 1918 and 1920 were in that age group.³⁰

Nonetheless, the aggregate effects of the 1918 influenza were less than that of the Great War in terms of lives and economic output lost.³¹ Jeremy Youde notes that “the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic is barely remembered or commemorated.”³² Even writers who believe that its influence has been historically understudied acknowledge that “we still think of the Spanish flu as a footnote to the First World War.”³³ A review of the scholarly international relations literature reveals minimal discussion of the Great Influenza’s effect on world politics.³⁴

This highlights another trend: during the post-Napoleonic era, which has been the overwhelming focus of empirical international relations scholarship, the effect of pandemics has been more muted than in previous eras. A series of developments from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century reduced the impact of infectious diseases in great power societies by an order of magnitude. Dramatic improvements in urban sanitation, food preparation, and living standards in North America and Europe constricted multiple disease vectors.³⁵ Innovations in medical research and practice further limited the spread and impact of pandemics. The development of the germ theory of disease in the late nineteenth century was an ideational revolution that permitted a cumulative scientific research program to combat different pathogens. This was followed soon after by the development of vaccines through the attenuation of live viruses. A few decades later, the antibiotic revolution helped to counter bacterial infections and greatly diminished the effect of pandemics on international society. Prior to the twentieth century, plague, smallpox, cholera, measles, malaria, and polio killed or maimed significant fractions of the global population. Since the microbiological revolution, however, some of these diseases have been eradicated and the rest have seen their geographic scope and impact greatly reduced.³⁶

28. See Barry 2004; Spinney 2017. The Great Influenza is also called the Spanish flu, but not because the virus originated there. Rather, it was first reported there because Spain, neutral during the First World War, did not censor its press coverage.

29. Barro, Ursúa and Weng 2020.

30. Barry 2004, 397.

31. Barro, Ursúa and Weng 2020.

32. Youde 2017, 357.

33. Spinney 2017, 8.

34. A digital search of *International Organization*’s archives reveals no research articles that reference either “pandemic” or “epidemic.”

35. See Deaton 2013; Snowden 2019.

36. *Ibid.*

Most of the pandemics that have emerged in the last century have had acute short-term effects. It would be difficult to argue, however, that these diseases triggered transformational change in world politics. The long duration of HIV/AIDS arguably had the largest systemic effects. The disease changed the global norms surrounding the LGBT community and contributed to the securitization of infectious diseases.³⁷ The 2003 SARS outbreak did not slow China's rise in the international system, however, or diminish Chinese influence over global governance structures, including the WHO. The 2009 H1N1 pandemic caused barely a ripple in international relations. Neither the Ebola or Zika outbreaks of the past decade affected great power politics. Progress in therapeutics and treatment of infectious diseases has reduced the scale and scope of their effects. The trendline, prior to the emergence of COVID-19, had been toward more limited effects of infectious diseases in international relations. The effect was pronounced enough for public health experts to urge the WHO to reorient its focus to noncommunicable diseases.³⁸

The diminution of pervasive infectious diseases in the developed world led to perverse health policy effects. The successful eradication of smallpox convinced many public health experts that a similar approach would be successful with other infectious diseases. Smallpox, however, was a pathological outlier, and the “eradicationist” perspective on infectious diseases proved to be misguided.³⁹ Excessive prescriptions of antibiotics have fueled concerns about the emergence of drug-resistant bacterial infections.⁴⁰ Public investments in infectious disease prevention fell to dangerously low levels.⁴¹ Paradoxically, the successful development of herd immunity facilitated the emergence of an anti-vaccine movement in the United States.⁴²

I will next review the observed effects of the novel coronavirus on the distribution of power and interests in global society. But it is worth stressing that preliminary efforts to measure COVID-19's aggregate effects reveal it to be weaker than what transpired during the Great Influenza. The pathology of the novel coronavirus is much less virulent than influenza. The case fatality ratio of COVID-19 is smaller by an order of magnitude. Unlike the 1918 influenza strain, the novel coronavirus does not have outsized effects on young and working-age populations—quite the opposite.⁴³ Unlike Ebola or Zika, the physical effects of COVID-19 do not provoke disgust in others, which can have pronounced effects on public attitudes.⁴⁴ In their comparison of the Great Influenza and the novel coronavirus, Barro, Ursúa, and Weng observe that “at this point, the probability that COVID-19 reaches anything close to the Great Influenza Pandemic seems remote, given advances in

37. See Ostergard 2002; Kamradt-Scott and McInnes 2012.

38. Saha and Alleyne 2018.

39. Snowden 2019, chapter eighteen.

40. Antonovics 2016.

41. Snowden 2019, chapter eighteen.

42. Olive et al. 2018.

43. Rothan and Byrareddy 2020.

44. Clifford and Jerit 2018.

public health care and measures taken to mitigate propagation.”⁴⁵ Jared Diamond concludes that “unlike many of the epidemics of the past, the virus isn’t threatening to cause military defeats, population replacements, or abandonments of land under cultivation.”⁴⁶

Of course, the estimated economic effects still exceed the 2008 financial crisis, and scholars believe that event had pronounced effects on world politics.⁴⁷ If COVID-19’s effects do not rival the Black Death, do they rival those of the Great Recession?

The Distribution of Power

Prior to the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic, analysts were debating how much China had closed the relative power gap with the United States.⁴⁸ COVID-19 raises legitimate questions about the acceleration of a hegemonic transition between China and the United States. While COVID-19 originated in China, by March 2020 Beijing had mostly contained the virus, going so far as to send personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical goods to hard-hit European countries. Premier Xi Jinping pledged billions of dollars to the WHO to fund research into a vaccine. During the pandemic China has tried to burnish its image as a supplier of key global public goods.

In contrast, the US response was at best haphazard and at worst inept. The Trump administration took minimal preventive actions during the early stages of the pandemic. For months the United States lagged behind other countries in testing because of scientific errors by the CDC and bureaucratic snafus at the FDA. The Trump administration also stymied any multilateral response at the G-7, G-20, United Nations, and WHO. Those mistakes, compounded by President Trump’s insistence that the threat posed by the pandemic was minimal, led to a sluggish reaction and more than 150,000 dead in the United States. March and April of 2020 were replete with media reports of public health officials panicked about shortages of medical gear. As of July 2020, the United States, with 4 percent of the world’s population, has been responsible for more than a quarter of worldwide COVID-19 infections and fatalities. In contrast to every other advanced industrialized economy in the world, the number of confirmed cases and deaths continued to surge in the United States during the summer of 2020.

In Joseph Nye’s formulation, a key source of soft power is the demonstration of policy competence.⁴⁹ Conversely, policy incompetence eviscerates soft power. As Stephen Walt notes about the US response to the novel coronavirus, “far from

45. Barro, Ursúa and Weng 2020, 18.

46. Diamond 2020.

47. See Kirshner 2014; Tooze 2018.

48. Beckley 2020; Drezner 2014; Kirshner 2014.

49. Nye 2011. See also Khong 2019.

making ‘America great again,’ this epic policy failure will further tarnish the United States’ reputation as a country that knows how to do things effectively.”⁵⁰ Few observers beyond President Trump believe that the United States has been competent in its policy response. Plenty of observers have used the response to paint the US as a failed state.⁵¹ Mira Rapp-Hooper cautions that “if the United States continues to founder while China offers supplies and coordination, international partners will naturally perceive China’s leadership to have strengthened.”⁵²

Despite these policy miscues, the results from a Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) snap poll conducted in May of 2020 are telling.⁵³ A solid majority of IR scholars (54 percent) disagreed with the notion that the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally alters the distribution of power in world politics, while only 31 percent agreed. And there are valid reasons to believe that the majority opinion is correct. The hard-power capabilities of the United States remain formidable despite the country’s abysmal performance during the pandemic.

This is particularly clear in the economic and financial realm. Even before the pandemic there was ample evidence that the United States had bolstered its structural power in global financial networks.⁵⁴ US financial power has been on display during the COVID-19 pandemic. The one area of unparalleled American leadership during the crisis has been through the Federal Reserve offering substantial swap lines to other central banks, guaranteeing their access to dollars. The Fed also injected \$2 trillion into the US economy, double the amount of what was done in the months after Lehman Brothers collapsed. On the fiscal side, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, authorizing \$2 trillion in new expenditures. Despite the CARES Act, interest rates declined during this period.

Reviewing the global response to the pandemic in its 2020 annual report, the Bank of International Settlements concluded that the Federal Reserve acted as the world’s lender of last resort, dwarfing the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) capacities in this area.⁵⁵ Sebastian Mallaby concurs: “Since the start of the pandemic, the United States has unleashed the world’s biggest monetary stimulus and the world’s biggest budgetary stimulus. Miraculously, it has been able to do this at virtually no cost.”⁵⁶ In July the IMF staff argued that the US still had the “fiscal space” to go further to avoid an economic depression.⁵⁷ If a key measure of state power is the capacity to spend in an unconstrained manner, the United States remains a unique superpower.

At the same time, China’s efforts to augment its soft power have not borne much fruit. The public health goods that China provided to other countries proved to be

50. Walt 2020.

51. See Packer 2020; Fukuyama 2020.

52. Rapp-Hooper 2020.

53. The full poll results can be accessed at <https://trip.wm.edu/data/our-surveys/snap-polls/Snap_Poll_13_Report_Final.pdf>.

54. See Drezner 2014; Farrell and Newman 2019; Norrlof et al. 2020; Oatley et al. 2013.

55. Bank of International Settlements 2020.

56. Mallaby 2020, 69. Other countries have borne adjustment costs. See Koren and Wincoff 2020.

57. International Monetary Fund 2020.

substandard, which did not help its reputation for competence. Beijing has also been dogged by allegations that it was less than transparent during the early critical phase of the epidemic. In response, China has engaged in “wolf warrior” diplomacy, threatening countries that criticized China with retaliation.⁵⁸ At the same time China has ratcheted up its internal repression and aggressively contested disputed border regions. Arvind Subramanian concludes that “China’s recent actions have undermined its global aims.”⁵⁹

The combined diplomatic blowback has left China in a position akin to that of the United States: powerful but unliked. But there are two key differences. The first is that US network power remains unmatched. Across an array of economic networks, the US continues to be the system maker and privilege taker.⁶⁰ The second is that in the absence of producing the reserve currency, China faces a harder budget constraint.⁶¹

In the post-Napoleonic era of international relations, rapid shifts in the distribution of power have come about only after great power war and the collapse of communism. Unless COVID-19 triggers one of these two events, it is unlikely to have a transformational effect on the distribution of power. At best, the pandemic mildly reifies existing trends. The one wild card is whether one of the great powers develops an easily reproducible vaccine or therapeutic drug far earlier than any other actor. Whichever country or coalition is first in that race will have demonstrated its “protean power.”⁶²

The Distribution of Interests

One of the reasons that the 2008 financial crisis did not trigger a dramatic upsurge in protectionism was that powerful interest groups within the world’s major trading economies resisted steps toward closure. Both the global supply chain and global financial network were so complex and imbricated that traditional divisions of economic interests into import-competing sectors and export sectors (or strong and weak currency groups) made little sense.⁶³

The status quo ante of interests at the beginning of 2020 was different than in 2008. The surge in populism across the globe, highlighted by Brexit and Donald Trump’s election, empowered socioeconomic interests more predisposed toward economic nationalism.⁶⁴ In the year before the pandemic, China and the United States were prosecuting a trade war in which both countries raised their tariff rates over an increasing array of goods from single digits to roughly 25 percent.⁶⁵ Both countries

58. Dettmer 2020.

59. Subramanian 2020.

60. See Drezner 2014; Drezner 2019; Mastanduno 2009.

61. Babones 2020.

62. Katzenstein and Seybert 2018.

63. See Drezner 2014; Gawande, Hoekman, and Cui 2015.

64. Tooze 2018.

65. Bown 2020.

enhanced export controls and national security measures due to fears of weaponized interdependence.⁶⁶ The trendline at the beginning of the pandemic pointed toward further efforts at economic decoupling.

COVID-19's effects on the distribution of economic interests certainly do not reverse that trendline, but has the pandemic accelerated decoupling? At first glance the answer would seem to be yes. The very nature of COVID-19 necessitated measures that restricted the cross-border movement of people. Such moves also lean into the populist predilection to blame foreigners for the source of all ills.⁶⁷ Public opinion surveys conducted in 2020 revealed a pronounced increase in hostile US attitudes toward China.⁶⁸

The initial policy reactions to the pandemic also conform to an accelerated shift in interests. According to Global Trade Alert, 157 export controls on medical supplies and medicines were put in place across eighty-six jurisdictions since the start of COVID-19.⁶⁹ In early 2020 China exercised state power to seize domestically produced PPE and medical equipment; the United States soon reciprocated. US leaders expressed concerns about vulnerability to China weaponizing its role in medical supply chains.⁷⁰ The State Department announced plans for an Economic Prosperity Network of like-minded countries to host supply chains.

Both a dynamic open economy politics approach and a historical institutionalist approach would predict that continued closure would generate dynamic feedback effects that reinforce economic decoupling.⁷¹ As access to foreign markets declined, exporters would find their market capitalization shrinking. They might lobby for a policy reversal but over time their ability to influence policymakers would decline as their resources atrophied. These firms would also be vulnerable to populist accusations that they no longer represented their country's national interest. Import substitution would thrive as domestic producers stepped in for imports. These new sectors would be vulnerable to any reversal of decoupling, however, and therefore would be likely to invest in lobbying efforts to preserve the new status quo. Over time, the balance of interest group pressure would shift towards continued closure.⁷²

There is also, however, a welter of contrary evidence suggesting that COVID-19's lasting effects will be negligible. Neither state actors nor public opinion nor economic interests have accelerated toward closure because of COVID-19. For example, it is noteworthy that even as the pandemic worsened, the Trump White House prioritized the "phase one" trade deal with China over demanding information from Beijing about SARS-CoV-2's etiology. Trump resisted pressure from his advisors to criticize

66. Farrell and Newman 2019.

67. Müller 2017.

68. See Bowman 2020; Devlin, Silver, and Huang 2020.

69. Global Trade Alert, "21st Century Tracking of Pandemic-Era Trade Policies in Food and Medical Products." 4 May 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.globaltradealert.org/reports/54>>

70. Sutter, Sutherland and Schwartzberg 2020.

71. On open-economy politics, see Lake 2009. On historical institutionalism, see Fioretos 2011.

72. See Rogowski 1989; Hathaway 1998.

Xi Jinping throughout the first half of 2020. Even as the United States ratcheted up its hostile rhetoric toward China, President Trump opted not to withdraw from the trade deal. The *New York Times* observed that “the trade pact the two countries signed in January appears to be the most durable part of the US-China relationship.”⁷³ The Economic Prosperity Network remains notional; there has been minimal change in actual trade patterns.

Nor is there evidence that the pandemic itself exacerbated American public hostility toward China. Pew Research conducted one survey throughout March as the pandemic spread in the United States. A split sample analysis concluded that worsening conditions in the United States did not shift public attitudes toward China.⁷⁴ From March to June 2020, Morning Consult did not find an increase in US respondents blaming China for the pandemic. Furthermore, both pollsters found a majority of Americans preferred cooperation over confrontation with China to address the pandemic.⁷⁵

The distribution of interests away from openness has not accelerated due to COVID-19. Indeed, the private-sector response has been largely one of resistance to decoupling. Even in the wake of the pandemic, multinational corporations such as Apple have not altered their supply chains in response to political pressure.⁷⁶ This jibes with American Chamber of Commerce in China’s March 2020 survey results: 80 percent of its members reported no plans to relocate any of their production activities away from China.⁷⁷ Furthermore, US companies remain reluctant to make large-scale investments in PPE because of their expectation that demand will be temporary.⁷⁸ Complex interdependence between the United States and China in the areas of finance and scientific research and development also persists.⁷⁹

A June 2020 Bloomberg analysis concluded that drastic shifts in global supply chains were unlikely: “In the end, the biggest force diluting China’s position in the global supply chain will likely be the long, slow evolution of global trade, as companies see opportunities that arise from new markets, new technologies and changing patterns of wealth.”⁸⁰ This tracks with other journalistic accounts of how US businesses are reacting to political pressure during the pandemic—explaining the surge in US foreign direct investment into China, for example.⁸¹ Even as national security concerns have been raised about Chinese purchases of US firms, the

73. Swanson and Bradsher 2020.

74. Devlin, Silver, and Huang 2020, 6.

75. Bowman 2020.

76. Ma 2020

77. Lardy and Huang 2020.

78. Bradsher 2020.

79. Lardy and Huang 2020.

80. “Can the US End China’s Control of the Global Supply Chain?” *Bloomberg*, 8 June 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-08/why-the-u-s-can-t-easily-break-china-s-grip-on-supply-chains>>.

81. See McDonald 2020; Swanson and Tankersley 2020.

process that regulates foreign acquisitions of US firms still favors interest groups dedicated to economic openness.⁸²

Formal and informal restrictions on the global flow of people are likely to persist as long as the novel coronavirus is a pandemic. Migration, however, has been the least globalized portion of the global economy during the postwar era. Just as the US-China trade war caused a modest diversion of trade rather than homeshoring, the coronavirus is unlikely to tear asunder what the profit motive makes compelling. The pandemic has neither altered nor accelerated the pre-existing distribution of economic interests.

Conclusion

In the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many apocalyptic predictions were made. Epidemiologists projected a global death toll in the millions. Economists warned of a breakdown in supply chains for critical goods like food and medical supplies. Six months into COVID-19, these worst-case scenarios have, thankfully, not come to pass. Claims that the global supply chain in medical products rendered states vulnerable to weaponized interdependence proved to be wildly exaggerated.⁸³ This is worth remembering when evaluating political scientists predicting transformative change in world politics. To put it gently, our discipline's forecasting track record is not great.⁸⁴

In the far past, pandemics transformed international politics. In the recent past, the effect of infectious diseases has been more muted. I argue that while the aftershocks of COVID-19 will be real, the pandemic's lasting effects may be minimal. If one examines the distribution of power and the distribution of interests, the effect of COVID-19 has been to mildly reinforce the status quo. It has revealed the sources of Chinese and US power without undercutting the foundations of either one. The pandemic has highlighted the nationalist and protectionist tendencies in both great powers. In neither dimension, however, has COVID-19 had a transformational effect. By historical standards, a minor pandemic will have minimal system-altering effects.

There are three significant caveats to my argument, however. First, COVID-19 might matter in the same way some historians argue the 1918 influenza affected world politics—by altering first-image behavior. In particular, if the shock from the pandemic is a principal cause of Donald Trump's defeat in November, that event would have system-altering effects. For the past four years the United States has been the principal revisionist actor in world politics.⁸⁵ This is due to the Trump administration's break from liberal internationalism. In a counterfactual

82. Danzman 2021.

83. See Bamber, Fernandez-Stark and Taglioni 2020; Sutter, Sutherland and Schwartzberg 2020.

84. See Gaddis 1992; Fettweis 2004.

85. Drezner 2019.

world without the pandemic, it is possible that Trump would have been re-elected on the back of a solid economy.⁸⁶ This would have given his administration an additional four years to subvert the existing order.

The second caveat is that the novel coronavirus might have ideational effects. The idea of maximizing efficiency has been a cornerstone of economic thought for two centuries. The pandemic has reminded observers of tradeoffs between efficiency and resiliency. Although global supply chains proved more resilient than feared at the outset, a prioritization of resiliency might reorient national economic interests away from maximizing income to a more diverse set of objectives. Similarly, there could be second-image reversed ideational effects, as the pandemic causes shifts toward or away from populism or neoliberalism. While these ideational effects are possible, they will only be observable after the fact. It could take a decade to determine whether this causal mechanism is at play.

The final caveat is that COVID-19 might be a harbinger of larger shocks to come. Pandemics contributed to the fall of Rome but were not the only cause. The combination of epidemiological, environmental, and geopolitical shocks destroyed the empire. At least one recent evaluation of existential risks cautions that pandemic “paired with catastrophic climate change” could have catastrophic effects.⁸⁷ COVID-19 could presage a return to Malthusian thinking. Malthus is mostly cited to demonstrate that his predictions of overpopulation and famine were incorrect. Malthus’ theory was subtler than that, however. He warned that if the human population grew unchecked, a sequence of mechanisms would trigger mass mortality events. The first mechanism, consistent with McNeill’s “macroparasitic” causal mechanism, was the vices of war. Failing that, however, Malthus suggested that “sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands.”⁸⁸ The seventy-five-year absence of great power war has removed the first Malthusian check; the medical revolution has suppressed the effect of disease. If COVID-19 presages a planet encountering severe epidemiological or ecological checks on human flourishing, the effects on world politics would indeed be transformative.

References

- Antonovics, Janis. 2016. The Value of Concept: Lessons from the Evolution of Antibiotic Resistance. *Global Policy* 7 (S1):97–106.
- Babones, Salvatore. 2020. China’s Superpower Dreams are Running Out of Money. *Foreign Policy*, 6 July.
- Bamber, Penny, Karina Fernandez-Stark and Daria Taglioni. 2020. Why Global Value Chains Remain Essential for COVID-19 Supplies. *VoxEU*. 27 May.

86. Even in the pre-pandemic peak of the economic boom, however, Trump consistently trailed Joe Biden in polling.

87. Tonn and Stiefel 2013, 1777.

88. Malthus 1798.

- Bank of International Settlements. 2020. *Annual Economic Report*. Basle.
- Barro, Robert, José Ursúa, and Jeanna Weng. 2020. The Coronavirus and the Great Influenza Pandemic. NBER Working Paper No. 26866. April.
- Barry, John. 2004. *The Great Influenza*. Viking Penguin.
- Beckley, Michael. 2020. China's Economy is Not Overtaking America's. *Journal of Applied Corporate Finance* 32 (2):10–23.
- Bowman, Karlyn. 2020. China, Coronavirus, and Public Opinion. *Forbes*, 21 May.
- Bown, Chad. 2020. US-China Trade War Tariffs: An Up-to-Date Chart. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 14 February. Available at <<https://www.piie.com/research/piie-charts/us-china-trade-war-tariffs-date-chart>>.
- Bradsher, Keith. 2020. China Dominates Medical Supplies, in This Outbreak and the Next. *New York Times*, 5 July.
- Campbell, Kurt, and Rushi Doshi. 2020. The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order. *Foreign Affairs*, 18 March.
- Capoccia, Giovanni, and R Daniel Kelemen. 2007. The Study of Critical Junctures. *World Politics* 59 (3):341–69.
- Clifford, Scott, and Jennifer Jerit. 2018. Disgust, Anxiety, and Political Learning in the Face of Threat. *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (2):266–79.
- Cox, Robert. 1981. Social Forces, States and World Orders. *Millennium* 10 (2):126–55.
- Danzman, Sarah Bauerle. 2021. Investment Screening in the Shadow of Weaponized Interdependence. In *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence*, edited by Daniel W. Drezner, Henry Farrell, and Abraham Newman. Brookings Institution Press.
- Deaton, Angus. 2013. *The Great Escape*. Princeton University Press.
- Detmer, Jamie. 2020. China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy Prompts International Backlash. *Voice of America*, 6 May.
- Devlin, Kat, Laura Silver, and Christine Huang. 2020. US Views of China Increasingly Negative Amid Coronavirus Outbreak. Pew Research Center, 21 April.
- Diamond, Jared. 1998. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. W.W. Norton.
- Diamond, Jared. 2020. Lessons from a pandemic. *Financial Times*, 28 May.
- Drezner, Daniel W. 2010. Is Historical Institutionalism Bunk? *Review of International Political Economy* 17 (4):791–804.
- Drezner, Daniel W. 2014. *The System Worked*. Oxford University Press.
- Drezner, Daniel W. 2019. Counter-Hegemonic Strategies in the Global Economy. *Security Studies* 28 (3):505–31.
- Farrell, Henry, and Abraham L. Newman. 2019. Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion. *International Security* 44 (1):42–79.
- Fettweiss, Christopher. 2004. Evaluating IR's Crystal Balls. *International Studies Review* 6 (1): 79–104.
- Fioretos, Orfeo. 2011. Historical Institutionalism in International Relations. *International Organization* 65 (2):367–99.
- Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization* 52 (4):887–917.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2020. The Pandemic and Political Order. *Foreign Affairs* 99 (4):26–32.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. 1992. International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War. *International Security* 17 (3):5–58.
- Gawande, Kishore, Bernard Hoekman, and Yue Cui. 2015. Global Supply Chains and Trade Policy Responses to the 2008 Crisis. *World Bank Economic Review* 29 (1):102–28.
- George, Alexander, and Andrew Bennett. 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. MIT Press.
- George, Alexander, and Juliette George. 1956. *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study*. John Hay.
- Gunitsky, Seva. 2013. Complexity and Theories of Change in International Politics. *International Theory* 5 (1):35–65.

- Guzzini, Stefano. 2005. The Concept of Power: A Constructivist Analysis. *Millennium* 33 (3):495–521.
- Harper, Kyle. 2017. *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*. Princeton University Press.
- Hathaway, Oona. 1998. Positive Feedback: The Impact of Trade Liberalization on Industry Demands for Protection. *International Organization* 52 (3):575–612.
- Ikenberry, G. John. 2000. *After Victory*. Princeton University Press.
- International Monetary Fund. 2020. United States of America: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2020 Article IV Mission, 17 July. Available at <<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/07/17/mcs-071720-united-states-of-america-staff-concluding-statement-of-the-2020-article-iv-mission>>.
- Kahl, Colin, and Ariana Berengaut. 2020. Aftershocks: The Coronavirus Pandemic and the New World Disorder. *War on the Rocks*, 10 April. Available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/aftershocks-the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-the-new-world-disorder/>>.
- Kamradt-Scott, Adam, and Colin McInnes. 2012. The Securitisation of Pandemic influenza: Framing, Security and Public Policy. *Global Public Health* 7 (sup2):S95–S110.
- Kaplan, Robert D. 2020. Coronavirus Ushers in the Globalization We Were Afraid Of, *Bloomberg*, 20 March 2020.
- Katzenstein, Pater, and Lucia Seybert. 2018. Protean Power and Uncertainty: Exploring the Unexpected in World Politics. *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (1):80–93.
- Khong, Yuen Foong. 2019. Power as Prestige in World Politics. *International Affairs* 95 (1):119–42.
- Kirshner, Jonathan. 2014. *American Power After the Financial Crisis*. Cornell University Press.
- Koren, Ore, and W. Kindred Winecoff. 2020. Food Price Spikes and Social Unrest: The Dark Side of the Fed's Crisis-Fighting. *Foreign Policy*, 20 May.
- Lake, David A. 2009. Open Economy Politics: A Critical Review. *Review of International Organizations* 4 (3):219–44.
- Lardy, Nicholas, and Tianlei Huang. 2020. Despite the Rhetoric, US-China Financial Decoupling is not Happening. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2 July. Available at <<https://www.piie.com/blogs/china-economic-watch/despite-rhetoric-us-china-financial-decoupling-not-happening>>.
- Krasner, Stephen D. 1976. State power and the structure of international trade. *World Politics* 28 (3):317–47.
- Ma, Damien. 2020. How Apple Exemplifies the Resilience of East Asian Supply Chains. *MacroPolo*, 2 June.
- Mallaby, Sebastian. 2020. The Age of Magic Money. *Foreign Affairs* 99 (4):65–77.
- Malthus, Thomas. 1798. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*.
- Mastanduno, Michael. 2009. System Maker and Privilege Taker: US Power and the International Political Economy. *World Politics* 61 (1):121–54.
- McDonald, Joe. Companies Prodded to Rely Less on China, But Few Respond. *Associated Press*, 29 June.
- McNeill, William. 1976. *Plagues and Peoples*. Anchor Books.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2017. *What is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nielsen, Donald A. 1996. Pericles and the Plague: Civil Religion, Anomie, and Injustice in Thucydides. *Sociology of Religion* 57 (4):397–407.
- Norrlöf, Carla, Paul Poast, Benjamin J. Cohen, Sabreena Croteau, Aashna Khanna, Daniel McDowell, Hongying Wang, and W. Kindred Winecoff. 2020. Global Monetary Order and the Liberal Order Debate. *International Studies Perspectives* 21 (2):109–53.
- North, Douglass, and Robert Paul Thomas. 1973. *The Rise of the Western World*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nye, Joseph. 2011. *The Future of Power*. PublicAffairs.
- Oatley, Thomas, W. Kindred Winecoff, Andrew Pennock, and Sarah Bauerle Danzman. 2013. The Political Economy of Global Finance: A Network Model. *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (1):133–53.
- Olive, Jacqueline K., Peter J. Hotez, Ashish Damania and Melissa S. Nolan. 2018. The State of the Antivaccine Movement in the United States. *PLoS Medicine* 15(6):1–10.
- Ostergard, Robert. 2002. Politics in the Hot Zone: AIDS and National Security in Africa. *Third World Quarterly* 23 (2):333–50.
- Packer, George. 2020. We Are Living in a Failed State. *The Atlantic*. June.

- Page, Scott. 2006. Path Dependence. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 1 (1):87–115.
- Pierson, Paul. 2004. *Politics in Time*. Princeton University Press.
- Rapp-Hooper, Mira. 2020. China, America, and the International Order After the Pandemic. *War on the Rocks*, 24 March. Available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/china-america-and-the-international-order-after-the-pandemic/>>.
- Rogowski, Ronald. 1989. *Commerce and Coalitions*. Princeton University Press.
- Rothan, Hussin A., and Siddappa N. Byrareddy. 2020. The Epidemiology and Pathogenesis of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak. *Journal of Autoimmunity* 109: 102433.
- Saha, Amrita, and George Aleyne. 2018. Recognizing Noncommunicable Diseases as a Global Health Security Threat. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 96:792–93.
- Snowden, Frank. 2019. *Epidemics and Society*. Yale University Press.
- Spinney, Laura. 2017. *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1928 and How It Changed the World*. PublicAffairs.
- Subramanian, Arvind. 2020. China Has Blown Its Historic Opportunity. *Project Syndicate*, 20 July.
- Summers, Lawrence. 2020. COVID-19 Looks Like a Hinge in History. *Financial Times*, 14 May.
- Swanson, Ana. 2020. Once a Source of US-China Tension, Trade Emerges as an Area of Calm. *New York Times*, 25 July.
- Swanson, Ana, and Keith Bradsher. 2020. Once a Source of U.S.-China Tension, Trade Emerges as an Area of Calm. *New York Times*, 25 July.
- Swanson, Ana, and Jim Tankersley. 2020. The Pandemic Isn't Bringing Back Factory Jobs, at Least Not Yet. *New York Times*, 22 July.
- Sutter, Karen, Michael Sutherland, and Andres Schwarzenberg. 2020. COVID-19: China Medical Supply Chains and Broader Trade Issues. Congressional Research Service. 6 April.
- Tonn, Bruce, and Dorian Stiefel. 2013. Evaluating Methods for Estimating Existential Risks. *Risk Analysis* 33 (10):1772–87.
- Tooze, Adam. 2018. *Crashed*. Viking.
- Walt, Stephen M. 2020. The Coronavirus Pandemic has Killed America's Reputation. *Foreign Policy*, 23 March.
- Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Youde, Jeremy. 2017. Covering the Cough? Memory, Remembrance, and Influenza Amnesia. *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 63 (3):357–68.

Author

Daniel Drezner is Professor of International Politics at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He can be reached at daniel.drezner@tufts.edu.

Acknowledgements

A previous version of this paper was presented remotely at the June 2020 Perry World House conference. I am grateful to Erik Voeten, Michael Horowitz, Jon Pevehouse, Ken Schultz, Tana Johnson, Kim Yi Dionne, David Stasavage, and Tanisha Fazal for their comments and suggestions. Tracy Jenkins and Caroline Sugg provided research assistance during the drafting of this paper. The usual caveat applies.

Keywords

pandemic; great power politics; global political economy; United States; China