



BRIEFING NOTES

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GEOPOLITICAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Authors: Rezvan Nozaripour¹ and Kash Khorasani²

¹ Graduate student, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

² Professor, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.

SUMMARY

- ✚ Regional and global cooperation have been tested with rather poor results during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ✚ Spread of COVID-19 pandemic was an inevitable result of globalization and the pandemic has seriously threatened the world's globalization prospects going forward.
- ✚ Security services should be concerned by new vulnerabilities that are brought by the increased use of technological tools by all citizens.
- ✚ The rising tensions between the two super powers, U.S. and China, have prompted many experts to warn of a new Cold War.
- ✚ Russia and China have published disinformation and propaganda announcements that accuse the West for creating and releasing the COVID-19.

CONTEXT

- ✚ The COVID-19 pandemic is considered as the world's greatest challenge that the humankind has faced since the World War II. It has rapidly spread around the world, posing enormous health, economic, political and social challenges to the entire human population.
- ✚ This briefing note (BN) considers how this pandemic can change the geopolitical landscape and the nature of strategic competition between great powers.
- ✚ It also highlighted potential impacts of disinformation that has targeted Western governments. Finally, we offer recommendations for future political developments resulting from these initial observations.

CONSIDERATIONS

International Relations:

- ✚ The pandemic has heavily impacted the central part of statecraft that is international diplomacy. Global and regional cooperation have seriously and adversely impacted in this test. The European Union has failed to respect its cooperation and solidarity principles from the first weeks of the crisis. National reflexes and bilateral humanitarian aid cooperation have been restored [1]. On the other side, some states have used the crisis as an opportunity for power projection by sending assistance to other countries or repatriation operations.
- ✚ Diplomatic tensions around trade and transport of medicines, diagnostic tests and hospital equipment for COVID-19 disease have increased [2]. Leaders of some countries have accused other countries for not containing the disease effectively and resulting in the uncontrolled spread of the virus [3], [4].

- ✚ In addition, the crisis has transformed the core of diplomacy and diplomatic practices. Physical contacts have been reduced and digital diplomacy is instead promoted. For example, the first meeting of the UN Security Council on the pandemic was operated by videoconference.

Defence and Security Issues:

- ✚ COVID-19 has brought major security and military challenges to the landscape. Increased use of technological tools brought new vulnerabilities to security services. Cybercrime and cyber warfare will get more frequent and more aggressive [5]. Additionally, malicious states actors may seek to extend their efforts to weaponized [biology](#).
- ✚ In spite of these emerging challenges, substantial reductions in defence budgets may be anticipated due to austerity measures, and at the same time, increased international tensions and nationalism may force some governments to justify increased military and security expenditures.

Economic Issues:

- ✚ All economies have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19. The GDP per capita of 170 countries will fall by the end of the year. According to the IMF, the [global GDP](#) could fall by 3% [6], and under pessimistic scenarios it is expected that the world merchandise trade decreases by 31.9% [7].
- ✚ On the other hand, due to numerous online activities, the digital economy has thrived these days. The use of platforms and production of data by users were reinforced by tech giants. The outbreak allowed for Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft, to initially constitute as 20% of the [S&P 500](#) value [8].
- ✚ The recently collapsed oil, due to the sharp lack of demand, made the situation more difficult for various international companies, jobs and economies as a consequence of the lockdowns of individuals and businesses. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) 195 million people could lose their jobs due to pandemic and this will increase inequalities within and between countries [9].

Strategic Competition between U.S. and China – New Cold War:

- ✚ The U.S.-China relationship is more toxic than ever since their dramatic approach in the 1970s, but the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the possibility of further deteriorating relations [10], [11].
- ✚ On May 15, President Trump threatened to “cut off the whole relationship” with China over the COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in Wuhan. He had earlier called the Coronavirus “Chinese virus” and threatened to seek compensation from China for damages caused by the outbreak. Earlier in May, the U.S. imposed visa restrictions on the Chinese journalists working in the country, limiting their work period to 90 days. Recently, he has extended for one more year a ban on U.S. companies from using telecom equipment made by “companies posing national security risks” (Huawei and ZTE) [12].

Zhao Lijian, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, shared a conspiracy theory that the virus was created in a U.S. military laboratory. China, sometimes through the state-run media, has hit back, calling Trump's comments "lunacy" and Mike Pompeo, the U.S. Secretary of State, an "evil politician". The rising tensions between the two super powers have prompted many experts to warn of a new Cold War.

- ✚ Major U.S. allies - Japan, South Korea, Australia and European nations - should work together to pressure Beijing into act more responsibly to prevent the beginning of a dark era of ideological and strategic conflict between the two powers [13], [14].

Disinformation Targeting Western Governments:

- ✚ According to a report by the University of Calgary, Russia publishes disinformation and propaganda accusing the West for creating and releasing the COVID-19. They use Russian outlets and information platforms to give "evidence" the virus was created in America in order to halt the economic growth of China [15].
- ✚ They claimed that the U.S. is destroying global efforts in fighting the COVID-19 and decrease its contributions to the World Health Organization and its \$60 million outstanding debt to the organization. Russia and China are driving an online wave of disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 649 posts were reported to Facebook and Twitter, including false cures, anti-vaccination propaganda and conspiracy theories around 5G [16].
- ✚ Social media platforms have been more active lately in taking down health information that is inaccurate or could be harmful, along with accounts engaging in "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" by working together to spread misinformation [17].
- ✚ Twitter has started displaying fact-check labels on tweets that appear to incorrectly link 5G mobile technology to the spread of the Coronavirus [18].

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✚ *It is imperative and strategically essential to improve pandemic preparedness.* Measures need to include: increasing hospital bed capacities, stocks and manufacturing capacities of drug treatments, health technologies (such as ventilators), testing kits, vaccination research, bioinformatics, among others
- ✚ Response plans should also be improved, updated, and enhanced through extensive pandemic scenarios.
- ✚ Strong political, social and economic *recovery plans* should be developed and designed.
- ✚ National scientific councils should be the primary source of information and nations should *re-value expertise and fight disinformation* vigorously.
- ✚ Economic support programs such as a universal basic income (UBI), should be enacted by various governments as a social and economic safety-net.



- ✚ International organizations should reinstate their role as agenda setters, and improve their ability to influence states' behavior and preparedness.
- ✚ It is crucial to improve budget resilience and that could take the form of internal restructuring, without losing impartiality.
- ✚ It will be an essential task to develop new tools to foster cooperation notably in the digital, security and health sectors.

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